

UNCORKED

Wines so good, you'll lick the glass

Embrace the flavors of the sweet

By Bill St. John
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If you are a proponent of sweet wine — heck, even if you merely enjoy it — you face The Great American Wine Wile.

On the one hand, more Americans than not eschew sweet wine — even when it isn't sweet. (“No, thank you. I don't like riesling because it's sweet.” And yet, most riesling isn't sweet.) As a result, wines that are sweet on all fours — wines in which a spoon will stand — languish on store shelves, in basements, on the restaurant back bar.

On the other hand, ironically, and without being conscious of it, most Americans gravitate to wine with some sweetness to it. They “talk dry, but drink sweet,” as the adage has it. California just recently laid to rest Jess Jackson, the man accountable for a markedly sweet finish to America's best-selling chardonnay, K-J Vintner's Reserve.

Why don't we just fess up? Sweet wines are delicious, as absolutely delicious as sucking your fingers clean of melting chocolate or wiping your chin of the juice of a ripe peach. We eat candies with abandon and chug pop by

the gallon, while pretending to be “above” drinking sweet wine. C'mon.

Whole families of sweet wines await. What follows describes those families and recommends some tasty wines from among them.

Bill St. John has been writing and teaching about wine for more than 30 years.

The noble mold

Sometimes botrytis cinerea, a naturally occurring fungus (nicknamed “the noble mold”), envelops grapes while they still are on the vine and evaporates their water, further concentrating the sugar in their juice. Bordeaux's Sauternes and Barsac achieve their sweetness that way, as do the Tokays of Hungary and many sweet wines of Germany, Austria and France. (Some ice wines, where the grapes freeze on the vine, also come about this way.)

2007 Alois Kracher TBA No. 11, Welschriesling, Austria:

Stupefying in its concentration; as thick as honey yet still vibrant and crisp; tastes like dulce de leche splashed with orange water; a mere 5.5 percent alcohol, so have it as, not with, dessert. **\$55** (375 milliliter bottle)

2006 Swanson Late Harvest Semillon Crepuscule, Lake County, California:

Barrel-fermented and -aged for notes of vanilla underneath caramel; amazing length of flavor; little goes a long way. **\$90** (375 ml)

Passito

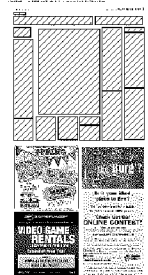
Sometimes, after the grapes ripen, they're laid out to dry and raisinate. The Italians call this process *passito*. Over several weeks, the grapes become sweeter and sweeter — too sweet to ferment all the sugar. During fermentation, the yeasts produce a level of about 16 percent alcohol and they die off, thus ceasing fermentation. What remains in the wine is unfermented sugar (sweetness). Many sweetish wines are made this way, such as the famed vin santo of Tuscany.

2009 Pellegrino Passito di Pantelleria, Sicily, Italy:

Flavor and aroma combo of orange peel, pomelo and candied fruit, with hints of anise; like liquid golden raisins; serve slightly cool with mature cheese. **\$28** (750 ml)

2009 Husch Late Harvest Gewurztraminer, Anderson Valley, California:

Grapes are left on the vine to desiccate in cool weather; fragrances of



litchi, honey and caramel, in an unctuous texture; try with blue or washed-rind cheese. **\$20** (500 ml)

Stop!

Sometimes the wine-maker puts a halt to fermentation by creating an environment hostile to the yeasts — for example, by bringing the fermenting vat to near-freezing temperatures, or by adding an arresting element such as sulfur. Many semisparkling moscatos from Italy begin this way.

2009 Cascinetta Vietti Moscato d'Asti, Piedmont, Italy: fragrant of peach, gingerbread and rose water; slightly sparkling; very low alcohol and refreshing slight sweetness; perfect with ripe fruit or as aperitif. **\$15** (750 ml)

Fortifieds

Sometimes the wine-

maker stops fermentation by adding distilled alcohol, which kills the yeasts before they have fermented all the sugar in the wine. Port and Madeira come about this way, as does sweet sherry, the vin doux naturels of southern France, Sicily's Marsala, many sweet wines from Australia (fortified muscats, ports and Tokays — all called "stickies" down under), and Portugal's muscat de Setubal.

2007 Casta Diva Recondita Armonia, Alicante, Spain: Red grapes partially fermented and slightly fortified; intense flavors of both black and red currant; like a young vintage port; serve with nuts or hard cheese. **\$30** (500 ml)

Toro Albala Don PX Gran Reserva, Montilla-Morales, Spain: The color of black coffee from decades of aging in oak; so rich it could dress ice cream; tastes of dark chocolate and

caramel; balanced and persistent, not sticky; fabulous. **\$35** (375 ml)

2007 Chapoutier Banyuls, France: Flavor combo of blood orange and dark chocolate, with watermelon and raspberry aromas and a sour cherry finish; great layering; lasts forever. **\$28** (500 ml)

Graham's 20-Year Tawny Port: Liquid caramel and toffee, hints of hazelnut; "20 years" are the greatest nonvintage ports. **\$40-\$45** (750 ml)

Broadbent Malmsey Madeira 10-years-old: Caramelized brown sugar; refreshing acidity balances sweetness; have a glass at 11 a.m.; it'll make your day. **\$43** (750 ml)

If your wine store does not carry these wines, ask for one similar in style and price.



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