

bon appétit

OCTOBER 2009

EAT WELL / SAVOR LIFE

a world of dessert wines

It's time to think about dessert wines in a whole new way: not overkill, not pretentious, not out of reach. Here are our favorite bottles—and what to serve them with. BY HEATHER JOHN

LIVING IN LOS ANGELES DOES, IN FACT, PRODUCE CELEBRITY sightings on an almost daily basis. Justin Timberlake getting sushi in a mini-mall? Ashton and Demi canoodling on the streets? Bob Barker hiking in the hills? No big deal. But every once in a while, even a jaded Angeleno gets starstruck, as I did last November when I found myself sitting next to none other than Pierre Lurton at lunch.

Monsieur Lurton is a celebrity not for having won Oscar gold, but for producing liquid gold in the form of Château d'Yquem, a late-harvest dessert wine made from Sémillon and Sauvignon Blanc grapes from the Sauternes district, in the Bordeaux region of France. Many would argue that these exquisitely sweet, golden wines are as rare and valuable as Oscar statuettes, since they are only produced during vintages when a benevolent mold called *Botrytis cinerea*, or "noble rot," occurs naturally on the grapes. The weather has to cooperate; *Botrytis* likes cool, misty mornings and warm, sunny afternoons. The grapes are left on the vine later into the harvest season and the mold causes them to shrivel, producing concentrated, rich flavors and higher sugar content. The production of these fickle wines is a miracle, really. Too much rain or damp and the crop is history. Which is why late-harvest dessert wines are some of the most sought-after wines in the world, and they are at their brilliant best when paired with the right dessert.

The good news is that not all of these bottles fetch the spectacular prices a bottle of Yquem does—starting at \$650 for futures of the 2007 vintage and skyrocketing from there. Some of my favorite Sauternes wines (which, like Yquem, are made from a combination of Sémillon and Sauvignon Blanc grapes) fall in the \$20 range for a half-bottle. Dessert wines are most often found in 375-ml bottles because they are so rich. The best of these wines are characterized by rich honey, peach, and almond notes, and are spectacular when paired with desserts that echo these flavors. Thanks to the viscosity of Sauternes wines, they stand up well to strong cheeses, like Roquefort, but shouldn't be overpowered by anything sweeter than they are. Chocolate or ice

cream are not good matches, while custards and caramelized fruit are fantastic.

But you don't need to go to France for top-notch late-harvest Sémillon or Sauvignon Blanc. In recent years, there have been some interesting interpretations of Sauternes-style wines from the U.S. Most notable is the splurge-worthy Dolce from the Napa Valley — compared to the Yquem, it's a relative bargain at \$85 for a half-bottle, especially when you consider just how dicey it is to make this type of wine in Napa.

Of the 20 acres that Dolce has dedicated to farming grapes for its late-harvest wine, the yields are only about 5 percent of what they would be if the winemakers were farming grapes to produce a dry wine. "When we set out to farm this vineyard in the '80s, we realized there wasn't a standard for producing late-harvest wines in this region," says Dolce winemaker Greg Allen. "We took the conventional wisdom on how to prevent Botrytis and did the reverse." For example, in the Dolce vineyards, huge canopies—or the vine's leaves that surround the grape clusters—are encouraged instead of pruned back to shield the clusters from sunlight and trap humidity in order to grow the benevolent mold. Another tactic is

wine & spirits/ **DESSERT WINES**

to cut off half of the grape cluster to promote ripeness and sweetness in the remaining fruit. Even if all of these farming techniques are successful during the growing season, there are still yellow jackets and unpredictable harvest weather to worry about. "Variability is the name of the game for Dolce," Allen says. "We've produced as few as 600 cases one year and then, two years later, as many as 4,000 cases—and everything in between."

WHAT TO SERVE THEM WITH

So if Mother Nature smiles upon the Dolce vineyards, and if the retail gods smile upon you and you manage to get your hands on a bottle of the stuff, a **PEAR TARTE TATIN**, which accentuates the honeyed notes in the wine, is a brilliant pairing. Desserts with **FRESH OR DRIED FIGS** or **ALMOND PASTE** are also particularly lovely with Dolce's house style.

But not all late-harvest dessert wines are made from Sémillon and Sauvignon Blanc grapes, and there is a vast range of styles and grape varieties used. Several wineries in Oregon and California are using Gewürztraminer. Williams Selyem in the Russian River Valley makes an excellent version every other year from grapes that are left to hang on the vine until late November. These wines tend to show more tropical and lychee fruit with floral notes, and they go well with **CRÈME BRÛLÉE** and a number of **BLUE CHEESES**. There are the elegant late-harvest Rieslings from Germany and Austria labeled "Beerenauslese" and "Troockenbeerenauslese," which are delicious with baked **APPLE DESSERTS** or citrusy tarts or cakes. In Hungary, the fabled Tokaji Aszú wines—Aszú being the Hungarian term for "noble rot"—are beautiful when served with desserts featuring **HAZELNUTS OR WALNUTS**. Hungarian Tokaji is made from white Furmint grapes and should not be confused with sweet Australian fortified wines that are labeled "Tokay." Those wines are made from the Muscadelle grape and have a higher alcohol

hot bottles



content, which makes them difficult to pair with desserts or food in general.

And yes, there are also late-harvest wines made from red grapes, like Zinfandel and Petite Sirah. Not to be confused with Port, which is fortified with additional alcohol, late-harvest red wines are made with the same method as their white counterparts. These you can pair with **CHOCOLATE, PLUMS, DARK CHERRIES, and BERRIES**. I recently had a fantastic late-harvest Spanish red at Beast in Portland, Oregon, made from Mourvèdre in the spirit of the wines from the Bandol region of France, but lighter in style and with a lower alcohol content. It was served with a ginger-**STOUT CAKE WITH ICE CREAM**, and the combination was sublime. If you are lucky enough to stumble upon a late-harvest Malbec from Argentina—very few are made and even fewer make their way to this country—try it with a dense **FLOURLESS CHOCOLATE TORTE**. It's as sweet as seeing Sidney Poitier wave to a passing tour bus on the streets of Beverly Hills.