

## Dessert wines add a sweet touch for Valentine's

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What's the grown-up version of candy hearts? Perhaps a sweet little bottle of dessert wine.

Sweet wines don't get the same sort of press as the big guns -- chardonnay and cab -- but they have a place at the table, especially at this time of year when romance is in the air, and possibly on the menu.

And you don't have to wait for dessert, says Greg Allen, winemaker at Dolce, the Napa Valley winery that is devoted to producing a single dessert wine of the same name.

"As an aperitif, I love it with blue cheese," he says. "And having it with Maine lobster is a wonderful treat."

Dessert wines come in various styles. Many are late harvest wines, which means the grapes are left on the vine until the sugar levels increase dramatically, then the grapes are pressed and fermented to produce a wine with residual sugar, hence the sweetness. **Some, like Dolce, also involve allowing a particular kind of mold, known as botrytis, to develop. This further concentrates the grape sugars and flavors.**

**This is a labor-intensive and tricky process. You have to have just the right amount of rain -- it doesn't happen every year, but it did this harvest -- followed by painstaking picking; sometimes only a few grapes are selected from a cluster.**

**The result is a golden, silky wine with notes of pineapple and caramel. Dolce costs around \$85 for a half-bottle. Still, everything's relative. Compare that to the hundreds of dollars you can spend on Chateau d'Yquem from France, generally held to be the king of dessert wines and the inspiration for Dolce.**

**The good news is the wine is rich enough that a little goes a long way, says Allen. "It's not a quaffing wine. It is something that is sublime and has a very lengthy texture on the palate and you want to be able to enjoy that."**

Port also falls into the category of dessert wines. Here the sweetness comes from adding a spirit, often brandy. Portuguese producers and their supporters assert that true port hails from Portugal. Still, a number of domestic producers, including Swanson Vineyards in the Napa Valley, are making what are called port-style wines. These usually are higher in alcohol content than regular wines, around 18 to 19 percent, and are a traditional way to end a meal. Ports also happen to be good with dark chocolate, a plus for Valentine's Day.

Swanson, which makes dessert wines in limited quantities and sells them through its wine club or at the winery's Rutherford tasting room, has a port-style wine, Arsene, which is made from petite sirah grapes, fortified with brandy and aged in French oak for 13 months. It sells for \$75 for a 750-milliliter bottle.

A good dessert wine is "always a good conversation starter," points out Mike Jellison, president at Swanson Vineyards. "When you have a really good dessert wine, there's so much to talk about, the taste, the flavor. You can't help but smile."

Another California port-style wine is Obtuse, from Justin Vineyards & Winery in Paso Robles, which runs in the \$25 range.

Jellison sees more producers adding sweet wines to their portfolio, though there's still a limited audience for these styles of wines. Some people blame that on the cheap, not very good dessert wines they feel have given the whole category a bad name.

"Sweet wines are SO overlooked," says Karen Page, who with husband Andrew Dornenburg wrote "The Flavor Bible," and "What to Drink with What You Eat." "They often get no respect, except by those in the know."