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Giving Sweets a Chance

The best U.S. dessert wines will make you forget the category's rotgut reputation

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Sometime in the next few months, when you're entertaining, do something unexpected: After dinner, bring out nuts or fruit and open a bottle of sweet wine from the U.S. Really.

Too many people think they don't like sweet wines, and there are reasons for that, including history. For a long time after Prohibition, much American wine was sweet and really bad. In time, Americans associated sweet wine—and especially American sweet wine—with rotgut. Perception still hasn't caught up with reality. The reality is that there are beautifully made sweet American wines on shelves these days that would wow your guests—and perhaps change your mind, too.

France and Germany make some great sweet wines, but many people don't know there are fine choices right here in the U.S. WSJ "Tastings" columnists John Brecher and Dorothy Gaiter give some a try.

All we are saying is: Give sweets a chance.

To be sure, there are few wines in the world as staggeringly wonderful as sweet German Rieslings, which often make us think we're walking through a cloud of sweetness, and French Sauternes, which, at its best, tastes like sweet, wet, dark earth somehow transformed into liquid gold.

Tips about wine from The Wall Street Journal's reporters and columnists. But don't count the U.S. out. To discover what's on shelves these days, we picked up a large collection of sweet American wines. To keep our selection from getting too large, we did not include fortified wines, though there are some good ones. If you ever see Heitz Cellars's "Ink Grade Port," made from several Portuguese varieties, grab it (it's about \$30). There aren't many sweet American wines that are well-known or widely distributed, but we do often see Dolce (which has a big following, even at \$70 for a half bottle, but has never been one of our favorites in the past) and Quady's Essencia and Elysium (favorites from long ago and both about \$24). We were sure to include those. Most of the rest were more obscure.

We also were not able to include ice wines—made from frozen grapes—from some states that are very proud of them, such as Ohio and Indiana, because they are made in minute quantities and hard to find. These are most certainly worth trying if you have an opportunity. Finally, we did not include light, flowery, often low-alcohol and not-too-sweet Muscat Canelli, which we have written about in the past.

We did not taste these wines blind because they were so varied. Simply put, the tasting was a treat. What makes any fine sweet wine work is an intricate interplay of sweetness, acidity and earthiness. The sweetness shouldn't mask the grapes' essential flavors, but should enhance them. The wine, first and foremost, should taste like wine, not like some sort of sweetened juice. This is not easy to get right and, indeed, some of the wines we tasted didn't get it right. They were, in too many cases, simply sweet, without the balancing acidity that makes them light on their feet.

A Sampling of Sweet American Wines

In a broad tasting of sweet wines made in the U.S., these are some of our favorites, which we list to give you an idea of the tastes, prices and tremendous diversity of visions. Note that these are made from different grapes. All good dessert wines are produced in very limited quantities, so it's impossible to know which you might see. These five, for instance, came from five stores in four cities. We have listed them roughly from lighter to heavier. We generally prefer sweet wines by themselves after dinner, but they are also good with nuts and fruit. All of the wines below are half bottles except the Wiemer, which is 500 ml. If you have any question whether a wine is sweet, look for the amount of residual sugar or

sugar at harvest on the label; all of the wines below list those. While fine sweet wines can age beautifully, they don't fly off shelves, so if you buy an older one, make sure it has been well-kept at a thoughtful store.

Hermann J. Wiemer Vineyard Bunch Select Late Harvest Riesling 2006 (Finger Lakes). \$50. New York makes fine Riesling, both dry and sweet, and this is one good example, from a reliable name. The taste is rich with lychee, white peach and earth, but the texture is light. Clean, fresh and tangy. There was just one barrel—50 cases—of the 2006. The 2007 (about \$70) is a bit more widely available.

Bonny Doon Vineyard 'Le Vol Des Anges' 2007 (Beeswax Vineyard, Arroyo Seco, Monterey County). \$30*. Made with Roussanne grapes, best known for their role in the Rhône Valley. These Roussanne grapes have been infected with botrytis, the "noble rot" that leaves grapes concentrated to their sweet essence. Earthy and complex, with great balance and, at the end, a little bit of bite that gives the wine extra interest.

Rancho de Oro Puro Vineyards Late Harvest Sauvignon Blanc-Sémillon 2005 (Napa Valley). \$34.99. These are the main grapes of classic Sauternes. The juice was about 46% sugar for harvest in December. Simply luscious, with ripe peaches and an almost sinful mouthfeel.

Raymond Vineyard & Cellar 'Eloquence' Late Harvest Chardonnay 2005 (Napa-Monterey). \$40*. Made from Chardonnay infected with noble rot. Tastes like sweet, golden raisins. Beautiful wine, both in the glass and the mouth, and that golden glow seems to go right down your throat. Floral, with some honey and orange blossoms.

Dashe Cellars Late Harvest Zinfandel 2007 (Dry Creek Valley). \$25*. So different from the monsters of our youth, far more restrained—and just 14.1% alcohol, lower than many of today's dry Chardonnays. Great fruit, fine acidity, ripe without being overly sweet, and totally winning. Dottie said she'd have this with roast duck, a surprising compliment for a late-harvest Zin. John wanted cheese.

Note: These are the prices we paid at stores in California and New York. *We paid \$36.99 for Bonny Doon, \$49.99 for Raymond and \$32.99 for Dashe, but these prices appear to be more representative. Prices vary widely.

We ultimately weren't crazy about any of the ice wines we tasted. We found that they lacked the laser-like focus and intensity of Icewine from Canada or the eye-rolling lusciousness of Eiswein from Germany. We have liked ice wines that are proudly American, but not this time. We also tasted several wines made from grapes that were frozen after harvest, but none was among our favorites. These can be successful, however. One to keep an eye out for is Andrew Rich Gewürztraminer, which costs about \$23 for a half bottle.

Ultimately, our favorites were late-harvest wines, in which grapes are left on the vine for an extended period to get more and more concentrated, in some cases developing the famous "noble rot" that shrivels the grapes to their sweet essence. That's how one of our favorites, Oro Puro, was made. This is both risky and expensive and doesn't produce much wine (137 cases of the Oro Puro, for instance). Jonathan Goldman, proprietor of Oro Puro with his wife, Deborah, told us they own a vineyard and sell all of the grapes—except the grapes for this dessert wine, the only wine they make. There are fewer than 900 vines involved. "My wife and I love dessert wines," he told us. The secret, he says, is great grapes and a "noninterventionist" approach to winemaking. "The grapes, we let them hang forever, until they start to look as gross as possible. They are furry when picked. The grapes get picked the first week of December. They're pressed, barrel-fermented with natural yeasts in 50% new French oak and the rest in one-year-old barrels. That's the sum total of the process."

Another one of our favorites left us smiling for days because it was a late-harvest Zinfandel. Holy cow. Remember those? Back in our youth, late-harvest Zin was over the top in every way—too alcoholic, too sweet, too big, too muscular—and we loved it. In time, though, too many of them simply became clumsy and badly made and we moved on. We were so delighted to taste a good one, from Dashe Cellars. We called head winemaker Michael Dashe, who makes wine with his wife and co-owner, Anne, to talk about it and we could almost hear his smile. As a former

assistant winemaker at Ridge, he told us that he loves Zinfandel. The Dashes make this one from vines from the Bella Winery estate, where Mr. Dashe is the consulting winemaker. The Lily Hill vineyard there makes the vines struggle, producing grapes of marvelous complexity and perfect acidity. They made 949 cases of this.

Remember that most of these can be served in your prettiest little glasses in small amounts and then can be pumped, put in the refrigerator and enjoyed for several days. We're betting, though, that if you serve these to guests, you will never have a chance to do that.

—Melanie Grayce West contributed to this column.

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