

FOOD & WINE

This Winter, Maximum Coziness Is an Evening Glass of Sweet Wine

Sweet elixirs to drink late into a winter night.

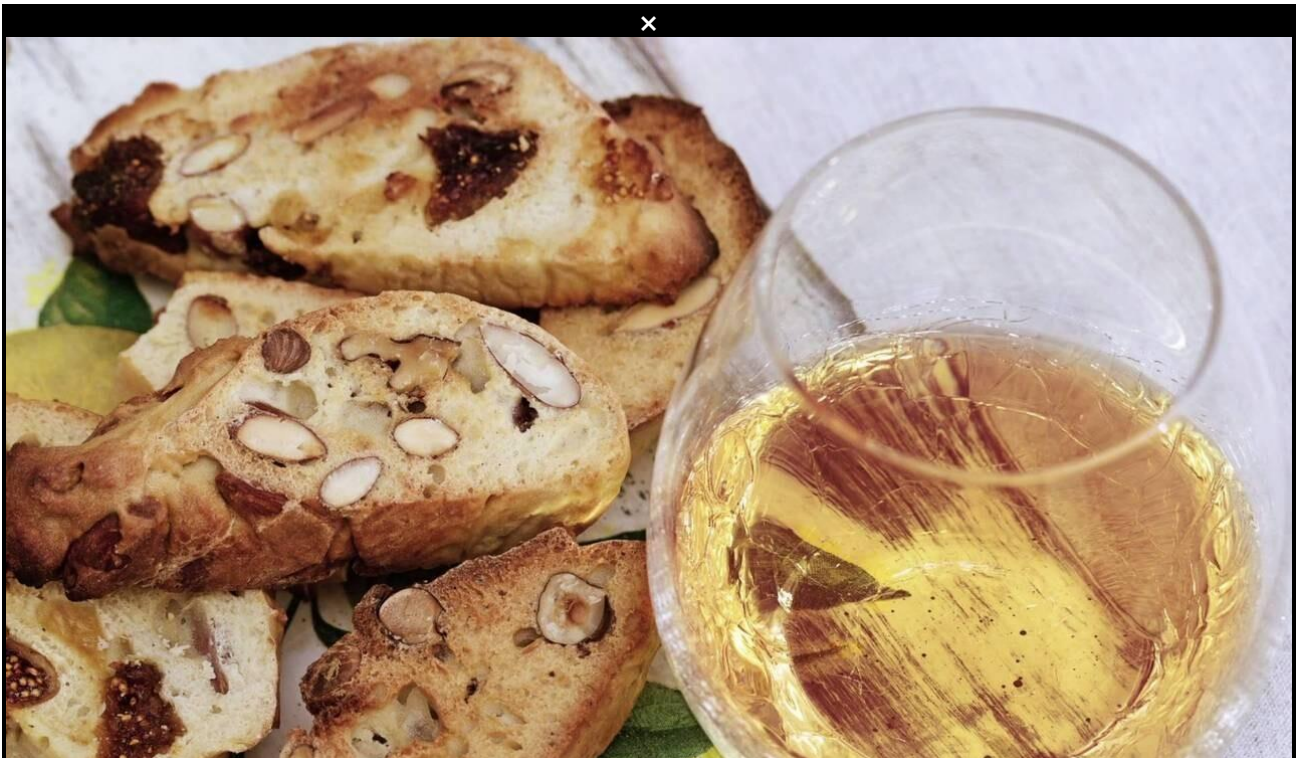
By **Ray Isle**

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The great Italian wine critic Luigi Veronelli had many achievements, and among them was coining the term *vino da meditazione*. What is a meditation wine? For Veronelli, it

was a wine to drink alone—not to pair with food, and not to drink with someone else—a wine you could, through contemplation of each sip, create a deep, even spiritual connection with.

Veronelli didn't intend the term to mean dessert wines specifically—he meant any wine, red or white, still or sparkling, dry or sweet, that could achieve this effect. But for better or worse, the phrase is most often applied to the profoundly complex dessert wines of Italy, notably Tuscan vin santos, which are made by drying Trebbiano and Malvasia grapes (typically) on straw mats for months before making them into wine. The result is amber in hue, sweet to varying degrees, and layered with flavors and aromas of toasted nuts, dried herbs, caramel, citrus peel...the list goes on.

For me, though, any great sweet wine—particularly sipped in solitude, in front of a roaring fire on a winter night—qualifies as a vino da meditazione. Maybe some music, maybe just the crackle of burning logs; possibly the snow falling silently outside; no company but your own thoughts and the fluid, shifting taste of the wine.



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2014 Oremus Tokaji Aszú 3 Puttonyos^[P]_[SEP]

Hungary's Tokaji reached the apex of its fame when France's King Louis XIV referred to it as *vinum regum, rex vinorum* ("wine of kings, king of wines"). Today's Tokajis are still extraordinary, as this subtly sweet example, with its tangerine-apricot-nougat flavors and thrilling acidity, makes perfectly clear. (\$58/375 ml.)

2013 Dolce Late Harvest

In 1985, Napa Valley's Far Niente winery launched Dolce, a decadent late-harvest blend of Sauvignon Blanc and Sémillon aged for 32 months in French oak barrels. Rich with caramel, honeysuckle, and sweet lemon flavors, it set a benchmark for California dessert wines at the time and still does today. (\$85/375 ml. *at wine.com*)

Nv Gonzalez Byass Matusalem Oloroso Sherry

This remarkable sherry spends 30 years in partly filled oak casks before release, a fact that makes its highish price actually seem like a bargain. And what those 30 years of wood and oxygen and time have wrought is a sublime experience: Think dried figs, espresso, caramel, and dark chocolate. (\$50/375 ml.)

2012 Capezzana Vin Santo

Capezzana continues to be a premier property in Tuscany's Carmignano region under the guiding hand of owner and winemaker Benedetta Contini Bonacossi. Her vin santo is seductively rich and mouth-coating, with layers of flavor that suggest dates, caramelized orange peel, toast, and grilled nuts. (\$70/375 ml.)

The Rare Wine Co. Historic Series Boston Bual Madeira^[P]_[SEP]

George Washington toasted his inauguration with Madeira. Contemplate that, and the fact that all the founding fathers loved this now-often-overlooked Portuguese fortified

wine, as you sit with a glass of this elegant, tangy, toffee-and-citrus version. (\$50/750 ml. at klwines.com)



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2002 Avignonesi Vin Santo Di Montepulciano

There is no greater vin santo producer than Avignonesi. This viscous elixir is aged for years before release, slowly evaporating and concentrating (the winery estimates that they could make 24 bottles of dry wine with the amount of grapes it takes to produce one half-bottle of its vin santo). Dark mahogany in hue, with notes of dates, dried cherries, toasted hazelnuts, and espresso, and bright acidity to balance the intense sweetness—it's a spectacular wine and truly a vino da meditazione. (\$220/375 ml.)

Graham's 10-Year-Old Tawny Port

Tawny ports are labeled by the average age of the barrels that go into the blend. That blend of younger wines with, in this case, barrels as old as 15 years, creates a caramel, cherry, and toasted walnut complexity. (\$30/750 ml.)

2014 Castellare Vin Santo S. Niccolò

This wine from the noted Chianti producer Castellare is actually fairly youthful as vin santos go. It's elegant and light-bodied, with touches of dried herbs and leaf tobacco and only moderate sweetness. (\$30/375 ml.)

2016 Château Rieussec Sauternes

Rieussec is one of the largest and best estates in the Bordeaux sweet wine appellation of Sauternes, and this 2016 is a stellar example of the region's wines, with delicate lemon-cream and bitter honey notes. (\$45/375 ml. *at wine.com*)

2017 Kracher Beerenauslese

Gerhard Kracher makes stunning sweet wines from his home in Austria. This Welschriesling and Chardonnay blend gains its honeyed notes from the botrytis that shrivels and concentrates the grapes before harvest. (\$40/375 ml. *at winelibrary.com*)

2017 Donnafugata Ben Ryé Passito di Pantelleria

The unctuous Passitos of the Sicilian island of Pantelleria are made from partly raisined Muscat of Alexandria grapes. Ben Ryé, one of the best, has a flavor that recalls a tarte Tatin made with apricots. (\$44/375 ml. *at vivino.com*)