

DAVE — ON — WINE

How Sweet It Is ! Or is it?

Sweetness is a surprisingly complex subject when it comes to wine. First, folks often confuse sweetness with fruitiness. This is understandable, as fruit is in fact sweet. Well, except for the African Horned Cucumber, but that's another column. When it comes to wine, fruitiness is an aromatic thing. We actually smell grapefruits or pears or berries in a wine. We don't really taste them.

For a demonstration of this, let us repair to the Wine Lab. Now hold your nose and close your eyes. Then have a friend (a good one) place a piece of peeled fruit on your tongue. Chew and swallow the fruit. Your mouth will be able to discern that what you're eating is sweet, but you won't be able to identify which fruit you're eating until you release your grip on your nose.

The huge majority of wines, especially reds, are fermented fully dry. Fermentation is the magical process whereby yeasts convert sugars into alcohol. The little yeasts don't know when to stop, so they just keep converting until they meet the extremely small Grim Yeast Reaper. This happens (a) when the yeasts consume all of the sugar in the wine, or (b) when the alcohol content of the wine approaches 14-15%, the level at which yeasts meet the Reaper.

Only a few wines are truly sweet. These include Rieslings, Chenin Blancs or wines in the Dessert section, such as Ports and Muscat-based wines. Rieslings and Chenin Blancs get to live in the Table Wines section of the shop because they are crafted with high acidity, which offsets the perceived sweetness with acidity that you will taste as a pleasant sourness, like a jawbreaker. Consequently, good Rieslings and Chenin Blancs are nicely-balanced, meaning that you won't necessarily think of many of these wines as being sweet.

The sensation that a lot of folks describe as "dry" is actually the astringent sensation caused by tannins, wine compounds that occur in grape skins. Tannins are common in red wines, and we in the trade refer to a tannic wine as being "sticky". If you want a Rockin' Tannin Experience, brew up some really strong tea, and then drink it plain. That feeling like your gums are receding is the tannin blast. Wines that are low in tannins are usually regarded as being smooth.

Here are some nice Winter/Spring sweet wines to tide us over for warmer days:

St. Urbans-Hof Riesling. A fine example of a nicely-balanced Riesling from Germany's famed Mosel-Saar-Ruwer region. Excellent alone or with light fare (\$13).

Bonny Doon Bouteille Call. This Port-style wine is made with grape and raspberry wines. Tremendous raspberry flavors go beautifully with chocolate. 500 ml (\$22).

Grof Degenfeld Tokaji Muscat Lunel. Hungary's noble dessert wine is exceptional with upscale desserts, or with simple fruit tarts. 375 ml (\$37).

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