

## WINE

# Why You Should Be Drinking Dessert Wine With Dinner

If it's good enough for Massimo Bottura, Beyoncé, and Jay-Z, it's good enough for us.

By **Céline Bossart** | Published on June 21, 2023



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Dessert wines get a bad rap, thanks in part to our grandparents' drinking habits, and also to the fact that the term itself is, well, totally misleading. It wasn't until I began working in the wine industry in my early twenties that I realized "dessert wine" didn't just refer to a wine you drank as dessert itself, but to a sweet wine that you could actually pair *with* a dessert to create a combination of flavors far superior to the sum of its parts. And

[d'Yquem](#) fan (so much so that he serves the precious Sauternes by the glass at Osteria Francescana) for his thoughts on where “dessert wines” stand in society today.

“You know, people really don't understand [it] – people think Château d'Yquem is for dessert and it's like, what? This is crazy!” he shares. In the midst of preparing for an intimate pop-up dinner at [Deer Valley's Empire Canyon Lodge](#) in Park City, Utah, Bottura indulged me with a story (he's got one for everything). He recalls his unforgettable dinner at the wedding of the son of LVMH chief's Bernard Arnault in 2021: “At Alexandre Arnault's wedding to Géraldine Guyot, we served tortellini cooked in a fresh daily-made cream with white truffle shaved on top and Château d'Yquem 2019,” he tells me. “People went *crazy*. You had to see it – I mean, Beyoncé and Jay-Z, Monsieur [Bernard] Arnault, everyone in the kitchen shaving white truffles and eating tortellini [with Sauternes] at midnight.”

If it's good enough for Bottura and Beyoncé, then it's good enough for us, right? My point is this: dessert wines are just so much more than we give them credit for, and they shouldn't be written off just because you once tasted your friend's mom's dusty bottle of Marsala and it haunts you to this day. Here's everything the experts want you to know about sweet wines, including how they themselves like to drink them (when they're not at billionaires' sons' weddings and whatnot).

## What are sweet wines?

“Sweet or dessert wines are a category of wines that are characterized by their higher residual sugar content,” says David Kong, founder of [Somm.ai](#) and [Glasvin](#).. “Unlike dry wines, which have minimal or no residual sugar, sweet or dessert wines have noticeable levels of sweetness. This sweetness is often balanced by [acidity](#) and other flavor components, resulting in a harmonious and complex taste profile.”

Sweet wines, Kong adds, are also known for their higher alcohol content, another factor that makes them popular for after dinner, whether paired with desserts or enjoyed on their own. Within the wine world, where sweet wines do have somewhat of a cult following, there's the added appreciation

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## What do sweet wines taste like?

There are many different styles of sweet wines out there, and thus a wide spectrum of flavor profiles and characteristics depending on factors like provenance, grape variety, production style, age, and more. You're likely already familiar with some of the sweet wine world's big players – [Port](#), [sherry](#), and Madeira – but some of the classic notes you'll find in sweet wines include fruits (fresh, candied, dried), flowers, vanilla, butterscotch, honey, caramel, cocoa, coffee, and nuts.

## How are sweet wines made?

Technically, sweet wines can be made anywhere, but some of the most popular sweet wine making areas include Germany, Austria, Canada, Portugal (specifically Porto and the island of Madeira), the southwestern Spanish region of Jerez (home to sherry), and all throughout France, to name a few.

There are various ways in which sweet wines can be made, and they can also run the gamut from off-dry (meaning they have just a touch of sweetness) to quite sweet. Understanding what separates one style of sweet wine from the next can help to demystify the category as a whole – here are some of the various sweet wine production methods, according to Kong:

**Late Harvest:** Grapes are left on the vine for an extended period, allowing them to ripen further and accumulate more sugar. This leads to wines with a naturally higher sugar content.

**Noble Rot (Botrytis):** In certain regions, grapes are intentionally affected by the noble rot, a beneficial fungus called Botrytis Cinerea. This process causes the grapes to dehydrate, concentrating their sugars and flavors.

**Ice Wine:** Grapes are left on the vine until they freeze, usually in regions with cold climates. The frozen grapes are then harvested and pressed,

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during fermentation, stopping the process and leaving residual sugar behind. This method is commonly used to produce fortified wines like Port or sherry.

**Passito:** I spoke with Sicilian winemaker José Rallo of [Donnafugata](#) about how her team produces their passito on the island of Pantelleria, where the only grape variety grown is Zibibbo (Muscat of Alexandria) via a special UNESCO-recognized viticultural system developed to withstand the island's strong winds.

“All the activities we carry out in the vineyards are done by hand, from the harvest to the destemming of the dried grapes destined for the production of our iconic Passito di Pantelleria [Ben Ryé](#),” Rallo shares. Harvest, she notes, usually begins around mid-August, and the bunches are hand-selected and laid out on racks for natural drying in the sun and wind until they reach the desired sugar concentration levels (around three or four weeks). A second harvest takes place in September, and these fresh grapes are used to produce the must for fermentation in stainless steel vessels.

“During the fermentation, dried grapes are added several times to the fresh must in the stainless vessels; the fermentation lasts for around four weeks until the Ben Ryé reaches the perfect balance,” Rallo adds, summing up the appassimento method. “At the end of the process, to produce one bottle of Ben Ryé, we use around four kilos of grapes.” The final product strikes a balance between fresh and sweet with a bright, fruit-forward bouquet full of apricot, candied orange, and (according to Rallo), “hints of Mediterranean scrub.”

**RELATED:** [Maximum Coziness Is an Evening Glass of Sweet Wine](#)

## What are some of the best ways to pair sweet wines with food?

Bottura is also a big fan of pairing young Château d'Yquem with finely-sliced [Culatello](#), but if you don't happen to have either of those lying around, here are a few general pairing guidelines:

whatever wine you're drinking with dessert is going to taste *much* more dry than it would on its own, thanks to the sugar in the dessert itself. So while it's a natural urge to opt for a dry wine with dessert for "balance," the balance you seek actually lies in a sweeter wine that will no longer taste so sweet between bites of [crème brûlée](#) or raspberry pavlova.

Lean on your intuition when pairing sweet wines with desserts—look for complementary flavors and qualities in both the dish and the wine and use those as your North Star. For example, if you've got a nice sweet Riesling or Gewürztraminer (both white grape varieties), you'll want to keep it light and fresh with a fruit-centric dessert rather than go heavy with, say, a flourless dark chocolate torte, which would be much more suitable for a big, luscious ruby Port.

Some sweet wines pair excellently with cheeses – Rallo recommends trying her Ben Ryé passito with a nice, big blue, for example. Kong says that rich and creamy cheeses generally tend to balance sweetness in wine, while fresh and tangy cheeses (think goat or feta) can provide good contrast.

Don't be afraid to experiment and have fun with your sweet wine pairings! While you most likely won't want to drink sweet wines throughout an entire meal, you can still play around with pairing sweet wines and savory foods when the mood strikes – bright acidity and a bit of sugar can work wonders with salt, fat, and heat.

## How should you serve a sweet wine?

"When enjoying sweet wines on their own, it's important to consider the serving temperature – some sweet wines are best served slightly chilled, while others may benefit from being served at cellar temperature to fully express their aromas and flavors," says Kong.

In terms of glassware, there are a few classic styles that have historically been used to serve sweet wines depending on their style and provenance (think stout, wide glasses with short stems for sherries and Ports, for example). Kong's stemware brand Glasvin originally developed its [dessert glass](#) for renowned chef and chocolatier Gabriel Kreuther, and it's quite possibly the best sweet wine glass out there, although it's certainly an investment at \$408 for a 12-pack. For more aromatic sweet wines (and