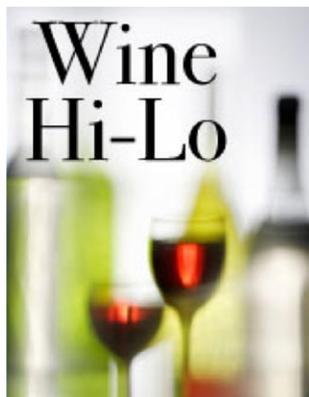


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Sweet Wines, On Purpose

Richard Nalley, April 17, 2009



"Sweet" gets a bad rap in the wine world, mostly because sweetness--sugar--as every winemaker knows, masks a multitude of sins. Unfortunately, as every wine drinker knows, it doesn't always do so successfully.

But let's be honest: Most wine drinkers enjoy more sweetness in their wine than they realize. It is a commonplace in wine stores that shoppers (especially Americans) "talk dry but drink sweet," one reason why so many big-selling New World Chardonnays have an appreciable dose of sugar to help the medicine go down. Even after they are swallowed, though, these wines can leave a lingering, cloying aftertaste, a coating on the tongue in some cases.

The great sweet and off-dry wines of the world, both dinner wines and dessert wines, balance their sugar content with enough acidity to give the wine lift and cleanse the palate. There is not a cloy in a glassful, and they are among the great pleasures of the wine world.



HI: Dolce 2005, Napa Valley - Elegant, flamboyant and attention riveting, Dolce is among the handful of greatest dessert wine regularly produced in America, and 2005 is a top vintage. It is gloriously unctuous, with billowy fragrances of apricot, melon and citrus blossoms, and practically glides across your tongue.

The partners behind Napa's Far Niente established Dolce ("dolce far niente" being an Italian idiom for a sweet idleness) as a separate operation to pursue the nearly Sisyphean task of making this Sauternes-style late harvest Semillon/Sauvignon Blanc. To get an idea of what's involved, check out www.dolcewine.com, which, despite a fair share of marketing hyperbole, tells a remarkable tale. Among the highlights: only about 20% of the grapes that set on the vines ever make it into the bottle; the harvest stretches on for as much as two nail-biting months after the regular grapes have been picked, and each berry, desiccated by botrytis cinerea (the famous "noble rot"), yields tiny trickles of sugar-concentrated juice for a fermentation that can last six months. It ain't cheap, obviously, but there are no short cuts to producing this wine, and it is unforgettable.