



A few of Vesta's dessert wines. Photo by Kari Cummings

## Why You Should Be Drinking More Dessert Wine

Sip a vintage port at Mercantile Dining & Provision or a complex Sicilian wine at Vesta and you'll quickly see why these oft-misunderstood vinos deserve a place in your glass.

BY RUTH TOBIAS ([HTTPS://WWW.5280.COM/BYLINE/RUTH-TOBIAS/](https://www.5280.com/byline/ruth-tobias/)) | AUGUST 27, 2018

*If you know your cream ales from your quadrupels and your Sidecars from your Sazeracs, there's no reason you can't learn your Burgundy from your Barolo, too. In this series, we'll demystify the world of wine—because Denverites deserve to enjoy the spirit of the grape as much as that of the grain.*

At some point over the past few decades, American drinkers got the impression that they aren't "supposed" to like sweet wine—that it's a tacky choice for undeveloped palates. They're mistaken. Sure, cheap supermarket blends that taste primarily of sugar get the bad rap they deserve. (Think [Steve Brule's sweet berry wine](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=C0YrfKIS08I) [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=C0YrfKIS08I] .) But some of the world's most venerated and expensive wines are exceptionally sweet. Take Hungary's legendary Tokaji Essencia, which can contain anywhere between 450 and, on rare occasions, a shocking 900 grams of sugar per liter—about the same amount as maple syrup. (It's traditionally served not in a glass but in a crystal spoon, because one sip of this viscous liquid does the trick.)

Of course, if that elixir were merely sweet, we could all save our money and just guzzle Mrs. Butterworth's. Instead, ample acidity in these wines provides the balance needed to achieve the complexity that characterizes high-quality dessert wine, which typically falls into one or more of the following categories:

### Late-harvest and ice wines

Late-harvest wines contain grapes that were left on the vine past optimal ripeness to shrivel, which concentrates their sugar content. The most extreme late-harvest wine, ice wine, starts with grapes picked after a frost, then pressed while frozen to concentrate the juice even further. Key examples: Spätlese and some Auslese Riesling from Germany

### Botrytized wines

Botrytis cinerea, aka “noble rot,” is a fungus that, in the right weather conditions, dessicates grapes to intensify their sugars while enhancing some of their aromatic compounds. Key example: Sauternes, the world-renowned sweet white Bordeaux made primarily from Sémillon grapes

## Vins de paille or vini passiti

The former term is French for “straw wines,” and the latter Italian for “raisinated wines.” Both amount to the same thing: made from grapes that are left to air-dry (often on straw mats) for weeks or even months before wine production begins, at which point they’re extremely dehydrated. Key example: Tuscan Vin Santo

## Fortified wines

To pick up [where I left off with my last column \[https://www.5280.com/2018/06/why-you-should-be-drinking-more-dry-sherry/\]](https://www.5280.com/2018/06/why-you-should-be-drinking-more-dry-sherry/), not all fortified wines are sweet: Spain’s famed sherry, for one, runs the gamut from apéritif to dessert styles. But many are indeed sweet because the fortifying agent—a grape spirit—is added to the base wine to stop fermentation before the yeast has consumed all the sugar. Key examples: Pedro Ximénez, the sweet, oxidized sherry named for the varietal it showcases, as well as Portuguese port and madeira

## Try It:

At **Vesta** [<https://www.5280.com/restaurants/vesta/>], beverage director **Michael Casey** culls a few different flights from his à la carte selection of after-dinner beverages, including a quartet of older dessert wines he calls Patience Rewarded. One of its highlights is the Château de Cérons 1999, a botrytized wine from Bordeaux that “blows away Sauternes for the price,” he says. “It’s pretty crazy, with a funky, almost blue-cheesy aroma. But on the palate, it’s got all this honey and clove and fruit compote.” Another pet pick is the Donnafugata Passito di Pantelleria 2011, a raisinated Sicilian wine with “a peach-pie aroma,” explains Casey. He also offers a flight of ports dating back to 1967.

**Mercantile Dining & Provision** [<https://www.5280.com/restaurants/mercantile-dining-provision/>] also carries a number of vintage ports—made only in superior harvest years—which wine director **Patrick Houghton** loves. They offer a snapshot of their vintage but also how they’re still evolving, exhibiting more fresh fruit such as blackberries to “layers of dried fig, golden raisin, dark chocolate” and the like. Other favorites include a 2015 Dönnhoff Oberhäuser Brücke Riesling Auslese from Germany’s Nahe region—which Houghton calls “epic,” acid-driven yet bursting with apricots and peaches—and Château Mossé Rivesaltes, a fortified Southern French bottling from, get this, 1946. “Its freshness is absolutely stunning,” he says, with “hazelnut, almond, and dried-fruit aromatics.”

With one of the top wine cellars in Colorado, you bet **Flagstaff House** [<https://www.5280.com/2018/06/go-now-flagstaff-house/>] has an extraordinary dessert-wine selection, ranging from several decades-old vintages of Sauternes from what’s arguably the single most-famous winery in the world, Château d’Yquem, to the aforementioned Essencia. Given their equally extraordinary price tags, however, wine director **Elizabeth Booth** is just as delighted to turn guests on to more-affordable alternatives as Royal Tokaji Late Harvest 2016. It has all the “honeysuckle, almond, candied ginger, and orange” notes of its botrytized Hungarian siblings, she says, but a “much less dense, syrupy texture”—meaning that you can also pair it with richly savory dishes such as foie gras without exhausting your palate during a long meal.