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THE SWEET TASTE OF SUMMER

A Quick and Dirty Guide to Summer Sweet Wines

August 14, 2015 By **Amy Miller**

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Dessert wines are often saved for the winter holidays when we tend to linger at the table with our family and friends, but summer brings its own set of celebrations that are perfect for opening a bottle of something sweet. As the days lengthen and temperatures rise, it's a perfect time to head outdoors for a picnic, barbeque or dinner party on the patio. Desserts made from the fruits of summer, such as strawberries, peaches, apricots and cherries easily lend themselves to wine pairing. The key is to make sure the wine is sweeter than the dessert and to match the flavor intensities so that neither overpowers the other. Here are five dessert wines to seek out for the sweet taste of summer.



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Brachetto d'Acqui

No one does fun and fizzy quite like the Italians. What comes through is not so much the wine's terroir but a sense of playfulness and charm. This is exactly what you'll find in a bottle of Brachetto d'Acqui, an off-dry, light red sparkler from Piemonte. Made with red Brachetto grapes (said to have been a favorite of Cleopatra) these crowd-pleasing wines are redolent of strawberries and roses with a light, delicate effervescence. Although often overshadowed by their more famous cousins down the road in Asti, Brachettos are made in a similar style, undergoing second fermentation in a pressurized tank to create their bubbles. Banfi's Rosa Regale is a consistently fine example. It's an easygoing, refreshing wine that offers up an abundance of ripe raspberries, strawberries and cherries as well as a hint of rose petals. The low alcohol

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(7% abv) makes it a perfect pour for brunch, paired with French toast and red fruit, or a great accompaniment to fresh strawberries and cream while watching Wimbledon. **Banfi's Rosa Regale Brachetto d'Acqui**, 750 ml, \$19.99.



Muscat de Beaumes-de-Venise

Transport yourself to the sunny south of France with a bottle of this vintoux naturel from a tiny appellation in the Rhone Valley. Made with the most noble of Muscat grapes, Muscat Blanc à Petits Grains, these floral, honeyed wines have been delighting drinkers since the

Popes set up shop in nearby Avignon in the 14th century. The best wines come from vines grown on a south-facing outcrop of limestone, which bathes the grapes in long days of direct sunshine. As with other fortified wines grape spirit is added to halt fermentation before all the sugar has been converted to alcohol, leaving behind an overtly sweet nectar with about 15% abv. The wines may be enjoyed in their youth, but the grape's inherent high acidity also gives them aging potential. Over time their color darkens and the flavors deepen with more pronounced notes of honey and dried fruits.

From one of the top producers comes this light and invigorating, medium sweet wine that will surprise you with its level of complexity. The glass is a harmonious swirl of pear, apple, candied lime, apricot, honeydew and Muscat's signature grapiness. This would make a wonderful aperitif or serve it with melon, strawberries, or a pear tart. **Domaine de Durban Muscat de Beaumes-de-Venise 2011**, 375 ml, \$18.99.

Tokaji

The sweet wines of Tokaj, Hungary have a pedigree going back centuries. In fact it was here in the late 16th century that someone first dreamed/dared to make a wine from grapes shriveled by the *Botrytis cinerea* fungus, aka noble rot. Sauternes is far better known these days, but Tokajiaszú wines were once favored by European royalty and great artists of the day such as Beethoven, Schubert and Goethe. The downward spiral began in 1885 when phylloxera decimated the vineyards. Further decline came with two world wars followed by four decades of Communism. Only in the last 25 years has the industry been able to rebuild and recapture some of its former glory.

One of the pioneers of Tokaji's renaissance is Royal Tokaji, which was founded in 1990 by Hugh Johnson, the noted British wine writer. The sweet, golden wines are made from three grape varieties: Furmint, Hárslevelű and Muscat de Lunel. The winemaking process itself has changed little over the centuries. The grapes shriveled by botrytis (aszú) are hand harvested individually and crushed into a thick, syrupy paste. This paste is then added to a base wine made from that year's harvest of unbotrytized grapes. Originally, the aszú grapes were collected in wooden barrels called puttonyos, which is the term still used today to indicate the

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level of sweetness. The more puttonyos, the sweeter the wine. They range from 3 to 6, followed by an even sweeter wine called essencia, which is made from free-run juice and not blended into a base wine (it's also extremely expensive). A wine with 5 puttonyos usually hits the right pleasure/price sweet spot, and this one from Royal Tokaji's Red Label is an elegant example. The deep orange color suggests a more viscous wine, but this is bright and lively, full of ripe peaches, apricots, pears and mandarin oranges with a gorgeous layer of botrytis. This could easily be dessert in itself, but would pair well with a peach pie or apricot tart. **2008 Tokaji Aszú 5 Puttonyos "Red Label" Royal Tokaji**, 500 ml, \$52.99.

Banyuls

Should you find yourself roasting marshmallows by a campfire, plan on having a bottle of Banyuls nearby. This port-like *vindoux naturel* from the Roussillon region in southern France is the perfect sip with s'mores. In fact it pairs well with anything chocolaty as well as desserts made with dark fruits, such as blackberry cobbler or plum tart.

Made predominantly with Grenache grapes grown along steep terraces above the Mediterranean Sea near the Spanish border, the wines are fortified while the grapes are still macerating, extracting a wide variety of flavors. Aging takes place in any number of vessels, including oak barrels and glass bonbonnes, depending on the producers desired style. Some seek to preserve the ripe red fruit flavors, while others seek the rancio notes (walnuts, caramel) that come from long aging and heat. The wines come in two tiers of quality. Grand Cru Banyuls must be aged a minimum of 30 months in wood, while regular Banyuls must be aged between 4 and 20 months. This wine from the Domaine de la Casa Blanca was aged in oak barrels for one year before being bottled. It's silky smooth and sweet but balanced by a racy acidity, with a complex array of jam-like fruit flavors (raspberry, strawberry and damson), and a hint of dried cranberries and figs. **Domaine de la Casa Blanca Banyuls**, 750 ml, \$26.95.

Pedro Ximénez

These lusciously sweet fortified wines from southern Spain are ideal for sipping into the late hours of a languorous summer evening. Made from Pedro Ximénez grapes that have been dried in the sun to concentrate the flavors and sugar, these dark, amber wines are redolent of caramel, chocolate and dried fruits. While most of the grapes are grown and dried in Motilla-Moriles, a region two hours northeast of Jerez, the wines may be aged in either the Marco de Jerez (which can then be labeled Sherry) or in Montilla-Moriles. Those aged in Jerez have more oxidative notes since producers don't completely fill the barrels. By contrast, in Montilla-Moriles the barrels are completely filled, which retains the fruit characteristics. Alvear is a producer from the latter and makes a whole range of sherry-like wines, including dry styles. They are known, however, for their line of sweet PX wines, such as this one, which was aged for five years in a solera that began in 1927. It's a lush, luxuriously sweet wine full of dried figs, prunes, cherry jam and dates, with a bright spark of acidity that will keep you coming back for

more. Enjoy on its own or pour over vanilla ice cream for a heavenly dessert.

Alvear Pedro Ximenez Solera 1927 Montilla-Moriles, 375 ml, \$24.99.

Amy Miller is a freelance writer based in New York City. Visit her at ladolcevino.com

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