



## Vino Dolce For The Holidays

*Sweet endings are even better when paired with wines that bring out the best in desserts and other meal-closing dishes.*

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■ **So it's the holidays** and you're hosting a dinner party. Or you've been invited to one and want to bring something special along. How about a bottle of dessert wine?

I know what you're thinking: "I don't like sweet wines." But don't be too quick to write them off. In my two decades of running wine tours, I've heard that a million times. But once someone tastes a good one, it's a whole different story. They realize that *vino dolce* isn't necessarily sappy or syrupy, but can have a zippy acidity that keeps the sweetness in check. Plus dessert wines offer layer upon layer of delicious dried fruit flavors.

Serving pumpkin pie? Pretty much any dessert wine goes with that. Fruit pie? Ditto. Biscotti for Santa? Forget the milk; leave out a glass of vin santo instead. If you're serving aged cheese or pâté, sweet wines go with that, too.

One rule of thumb: For a dessert wine to taste good, it should always be sweeter than the dessert. That's why Italians tend to serve them with biscotti, dry pastries, or fruit tarts. (It's also why champagne tastes wretched with wedding cake.)

When making a sweet wine, there are various ways to concentrate the sugars in the grapes. One method is late harvest, where grapes are left on the vine for weeks to dehydrate. Another way is to lay the clusters out in the sun or in airy fruit lofts until they turn to semi-raisins, making what Italians call *passito* wines. There's also noble rot, a fungus (*botrytis*) that shrivels the grapes, the most famous being Sauternes from Bordeaux.

Dessert wines usually come in half bottles of 375ml. That's the perfect size to share with friends. Trust me, they'll thank you for turning them on to the wide world of dessert wine.

Here's four to explore. Just give them 15 minutes in the fridge before serving.

### VIN SANTO

Without doubt, vin santo is Italy's best known dessert wine. Countless tourists in Tuscany have dunked *cantucci* (almond biscotti) in tiny glasses of this golden wine. But caveat emptor: Not all vin santo is created equal. Chances are, the one that quaint trattoria served you was the cheap stuff, more like caramelized water.

Try the real deal instead, like **Badia a Coltibuono's Vin Santo del Chianti Classico**. Its golden hue foretells a heady bouquet of honey, toasted hazelnut and sweet tobacco; in the mouth, the flavors suggest dried apricot and candied fruit, with a bright streak of acidity.

I've always found the more time a vin santo spends in barrel, the better. Here we need a word on process: When making vin santo, the grapes (usually malvasia and trebbiano) are dried in fruit lofts or attics from harvest until spring. Placed on bamboo mats or hung from nets, the clusters lose up to 70 percent of their juice during this six-month drying process, called *appassimento*. After pressing, the juice is put into small *caratelli* barrels and held there for years, never topped off. Unlike normal winemaking, they want the wine to evaporate through the wood ("the angels' share"), thus concentrating it further. In the Chianti Classico region, the minimum is two years in barrel. The most I've heard of is a decade. Badia a Coltibuono holds it for seven years, a quite respectable time. They're not cutting corners.

You can expect quality from this thousand-year-old estate. Badia a Coltibuono started out as a Benedictine monastery, then in 1864 was taken over by the Stucchi Prinetti family, who are still at the helm. Cookbook readers might recognize the name Lorenza de' Medici, a relative by marriage who started a cooking school here. Hopefully she teaches her students how to make *schacciata con l'uva*, a sweet focaccia with grapes that's popular in Tuscany at harvest-time. It's perfect with vin santo, if you want to venture beyond the classic cantucci pairing.

### PASSITO DI PANTELLERIA

Between Sicily and Tunisia lies the small volcanic island of Pantelleria, where the beating sun and hot sirocco winds from Africa are ideal for drying grapes. It sits smack in the middle of what the British used to call "the sun belt," the Mediterranean region extending from Portugal to Turkey, which produced the great meditation wines of yore: Madeira, Sherry, Marsala and Port.

Now add Passito di Pantelleria. One iconic example of this denomination is **Donnafugata's Ben Ryé**. By definition, Passito di Pantelleria is made from dried zibibbo grapes, the local name for Muscat of Alexandria. The muscat family is enormous, with some 200 subvarieties, but all share a common trait: a delectable floral fragrance reminiscent of honeysuckle and orange blossom. Uniquely among wine grapes, they're equally delicious to eat as table grapes. On Pantelleria, zibibbo grapes used to be sold as raisins. Some still are. But somewhere along the line, the

emphasis shifted to passito wine.

The winemaking process is laborious. In Donnafugata's case, they do two harvests: an early one for grapes destined to be dried under the sun for 20 to 30 days, then a second harvest to create fresh must from normal grapes. The dried grapes are added to the fresh juice in three batches, releasing their perfumes and residual sugar in stages. That combination of fresh and dried grapes results in a pleasing equilibrium between freshness and sweetness. In the end, the characteristic muscat orange-blossom scent transforms into candied orange peel, together with apricot jam and chestnut honey. It's a delectable wine from one of Sicily's leading wineries. Serve with Sicilian cookies, or just enjoy as a liquid dessert.

### LATE HARVEST SYRAH

Italy has a million dessert wines that don't fall into an appellation. **Alessandro di Camporeale's Kaid Late Harvest** is among them.

This Sicilian passito uses a different method to dry the grapes. The bunches are left on the vine, but their stems are pinched to stop the plants' vascular system from sending water to the clusters after they reach optimal ripeness. The grapes stay that way for a month or two, concentrating flavors, sugars and juice.

It's not unusual for syrah to be made into a dessert wine. They do it in Australia and California. But in Italy, not so much. In fact, Syrah hadn't been grown in this part of Sicily — an hour south of Palermo in the town of Camporeale — until grape-grower Benedetto Alessandro planted a row in the middle of his catarratto vineyard as a test. Satisfied with the results, he expanded his plantings in 1989, then again in 2000 and 2002. His three sons and grandchildren have carried on, making syrah the winery's flagship. Their first bottling in 2002 was a dry table wine called Kaid, meaning chieftain, in reference to the Arab sultans who once controlled Sicily.

A late-harvest Kaid followed, as well it should. Aged for three months in used oak tonneaux, the result is a divine elixir. Imagine blueberry and blackberry jam swirled together, and you get a sense of its dark fruit character and intensity. (But it's not as sweet as that sounds.) Notes of baking spice and chocolate follow, which make this an ideal companion for any dessert made with dark or bittersweet chocolate. It could pair equally well with a chunk of pecorino. Your call.

### RECIOLO DELLA VALPOLICELLA

Unlike Kaid, there's a long history behind Recioto della Valpolicella. Ancient history, in fact. This style of wine dates back two thousand years to the Romans, who colonized Verona and the surrounding Valpolicella area.

*Recioto* comes from a dialect word for ears, which is what locals called the lobes on top of the grape cluster. Exposed to more sunlight, this part of the bunch got the ripest and was picked separately to make a sweet wine for the nobles.

Nowadays, Valpolicella is famous for its Amarone, but that's a relatively recent invention. Recioto and Amarone are kissing cousins, using the same triad of grapes (corvina, rondinella, molinara) and the same *appassimento* drying technique. After

harvest, the grapes spend four to five months drying, laid out on bamboo mats or placed in shallow plastic baskets in a single layer. These go into a *fruttaio*, a fruit loft or warehouse that circulates air either through open windows (in boutique operations) or with giant fans (in more industrial ones).

After the desiccated grapes are pressed, the juice is divided. Part goes into cask to ferment until all the sugars are converted into alcohol, becoming dry Amarone. The other part is partially fermented, becoming sweet recioto.

Every Amarone winery makes a recioto, but in small quantities. The Adelia winery follows suit. This tiny 12-acre farm is the second label of Marinella Camerani, the first being Corte Sant'Alda. Her eldest daughter, Alda, runs the show at Adelia, which is an organic farm — thus the ladybug logo. The winery takes its name from a two-dotted ladybug called Adalia Bipunctuata, which one presumes lives amongst the farm's vines and cherry trees.

Speaking of cherries: That's the dominant flavor in the corvina grape. With 40 percent corvina, plus an equal portion of corvina grossa and 20 percent rondinella, **Adalia's Recioto della Valpolicella Roasan** is all about cherry. Think macerated cherries and cherries under spirit, then add baking spice, sweet tobacco and chocolate, and you've got a delectable dessert wine.

Recioto goes with dark chocolate and aged cheese. But my favorite accompaniment is *torta sbrisolana*, a regional dessert made of cornmeal, almond flour and whole toasted almonds. Torta is a misnomer, for it resembles a giant cookie more than a cake. Sometimes it's presented as such and you break it apart with your fingers. In more dignified settings, it might come pre-broken. However it's served, it's like the best crumble topping imaginable. But the cherries come in your glass.

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