

A Sticky Subject

When it comes to wine, it is easy to be prejudiced against sweetness. In professional wine circles you are constantly on guard against the 'seduction of sugar'. Certainly, in supposedly dry table wines, residual sugar is a no-no and can often be used to try to mask problems in the wine, such as lack of fruit character or excessive bitterness. But some of the greatest wines in the world are sweet and they offer a luxurious indulgence that is difficult to deny, either as an aperitif or particularly when accompanying a suitable dessert or as a post-dinner tippie. Australia, with her favourable climate and innovative winemaking fraternity, produces sweet wines in a myriad of styles, providing ample opportunity for enjoying a quality "sticky". Here's a guide to help you fully savour these sweet sensations.

There are many ways of creating a sweet wine. The simplest way is to leave the grapes on the vine until they start to shrivel, concentrating the sugars in the fruit. When the juice from these grapes is subsequently fermented to a normal level of alcohol, there remains a level of residual sugar in the wine that results in a relatively sweet and immediately appealing, albeit simple, drink.

Alternatively, in a style made famous by the great Riesling producers of Germany, the grapes may be picked at a relatively low level of sugar ripeness and the fermentation is stopped with residual sugar, a low alcohol level (often around 7-8% by volume as compared to anything between 10-15% or more for a dry table wine) and, most importantly, sufficient acidity to balance the sweetness. These delicate yet glorious wines are best known from the Mosel and Rhine River regions but a number of cooler-climate Australian producers are also making admirable examples of the style. The cool-climate origins are essential because it is under these conditions that the grapes reach sufficient flavour ripeness whilst retaining the natural acidity required for balancing the final sweetness of the wine. And it is undoubtedly the Riesling grape that is best suited to this style of wine. Look out for the Bellarmine 'Auslese' Riesling from Pemberton, WA, or the Frogmore Creek FGR (short for Forty Grams Residual) Riesling from Tasmania. Because of their low alcohol content, these wines can be enjoyed any time, as an aperitif, with spicy foods, or with fresh fruit.

The level of sugar concentration can be taken a notch higher by making wine from frozen grapes. The German practice of picking the grapes following a heavy frost allows, upon crushing, the frozen water to be separated from the other constituents in the fruit, thus concentrating both sugars and acidity. The resultant wine, known as Eiswein or ice-wine, is intensely rich, concentrated and flavoursome. Unfortunately, Australia does not possess any vineyards where grapes will freeze naturally on the vine so savvy local winemakers have turned to cryoextraction or freeze concentration technology, where the fruit or freshly

pressed juice is frozen in the winery, to create a similar effect. Not as romantic as the thought of grapes being picked at 2am in freezing conditions by swaddled (and no doubt cursing) pickers, but effective nonetheless. One only needs to taste the superb Frogmore Creek Iced Riesling to be converted.

Of course, the most recognisable styles of sweet wines are the Botrytis-affected ones. Botrytis cinerea (also known by the more attractive name of 'noble rot') is a benevolent fungus that attacks the grapes, making the skins of the fruit more permeable to water. Ideal conditions for the fungal growth are damp, misty mornings followed by warm days where the moisture content of the grapes will evaporate off,

concentrating the remaining sugars in the fruit. In addition, the Botrytis fungus lends its own particular honeyed character to the wine, adding complexity and lusciousness. For the great sweet wines of Sauternes and Vouvray in France, of Tokaj from Hungary and of the sweetest of the German Rieslings, Botrytis is an integral component of the wine. In Australia, it has been the winemakers of the Riverina that have led the way with the style, in particular De Bortoli with their Noble One botrytised Semillon, though botrytised Semillon (from the warmer climes) and Riesling (from cooler regions) are now made throughout Australia.

Last, but most definitely not least, are the world-class fortified sweet wines of the northern Victorian region of Rutherglen. It is here that the extraordinarily rich, syrupy and decadent Liqueur Muscats and Tokays (also known as Muscadelle) are made, using techniques similar to those used for the sweet, black Sherries of Spain and the sweetest of Madieras. This involves the picking of extremely ripe, shrivelled grapes, the fortification of the resultant wine and its lengthy maturation in old oak barrels. As the wine ages it becomes more concentrated, more complex and more luscious. Wines for bottling are blended from the material available (some stock is over 50 years old) and labelled according to a classification system developed by the growers: Rutherglen Muscat/Tokay is the most youthful and fresh bottling, indicating an average age of 2-5 years for the wine; Classic, more luscious, average age 5-10 years; Grand, another step up in complexity and richness, average age 10-15 years; and Rare, the pinnacle and, as the name suggests, the rarest with an average age of (often substantially) greater than 20 years. Producers to search out are Chambers, Campbells, Morris, Stanton & Killeen, All Saints, and the recently rebranded Seppeltsfield. The best of these are an amazing sensorial experience and the style is one of the few wines that can be matched with chocolate. They are absolutely ideal for sipping on a chilly winter's evening.



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Frogmore Creek Iced Riesling 2007 375ml

Made using the freeze concentrating process. The aromas are of mandarin, quince and mixed peel without any overt sugariness evident. Tasting the wine is reminiscent of the cleansing tangy/sweetness of a between-courses sorbet, the vibrant citrusy sweetness balanced by a sherbety acidity. A juicy crispness ensures that the wine stays more-ish whilst the low alcohol of only 8% means that you can enjoy a glass without regret. Definitely yummy.

Deen De Bortoli Vat 5 Botrytis Semillon 2006 375ml

The Deen De Bortoli Botrytis Semillon is the little brother to the De Bortoli Noble One and what an upstart of a brother it is, winning the trophy for the best sweet white wine at the Sydney Wine Show and beating its better known sibling in the process. The influence of the Botrytis is immediately apparent on the nose with aromas of apricot, honey and vanilla coming to the fore. The flavours flow on perfectly, the luscious apricot and honey elements balanced by just enough acidity. This would be great with cheesecake or a passionfruit soufflé.

Seppeltsfield Grand Tokay 500ml

Grand indeed. The great sticky wines of Tokay and Muscat from Rutherglen are similar in style but to my palate Tokay is just a little less overtly luscious and a little more complex than Muscat at a similar age. The Seppeltsfield is a textbook example, a hedonistic delight with aromas of Christmas pudding and toffee and caramel and brandy snaps, and richly rounded flavours that luxuriously coat the mouth and enraptures the senses. A perfect accompaniment to Kennedy & Wilson chocolate!

