

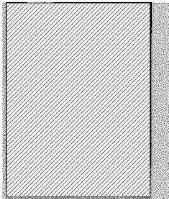
Tavistock Restaurants added two moscatos to the wine lists of some of its upscale concepts late last year.

The Moscato Movement

The varietal's popularity has surged in the past few years

By Michelle Paolillo Lockett

WILLIAM PRUTYN



What's behind the rise of moscato? It hasn't hurt that the wine has been embraced by the hip-hop community, with endorsements from the likes of Kayne West, Drake and Lil' Kim, or that it boasts the popular #Moscato hashtag on Twitter. But while the varietal has caught the attention of the younger set, it's not just Millennials fueling moscato's growth—up 200% since 2009, according to Nielsen.

"Moscato is an exciting grape varietal that is gaining popularity," says John Coletta, executive chef/managing partner of Quartino Ristorante in Chicago. "Moscato are becoming familiar as consumer explore, experience and embrace the wine and food culture of Italy."

The moscato grape (also known as muscat) is used in a variety of wines, but the most popular incarnation of the varietal is the sparkling Moscato d'Asti.

"It is best known in the sparkling format and best enjoyed with desserts," says Coletta. "The grape varietal moscato is experiencing significant consumption as an appetitivo or an accompaniment to seafood."

Beyond the Italian moscato, muscat wines overall are popular across the country. Many bar managers that have added key moscato selections on their wine lists are being rewarded.

"It is one of the few grapes that is produced in many various styles, much like pinot gris has quite a few variations around the world," says Gretchen Thomas, wine and spirits director at the Barteca Restaurant Group in Norwalk, CT.

APPROPRIATELY ACCESSIBLE

The keys to moscato's success, bar managers say, is price, accessibility and reliability.

Experimenting with various wines has become the norm in many locales, and it helps when the wines are approachable to the consumer.

"Moscato wines have never been considered 'collectors' wine' that eventually became general consumer wine," says Thomas. "It has always been accessible to everyone, and I think this makes it less scary to the developing palate of the beginner."

Customers are not only recognizing the varietal, they are seeking it out. "Moscato has definitely grown in popularity in the last three years," says Amy Goldberger, sommelier at Fifth Floor Restaurant in San Francisco's Hotel Palomar. "People do come in and ask for it."

Price matters when experimenting with wine, and this varietal fits the bill. "This new wave of moscatos are all priced very affordably—very few of them are more than \$20 a bottle in a retail store," notes Thomas. "They are accessible because of how they are marketed—easy to like, unpretentious, every day wine."

AN AROMATIC AND SWEET FLAVOR PROFILE

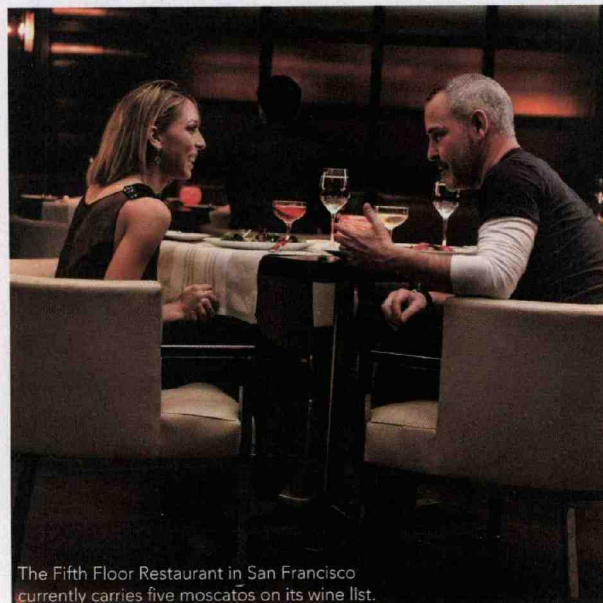
The American palette for wine generally tends toward the light and sweet. And most moscatos fulfill that taste profile.

"Moscato wines are always aromatic, fruity and semisweet to quite sweet," says Thomas. "It would take a lot of effort to find a moscato that tastes 'bad.' The grape is extremely aromatic by nature, gladly ripens to high sugar levels, and is basically a well-behaved grape for agriculturists and wine makers to work with."

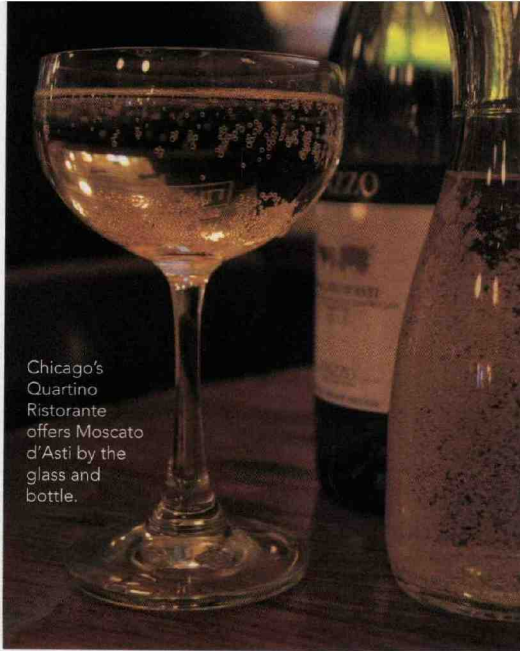
Coletta agrees. "Moscato tends to be a complex wine which pairs extremely well with food." Quartino features the Piazzo Moscato D'Asti Piazzo for \$9 a glass and \$36 a bottle. "But sipping a glass of moscato without food is not the beverage of choice," at least at Quartino, he says.

Moscato wines have found their way to chain restaurants, including P.F. Chang's. Moscatos are "fun and something new" for consumers, says Mary Melton, beverage director of the Asian-theme, 204-location chain.

The lightly carbonated moscato is the perfect aperitif, says Melton of the Besitos moscato she serves for \$7 a glass. But the wine also compliments the P.F. Chang's Asian cuisine. "It pairs well with lighter, fresh dishes, such as shrimp with garlic



The Fifth Floor Restaurant in San Francisco currently carries five moscatos on its wine list.



Chicago's Quartino Ristorante offers Moscato d'Asti by the glass and bottle.

sauce, ginger chicken with broccoli, orange peel chicken and, of course, lettuce wraps," Melton notes.

At Fifth Floor Restaurant, Goldberger finds that guests gravitate toward the light and sweet muscats, but she's more excited about the dry varieties. "When people come in and ask for something more aromatic, I introduce them to a dry muscat, because it has all of the aroma and beauty of viognier with a crisper, lighter style. It's also more of a value wine, so it's less risky to try," she notes.

She has five moscatos on her list that range from dry to quite sweet, including the Jorge Ordoñez Moscatel Seco Botani (\$44 a bottle), Terre di Pantelleria Zibibbo (\$55 a bottle), Domaine de Durban Muscat de Beaumes de Venise (\$14 a glass) and the best-selling Vietti Moscato d'Asti 2011 (\$30 a half bottle, \$11 a glass).

MORE THAN A FAD

Some operators were skeptical about moscato at first. Tavistock Restaurants wasn't sure about incorporating the wine at its concepts, which include Abe & Louies, Joe's American Bar & Grill and Napa Valley Grill. "We don't want to follow fads," says wine director Carolin Meier. "Instead, we see where there are consistent shifts happening for our guests."

Seeing that customers were indeed interested in this varietal, Meier added two moscatos (in addition to the Moscato d'Asti served at Tavistock's Italian concepts) to the wine lists of a few of its 33 upscale restaurants in late 2012. "We want to stay true to our brand, but also acknowledge and recognize the shift in what our guests are looking for," she explains.

Moscato's flavor profile was a key factor in the decision. While it's on the light and sweet side, "moscato adds something more than a white zin," Meier says. "We can offer our guests something unexpected with moscato."

She currently features the Delicato Domino moscato and HRM Rex Goliath moscato. "We've intentionally stayed away from the entry point," Meier says, because Tavistock wanted to offer wines of a little higher quality, plus "you want a flavor balance."

EDUCATING THE CONSUMER

When introducing the new wines across her various concepts, Meier added the varietal to Tavistock's extensive staff trainings. But she decided to take the staff involvement to a new level by starting a "tell, show, test and feedback" challenge to staff.

"I've asked them to send me pictures of how they introduce these wines," she explains. "I want managers to get five comments on the wines on OpenTable.com. This interaction helps me stay connect with the guest experience."

It's all part of enhancing the customer experience. "If we are engaging people about wine, they are associating us with the wine experience," Meier says.

It seems that the accessible, easy-to-drink and affordable moscato wines will continue to attract new fans. As Barteca's Thomas notes, "Just about everybody is drinking the wine and enjoys it." ♦

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