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Moscato, rising

By [Dave McIntyre](#), Published: September 20

Ask a wine retailer what's hot these days, and you'll probably hear "moscato." It's the fastest-growing wine variety in the United States, according to MarketWatch, with several American brands selling up to six times as much as they did three years ago.

Wait. Did I just say U.S. brands are on the rise? Not moscato d'Asti, the low-alcohol, fruity-floral, sweet and fizzy wine from Piemonte in northern Italy?

Well, yes, moscato d'Asti as well, apparently, but also its cheaper American imitators. The most popular domestic brand is Barefoot, produced by E&J Gallo, according to MarketWatch. Beringer, Sutter Home and Robert Mondavi Woodbridge are also in vogue. Those brands have the advantage of being widely available and less expensive than moscato d'Asti, although their quality can be uneven.

What's to account for moscato's popularity? Rap musicians used to favor Cristal champagne, but when the Louis Roederer Champagne house complained a few years ago about the image its top wine had acquired, musicians such as Kanye West, Lil' Kim and Kendrick Lamar turned to a cheaper bubbly.

Given the poor economy of the past few years, moscato certainly has more of a populist appeal than the triple-digit Cristal, anyway. Cheap, sweet and fizzy, it is an easy wine for non-wine-drinkers to love.

The rising appeal of moscato has been felt locally. The import company M Touton Selection had difficulty this year keeping its Villa Jolanda Rosato Moscato, a slightly sweet pink fizz, in stock as consumer demand surged. The company gained more than 100 local retail clients in the District and Maryland over the past year who were interested solely in that wine, says Steven Schattman, a local M Touton Selection representative. Many of those retailers are now ordering other products, he says.

"Our hope is that this will follow a similar pattern as the white zinfandel craze of the '70s and '80s, and that it will bring new customers to wine," Schattman says, fondly remembering his early tipples of Mateus and Lancer's rosé.

So what exactly is moscato? It's the Italian name of the muscat grape, which has many varieties and styles. Moscato d'Asti, the benchmark, is typically low in alcohol (about 5 percent), with good strong fizz to balance the residual sugar, so the wine is both sweet and refreshing. It tastes of rose petals, ripe peaches and sometimes jasmine, and it's excellent with fruit desserts or even breakfast (blueberry pancakes!). Moscato d'Asti typically sells for \$15 to \$25 a bottle.

To see what was out there, I bought several non-Italian moscato versions, all priced from \$5 to \$9, which is significantly cheaper than the Italian benchmark. American moscati, including the popular brands I mentioned earlier, ranged from mediocre to simply awful. Most bore no resemblance to what is produced in Italy; they were still, with little fruit and tons of sulfur. The one exception was Beringer, which had some appealing apricot flavors in an off-dry still wine that resembled more a muscat from Alsace. In all honesty, it shouldn't be called moscato, but it probably wouldn't sell as a muscat.

I did have one very pleasant surprise, and it came from a mass-produced label I never thought I'd mention favorably in this column. From Australia, Yellow Tail Moscato apparently is new (at least, it's labeled "NEW!"), and it is quite clean and tasty, with bright, refreshing fizz and just enough sweetness to support its fruit. It doesn't really taste like moscato d'Asti: It's more tropical, with mango and durian flavors. But at \$5 from Total Wine & More, it is hands down the best cheap moscato available.

So if you want to try moscato and you're on a tight budget, try the Yellow Tail. But I encourage you to move up to moscato d'Asti. For a few dollars more, you'll get more complexity and subtlety, more verve and more fun.

Dave McIntyre blogs at dmwineline.com; follow him on Twitter [@dmwine](https://twitter.com/dmwine).

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Recommendations

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***Exceptional **Excellent *Very Good

Prices are approximate. Check Winesearcher.com to verify availability, or ask a favorite wine store to order through a distributor.

When I think of moscato, I think of moscato d'Asti, the fizzy, slightly sweet, low-alcohol wine from Italy's Piemonte region. So when I taste other moscato wines, I judge them against the Italian model. Although quality varies among the Italian versions, I've never tasted a moscato d'Asti that I disliked. I cannot say the same for the cheap knockoffs. This is one wine where you get what you pay for.

Cascinetta Vietti Moscato d'Asti 2010

**

Piemonte, Italy, \$17; \$11 for 375 ml

From Vietti, one of the province's most celebrated wineries, this moscato has strong fizz that balances the sweetness, leaving ripe-fruit flavors of peach and orange blossom that are not in the least cloying.

Downey Selections: Available in the District at Cork Market, D'Vines, Paul's of Chevy Chase and Potenza Wine. Available in Virginia at Arrowine in Arlington; Balducci's in Alexandria and McLean; Chain Bridge Cellars in McLean; Grape + Bean and Rick's Wine & Gourmet in Alexandria; Leesburg Vintner; Red, White & Bleu in Falls Church; and Whole Foods Market in Arlington, Fair Lakes and Reston.

La Caliera Moscato d'Asti 2010

* 1/2

Piemonte, Italy, \$12

Here's a good introductory moscato d'Asti. It has the character, if not quite the verve and excitement, of pricey versions and offers a great contrast to the cheap knockoffs.

Dionysus: Available in the District at Barmy Wines & Liquors, Cleveland Park Wines and Spirits, A. Litteri, Rodman's, Wagshal's Market. Available in Maryland at Balducci's, Bradley Food & Beverage, Capital Beer & Wine and Cork & Fork in Bethesda; Classic Cigars & British Goodies in Frederick; Wishing Well Liquors in Easton. Available in Virginia at Balducci's locations in Alexandria and McLean, Fern Street Gourmet in Alexandria, the Town Duck in Warrenton, Vienna Vintner.

Villa Jolanda Moscato Rose

* 1/2

Italy, \$11

This rosé moscato offers scents of rose petals and peach blossom, nice fizz to cleanse the palate and a sense of fun.

M Touton Selection: Widely available in the District, Maryland and Virginia.

Brazilian Soul Moscato Brut

*

Brazil, \$11

A fun change of pace, this Brazilian example of the fizzy moscato style offers some salsa with that fruit. New to this market.

M Touton Selection: Available in the District at Rodman's, World Liquors, Yes! Organic Market Brookland. Available in Maryland at the Liquor Store in Waldorf, Old Farm Liquors in Frederick, Silesia Liquors in Fort Washington. Available in Virginia at Wine Warehouse in Charlottesville.

Yellow Tail Moscato

*

Australia, \$5

Bright, clean, fizzy and fruity, with a decidedly tropical bent, this is quite a pleasant wine for the price. It is heads and (yellow) tails above most American moscati at this price.

Widely available in the District (Washington Wholesale), Maryland (Reliable Churchill) and Virginia (Virginia Imports).

Beringer California Collection Moscato 2010

*

California, \$7

Semi-dry, with no fizz, it resembles a muscat from Alsace more than a moscato d'Asti. It offers nice apricot and peach flavors, and it makes a good aperitif wine.

Republic National: Widely available in the District, Maryland and Virginia.

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