

Desserts, to a certain extent, define American cuisine. If you've dined anywhere in the world you know that only Americans put such an emphasis on dessert. So why so little knowledge and emphasis on dessert wines? When it comes to wine most of us are just plain lazy. That's why you have me.

Here are some rules and facts about sweet wines:

First, the wine must be sweeter than the dessert. Otherwise your wine will detract from the food and the wine may taste sour.

Second, too much is too much, so very, very sweet desserts don't need any wine. Also, sweet wine by itself can be a dessert. Dessert wines work best with fresh fruit, tarts, or semi-sweet chocolate desserts.

A wine can be sweet because the grape has high natural sugar. Gewurztraminer is the perfect example of this type of sweet wine. It has pronounced floral and fruity flavors. It is best with strong cheeses, not sweet desserts.

At the other end of the spectrum are fortified wines. These wines actually have sugar and alcohol added to increase sweetness and intensity. These wines include Banyuls', Maderia, Malaga and PX Sherry. These wines are to be tried with the richest of chocolate confections or fudge. They are a dessert in themselves.

Between these two sweet wines you have white grapes that experience botrytis – also known as “noble rot”. This naturally occurring mold takes the water out of the grapes and thus concentrates the sugar. The most famous wine produced from these “rotten” grapes is d'Yquem. D'Yquem is never less than \$250 per bottle and as much as \$4,000 for very rare ones. Botrytis is most commonly found in these grapes – Semillon, Sauvignon Blanc, Riesling, Chenin Blanc, Tokaii and Chardonnay. As a note, most California botrytis – infected wines are made with artificially induced botrytis. These wines are best with apple, peach or pear based desserts. Again, these wines can be served by themselves.

Similar in price and quality are Ice wines. Strange, but these grapes are picked while frozen and the result is a thick, delicious, wine that goes well with fruity desserts (high acid and unctuous sweetness). Now some people are artificially fast freezing grapes to get this effect. In the new world this wine is Ice wine. In the old world it is known many times as Eiswein. Canada is the consensus leader on this type of wine and they predominately use Vidal grapes.

Many sweet wines are made by laying the grapes on mats or in trays and allowing them to dry, much like raisins. The grapes dry out losing water and the sugars become more concentrated (vin de paille in France and passeto or scioto in Italy). These wines include Vin de Santo, Amarone, and hundreds of others. These wines can have more of a syrup texture and can be served with very sweet desserts. Forget what I said before.

Finally, any wines can be made sweet by interrupting the fermentation process and leaving sugar that would have been converted to alcohol. This can be done by adding sulphur dioxide to kill the yeasts, chilling the wine to stop fermentation or by centrifuging it (which eliminates solids and stabilizes the wine).

Here are some ideas of wine and dessert pairings:

With sorbets no wine is necessary. It is redundant based on the sorbets flavors and freshness. If you still need a buzz, try champagne.

An apple tart or Galettes is perfect with a Sauterne or other fruity, white, sweet wine.

With fruit cobblers try a Rose champagne. The sweetness and acidity will work well or if it's especially sweet try a demi-sec champagne.

Chocolate cake deserves Port or Maderia. If it's not too sweet then a Banyuls' will work. Experiment and learn and then enjoy. Most wine stores will help you get started.

Michelangelo, an Italian artist, said, “I feast on wine and bread and feasts they are.”