



Muscat

Lasting Trend or Novelty Act?

W. BLAKE GRAY, CWP

You don't have to delve too deeply into the Muscat phenomenon sweeping the United States before you encounter skepticism and disdain. Sales of the world's oldest known grape variety have put the post-*Sideways* Pinot Noir boom to shame, according to Nielsen, tripling in less than three years. The Wine Market Council forecasts that Muscat will pass Sauvignon Blanc and white Zinfandel this year to become America's sixth-favorite wine.

The hot market has encouraged the release of products as bizarre as pink Moscato (to use the Italian name) and still Moscatos with low percentages of actual Muscat. Since the term "Muscat" can refer to any of at least four grape varieties, there's plenty of leeway for wineries looking to make a quick buck by slapping it on the label. "When I saw Yellow Tail Moscato, I

said, 'Moscato is done,'" says Luca Currado, winemaker at Vietti in Barolo, Italy. His cynicism is shared by many American sommeliers. "The interest will peak," contends Jamie Smith, wine buyer for Del Frisco's high-end steakhouse chain. "It's the flavor of the moment, but it was Pinot Noir a couple of years ago, and before that it was Shiraz."

Yet there's no question that right now, Moscato is attracting novice wine drinkers. Callouts in hip-hop songs (see Drake's oft-quoted lyrics, "Lobster and shrimp and a glass of Moscato/for the girl who's a student and her friend who's a model/Finish the whole bottle") have made it the wine of choice among young women of color, not to mention everyone who listens to Kanye West and Lil' Kim—in other words, a lot of people.

SPECIAL REPORT

To be sure, even the most sophisticated enophile can appreciate a good Moscato d'Asti (a sweet sparkling wine under regulation of the Denominazione di Origine Controllata e Garantita). "I don't think I've ever opened a great bottle of Moscato and served it to people and had anyone say, 'Oh, this is gross,'" Smith observes. "It's probably the only wine you can drink in bed—a breakfast wine, bar none. It's just 5.5% alcohol, and it can be delicious."

But the Moscatos fueling the current craze are mostly a cheap (less than \$7 retail) novelty. Barefoot Cellars launched its version in 2008, using grapes from Powell Ranch—a 3,500-acre property in California's Central Valley that once supplied apples for Boone's Farm—and it's now the top-selling Moscato in the United States. In fact, E. & J. Gallo Winery, which offered no Muscat wines before launching the Barefoot label, now commands an amazing 43% share of the U.S. market through five different brands.

Allied Grape Growers president Nat DiBuduo reports that 25% of all vines sold in California

in 2011 were Muscat varieties; what's more, he adds, "I believe that when everything that is currently planted comes into production, imported Moscato can and will be replaced with California-grown Muscat." Whether these transplants will ever compare in quality to their counterparts from Asti is another question. I recently sampled a few dozen new brands, looking for values from California or Chile or even other regions of Italy, and it was one of the more depressing tastings I've ever conducted—think cheap Merlot at the height of that grape's popularity.

Brian Larky, chairman of Dalla Terra Winery Direct, wasn't surprised by my verdict. His company imports three of the best-regarded Moscati d'Asti—Marchesi di Grésy, Saracco, and Vietti—and in his view, the difference between a good Moscato and a bad one, not surprisingly, is terroir: "It comes down to vineyards. There are really only a couple of places in the world where this stuff is grown that it shows its best, and they're right around Asti. It's taken literally millennia for Moscato to adapt to that land. You

W. Blake Gray, CWP, has written about wine and spirits for the San Francisco Chronicle, the Los Angeles Times, Food & Wine, Wine & Spirits, Decanter, The World of Fine Wine, and many other publications. He also writes one of the world's most-read wine blogs, The Gray Report.

Moscato d'Asti grapes (left); Gérard Bertrand vineyards at Château l'Hospitalet in Narbonne, France.



Photos courtesy of Azienda Agricola Paolo Saracco (previous page), Gérard Bertrand



The Vietti family (top), vineyards (middle), and cellar (above) in Castiglione Falletto, Italy; Vietti winemaker Luca Currado (right).

can't expect the same quality from grapes that were planted five years ago."

What's in a Name?

It also comes down to grape variety. Some theorize that Muscat evolved as the first edible grape; it's certainly the first variety identified in historical texts, which describe its use in winemaking by the ancient Greeks. Since this Mediterranean grape thrives in warm climates, it's found everywhere the early sailors could take it. The type used to make Moscato d'Asti—generally considered the best and oldest of Muscat's mutations—is called Moscato Canelli in Italy, Muscat Blanc à Petits Grains in France (where it makes the fine dessert wines of Beaumes-de-Venise as well as Frontignan and other Languedoc villages), Gelber Muskateller in Austria and Germany, and Brown Muscat in Australia (where it makes ageworthy stickies).

Muscat of Alexandria is almost as old as Moscato Canelli and just as widely planted. It's



Photos courtesy of Vietti s.r.l.

SPECIAL REPORT



Dalla Terra Winery Direct chairman Brian Larky (below); Bonny Doon Vineyard winemaker Randall Grahm (middle) and Santa Cruz, Calif., vineyards (bottom).

generally more productive but lower on the quality scale, peaking with Moscatel de Setúbal, a fortified dessert wine from Portugal. Wines are also made from lesser Muscat mutations such as Muscat Hamburg, Muscat Ottonel, and Orange Muscat, and these names all have equivalents in other languages. Adding to the confusion are the regional designations: Moscato d’Asti, Muscat d’Alsace, and Muscat of Frontignan, for example, are all the same variety.

Finally, while most Muscats worldwide are sweet and sparkling, some are still and bone dry—notably those made in Alsace by producers like Trimbach. Unfortunately, at least to connoisseurs of the dry version, it’s the dessert style that has captured the U.S. market. Just ask Randall Grahm, who has made a dry Muscat for Bonny Doon Vineyard for several years. “We’ve probably been the least successful Muscat producer,” Grahm laments. “The

OUTSTANDING RECENT RELEASES

DRY MUSCATS

Bonny Doon Vineyard Muscat Ca’ del Solo Estate, Monterey, California 2009 \$18

Crisp and surprisingly mineral, this wine offers floral notes on the nose and taut stone fruits on the palate, with a hint of bitterness in the finish. Best enjoyed with food, especially shellfish. 12.7% alcohol.

Gérard Bertrand Muscat Vin de Pays d’Oc 10°, Languedoc-Roussillon, France 2010 \$12

Clean aromas of peach and apple announce a fruity, pleasant wine that works better with food than as an aperitif, thanks to some minerality on the midpalate and a slightly bitter note on the finish. 10% alcohol gives this bottling its name.

La Sirena Moscato Azul, Napa Valley, California 2011 \$30

Celebrity winemaker Heidi Peterson Barrett makes one of the most expensive dry Muscats in the world. Fortunately, it’s also the best dry Muscat in California, containing fruit from both Napa Valley and Paso Robles. The aroma is complex: dried flowers, earth, and dried apricot. The taste is clean, with flavors of apricot and lime; the precise finish offers just a hint of bitterness. Beautiful blue bottle and all, this is an upscale winner. 12% alcohol.

Trimbach Muscat Reserve, Alsace, France 2009 \$17

Ginger jumps out immediately from a nose that is more mineral than fruity. Although there are some floral notes, a spicy overtone clearly identifies this as a Trimbach product. It tastes of green plum and underripe nectarine; the dry finish makes it a good candidate for food pairing. 12.5% alcohol.

SWEET SPARKLING MOSCATOS

Cameron Hughes Moscato d’Asti Lot 311, Italy 2011 \$14

An anonymous Italian vintner makes this pretty wine for San Francisco-based négociant Cameron Hughes. The nose combines light floral aromas with litchi, which lingers on the palate along with notes of apple and honey. The fizz is sufficient to carry what seems to be more residual sugar than is typical of Italian production. 7% alcohol.

Golan Moscato, Galilee, Israel 2011 \$14

A lovely, delicate Israeli wine featuring mild floral notes, white-peach flavors, and a light bead. Fairly sweet but balanced, it’s an interesting alternative for enophiles who keep kosher. 6% alcohol.

Martin & Weyrich Moscato Allegro, California 2010 \$13

An American alternative to Moscato d’Asti (as the brand name suggests), this Californian is fruit forward and floral on the nose, with a juicier mouthfeel and sparser bubbles than are found in its Italian counterparts. 7.5% alcohol.

Saracco Moscato d’Asti, Italy 2011 \$14

The aroma of jasmine and rose is rather faint, but this wine is lovely in the mouth: light bodied, with ample acidity and a pleasant fizz, it offers notes of violets and white peach. 6% alcohol.

Vietti Moscato d’Asti Cascinetta, Italy 2011 \$14

Vietti’s pretty floral aroma is just what you want from Moscato—honeysuckle and rose petals backed by litchi and a hint of lime. The wine is light and sweet on the palate, which offers more litchi and a slightly sugary finish. A comely label completes the package. 5.5% alcohol.



Photo by Greg Gorman (top); photos courtesy of Bonny Doon Vineyard (middle, bottom)



Marchesi di Grésy vineyard in Martinenga, Italy (above); Heidi Peterson Barrett of La Sirena in Calistoga, Calif. (bottom).

only once a year, a specialist can produce fresh batches on demand.

Here's how a winery like Sacarro makes Moscato d'Asti. First, the grapes are harvested and pressed, and the skins are removed. The must is allowed to settle before being racked, leaving crystal-clear juice that is fermented to about 1% alcohol and then chilled to about 28°F to pause—not halt—the fermentation. The remaining sugar, along with the carbon dioxide produced by fermentation and a layer of nitrogen gas added by the winemaker, prevents the must from freezing. "You leave it in suspended animation," explains Larky (himself a former winemaker at Ca' del Bosco in Italy's Franciacorta region). "It's going to go to 12% alcohol unless you turn on the chillers and stop the fermentation."

Before bottling, the coolers are turned off to bring the wine gradually to room temperature, so that the yeast awakens and fermentation resumes. When the winemaker achieves the right balance of sugar, acidity, and alcohol, the fermentation is stopped by sterile filtration. Every yeast cell must be removed by the filter, or the wine would continue to ferment in bottle and potentially explode, says Larky. Therein lies the main technical difference between sweet sparkling Muscat and Champagne: the substantial amount of residual sugar in the former makes filtration mandatory.

Currado cautions sommeliers to learn how

market for dry Muscat is exceptionally small. It's a really lovely, gastronomic wine; it has a hint of bitterness that's lovely with food. But the world has gone to hell in a hand basket, where image is more important than substance. It is truly extraordinary that a hip-hop artist can be responsible for the phenomenon. I'm sure that the Italian producers are all perplexed and amused."

Actually, they're more concerned than amused. Larky notes that although Asti's farmers have a solid domestic market for their crop, they don't expect much help from American consumers in raising prices, considering the Muscats that are popular in the United States. "I fear the low quality is going to give a bad impression of what traditional Moscato is," says Currado. "Even here, there are big factory producers. You can find extremely good Moscato and you can find really bad Moscato."



Narrowing the Field

So how does a wine buyer find the good ones? Because of the unusual methods required to produce a sparkling Moscato, Larky advises avoiding wineries that make it only as a sideline. Actually, he points out, even the good Moscato d'Asti that we enjoy today weren't available as recently as 20 years ago, due to the slow adoption of modern technology throughout the region. Now, whereas a small producer might bottle



Photos courtesy of Marchesi di Grésy, (top), La Sirena (bottom)



SPECIAL REPORT



Saracco vineyards in Castiglione Tinella, Italy (top left); Paolo Saracco (above); Trimbach estate in Ribeauvillé, France (middle left).



KEY PRODUCERS

Azienda Agricola Paolo Saracco
Via Circonvallazione, 6
12053 Castiglione Tinella, Italy
+39-141-855113
www.paolosaracco.it
Importer: Dalla Terra Winery Direct
www.dallaterra.com

11104 Narbonne Cedex, France
(954) 540-5401
Importer: Gérard Bertrand Wines
www.gerardbertrandwines.com

Bonny Doon Vineyard
328 Ingalls St.
Santa Cruz, CA 95060
(831) 425-6771
www.bonnydoonvineyard.com

Golan Heights Winery Ltd.
P.O. Box 183
12900 Katzrin, Israel
+972-4-696-8420
www.golanwines.co.il
Importer: Yarden Inc.
www.yardenwines.com

Cameron Hughes Wine
251 Rhode Island St.
San Francisco, CA 94103
(800) 805-1971
www.chwine.com

La Sirena
P.O. Box 441
Calistoga, CA 94515
(707) 942-1105
www.lasirenawine.com

F.E. Trimbach
15 Route de Bergheim
68150 Ribeauvillé, France
+33-389-736030
www.maison-trimbach.com
Importer: Esprit du Vin, Palm Bay International
www.palmbayimports.com

Martin & Weyrich
Moscato Allegro
8418 S. Lac Jac Ave.
Parlier, CA 93648
(559) 638-3544
www.moscatoallegro.com

Vietti s.r.l.
Piazza Vittorio Veneto, 5
12060 Castiglione Falletto, Italy
+39.0173.62825
www.vietti.com
Importer: Dalla Terra Winery Direct
www.dallaterra.com

Gérard Bertrand
Château de l'Hospitalet
Route de Narbonne
Plage, B.P. 20409



the Moscats they might pour were made; those produced by carbonation, rather than the more artisanal Charmat method (also known as *metodo italiano*), contain bubbles that are not only noticeably less fine but shorter lived. "If you open a bottle of artisanal Moscato, you can drink it all day," Currado says. "If you open a bottle of one of these factory Moscatos, it's like beer. In 20 minutes, the bubbles are gone."

In a restaurant, except for the best dry bottlings, selections by the glass are probably the way to go. Although a good Moscato d'Asti makes a wonderful aperitivo and is one of the world's best dessert wines, it's too sweet for most savory courses. "That's why I only have it on the half-bottle list," says John Wight, sommelier at Luce in San Francisco. "I want people to move on after having a glass." 🍷

Photos courtesy of Azienda Agricola Paolo Saracco (top), F.E. Trimbach (middle)