

FRENCH FANTASIES

Allow me to set the stage for you to discover one of life's greatest gifts. With the approaching holidays, this seems to be a good time to focus on dessert wines. They tend to be consumed more when life slows down with vacations, holidays, or the finale to gourmet meals.

While historically Hungary is credited with producing the earliest wines made from grapes attacked by *Botrytis cinerea* or noble rot (mid-17th century), the most famous ones (Sauternes and Barsac) come from Bordeaux. However, it was not until 1847 that the most famous dessert wine was made. As was the case two centuries earlier in Hungary, the necessity of fighting wars left the grapes on the vines until they had been attacked by noble rot. Nevertheless, the wine was made and after being put in barrel, someone noticed that there was a sweet taste on the fingers which had touched the bung of the barrel. Thus was born the world's finest elixir, Château d'Yquem. This wine was placed in a unique position as the best dessert wine in Bordeaux as well as given a higher designation (Premier Cru Supérieur or "first great growth") than even the four First Growth red wines in the 1855 Classification of Bordeaux.

Sauternes and Barsac are made mainly from semillon (80 percent) and sauvignon blanc (20 percent). The conditions must be such that the grapes have enough humidity and warmth for the botrytis fungus to proliferate amongst the berries and then penetrate the grape skins. Once inside the grapes, evaporation takes place and the grapes shrink with the sweetness intensifying. This process does not occur every year and the evenness of the harvest varies considerably. Imagine the expense of workers going through the vineyards picking individual grapes at just the right moment. In fact, in 1972, at Château d'Yquem, workers made 13 passes (tries) through the vines to pick the grapes only to have the wine declassified as normal Sauternes. I often refer to this vintage as the most expensive wine ever made, or never made. Two years later, the same thing happened again and the 1974 vintage was sacrificed also. Although

very expensive in relative terms because of the extreme difficulty in producing this profound wine, I believe it is actually a great value. The total harvested output from one vine is required to produce one glass of wine. This intense liquid is so aromatic that an experienced "nose" can tell when a bottle is opened from across the room. Although the taste is almost beyond comprehension, the smell alone is worth much of the price of the wine. If ever there was a wine that demanded the proper wine glass, this is it. (See photo)

Château d'Yquem is one thing that has to be experienced in life. No words can describe this wine adequately. Wine writers use descriptors but best agree that they use only the highest praise based on commonly understood words in our lexicon. In fact, we need new words to describe this wine. Be wary of any journalist who writes that any wine is its equal. Until the fall of the Romanov Dynasty, much of the Château d'Yquem production went to St. Petersburg in Bacharach crystal under armed guard for six decades. Its greatest tribute was attributed to Baron Philippe de Rothschild. In his autobiography, he recalls that once he was asked if he, perhaps France's most famous bon vivant of the 20th century, ever despaired due to his well-known impotence. He acknowledged his condition but told the person not to feel pity because if he ever started feeling sorry for himself, he would go to his 'scientific' freezer, which approached absolute zero, and get a Château d'Yquem popsicle to lift his spirits. Thomas Jefferson, as a famous wine connoisseur, chose Château d'Yquem as his favorite white wine.

The wine ages effortlessly. I had the 1893, second best of the 19th century, at a centenary dinner in 2003 and it was lovely — a deep mahogany color but still with good fruit. In a vertical of all Château d'Yquem from 1847 to 1980 done in 1985, the greatest wine was thought to be the 1861 at 124 years old. It had never been recorked. No matter your age, you don't have to worry about outliving this wine. I prefer it alone or with a perfectly ripe pear or a high-quality blue cheese, such as Stilton



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or Gorgonzola. One of the great sensations in life is to have it with a slightly seared piece of foie gras as a first course.

Although most of us cannot or will not spend what it takes to have Château d'Yquem frequently, there is good news. There are several chateaux that produce wines that are also profound but cost multiples less than Château d'Yquem. They are Premier Cru Sauternes and Barsac in the 1855 Classification of Bordeaux. My favorites include Château Climens, Rieussec, Suduiraut, and Gillette Crème de Tête. One of my most memorable experiences was being invited by an owner of a private tasting with a friend while attending Vin Expo in Bordeaux in 1989. We had fresh bottles of almost all great vintages from 1947 to 1969. Truly a life event! The greatest years for Sauternes and Barsac are not always the best years for red Bordeaux. Recent outstanding years include 1975, 1976, 1988, 1989, 1990, 2001, and 2005.

Best of luck in hunting down one of life's greatest treasures. Santé! U