

Moscato, dessert go together



Laurie Daniel

ON WINE

Americans have a terrible predilection for serving brut sparkling wine with dessert. I say terrible because this is a match made in hell. Brut bubbly is nearly dry, and drinking it with something sweet will make the wine taste sour and awful. Bubbly is festive, but sour and awful are anything but.

No, sweet food demands wine with some sweetness, and an excellent choice is moscato d'Asti. This isn't the inexpensive moscato that's being churned out from all corners of the globe to meet the current demand for a sweetish wine glorified by hip-hop artists like Kanye West and Drake. A lot of this new wave of moscato is sweet, spritzed and simple, without much character.

Moscato d'Asti, on the



Vietti's Moscato d'Asti

other hand, has a seductive, floral perfume and pretty fruit (orange, orange zest and ripe stone fruit are typical) to go along with that sweetness and slight effervescence. The wine is from a defined area of the Piedmont region of northwestern Italy and is made from moscato bianco (white muscat), considered to be the most complex variety of moscato. (A lot of cheap California moscato is made from the less-desirable muscat of Alexandria.)

There are about 25,000 acres of moscato bianco planted in Italy's Piedmont, in the hills outside the city of Asti, hence the name. The best, ripest grapes go into Moscato d'Asti; the rest go into a related wine simply called Asti or sometimes Asti spumante.

The two wines are made using similar methods. For moscato d'Asti, the fermentation is stopped when the wine reaches about 5 percent alcohol. The effervescence comes from the carbon dioxide that is a natural part of fermentation; it's trapped because the wines are fermented in pressurized tanks. Fermentation for regular Asti lasts

longer, usually until the wine is around 7 percent alcohol, resulting in a wine that is more bubbly and, in theory, less sweet. But balance is key: Because of its acidity and fuller flavors, moscato d'Asti can taste less sweet than regular Asti.

With a lot of wines, the unfermented juice bears little flavor resemblance to the finished wine, but moscato juice is like an intense version of the wine. Some juice that I sampled recently, before it underwent fermentation, was very floral and tasted like orange zest soaked in honey.

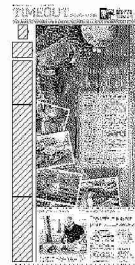
Unfortunately, the reputation of both wines has suffered because of the large amount of cloyingly sweet, often mass-produced Asti spumante that has been exported to the United States.

Now that moscato is in fashion again, I'd suggest moving beyond the inexpensive, less-interesting domestic versions into the real stuff. Most moscato d'Asti costs less than \$20, and the really good ones are quite alluring, their delicacy combined with a lot of complex flavors.

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Moscato d'Asti is also a good choice if you're looking for something sweet to pair with holiday desserts, as well as with fruit or biscotti.

A number of wineries in Piedmont that are better known for reds like Barolo and barbera also make excellent moscato d'Asti. One good example is Vietti, which makes its moscato under the Cascinetta Vietti name. The 2011 (\$15) is perfumey and more sparkling than some, with pretty orange zest and floral notes. It has a little more density and concentration than many moscatos.



Marchesi di Gresy, which is based in the Barbaresco zone, produces the fresh, lively 2011 La Serra Moscato d'Asti (\$16), a fragrant wine with orange and white peach flavors. And Fontanafredda, a venerable producer in the Barolo area, has the 2010 Moncucco Moscato d'Asti (\$16/500 ml), which is spicier than the others I tasted. I also liked the 2011 Fratelli Moscato d'Asti (\$17), which has bubbles that are a little more subdued, and the 2011 Batasiolo Bosc dla Rei Moscato d'Asti (\$17), which is quite floral and fresh.

Others to look for are the Paolo Saracco (\$15), from one of the leading moscato d'Asti producers, and the Michele Chiarlo Nivole (\$13/half-bottle).

Modern production of moscato d'Asti is all about preserving freshness, and the wines are ready to drink when they're bottled. So avoid older vintages – look for 2010 and 2011 wines to enjoy now. Don't cellar your moscato.

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