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## NOBLE TRADITIONS

NAME a white wine that is made throughout the world, but only in tiny quantities. Can age for 50 years and is sourced from numerous grape varieties. It is a style that has been made for centuries, and was once the toast of kings and queens.

The answer is a botrytis wine.

Sweet wines can be made by a number of methods, but the most famous are undoubtedly sourced from botrytis-affected grapes. Botrytis cinerea, pourriture noble or “noble rot” is a fungal disease that can attack grapes that are close to maturity. Given favourable conditions (20-25C and relatively high humidity) it has the desirable effect of dehydrating the grapes and concentrating the sugar content without rotting them. Due to their high glycerol

styles. Local grapes furmint (60 per cent) and Harslevel: (30 per cent) are the main constituents along with another four permitted varieties.

Turning to France, the region of Sauternes, on the “left bank” of Bordeaux, is the one we most often talk about. But to the north of Bordeaux in the Loire region great botrytis wines are also made from the much maligned chenin blanc in the Bonnezeaux, Chaume, and tiny Quarts de Chaume appellations. Back in Bordeaux more affordable botrytis wines can also be found in Sainte-Croix-du-Mont, Loupiac, Cerons, and inland to the east in Monbazillac on the river Dordogne. Rivers are often an important feature of the micro-climate. In Tokaj-Hegyalja it is

different times and the length of the process means pickers need to be kept on for some weeks after the main harvest. Yields can be cripplingly low, around 8hl/ha or one glass of wine per vine.

On account of its thin skins semillon is highly susceptible to noble rot and accounts for 80 per cent of a typical “encepagement” (blend). Sauvignon blanc makes up the remaining 20 per cent and attracts botrytis earlier. Its naturally high acidity gives the resulting wines a freshness that balances the more robust semillon. Muscadelle is sometimes used to provide additional aromatics.

The grapes are pressed a number of times and care must be taken during the slow vinification. Alcohol levels are ideally

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and sugar content the grapes produce a rich, luscious, intensely sweet dessert wine prized throughout the world.

You find wines made in this manner from many winemaking countries. Two of the most traditional and historic countries are Hungary and France. Three hour's drive north-east from the capital Budapest the Tokaj-Hegyalja region in Hungary was the first to “invent” botrytis wines. The first records of aszu (botrytis) grapes date back to 1571. From the 1700s the prized sweet wines were served at the courts of Louis XIV, Peter the Great of Russia and the Habsburgs in Vienna. Known as tokay in English or tokaji the aszu wine is classified into six levels of sweetness known as puttonyos. Their longevity is renowned, as is their high acidity which balances the residual sugar that can reach up to 180g/litre for some

the Tisza and the Bodrog rivers, while in the Sauternes region it is the confluences of the Garonne and tiny Ciron. It is here that the evening mist hangs around until late morning and the moist atmosphere encourages Botrytis Cinerea. Autumn mist activates dormant botrytis spores in the vineyard which increases concentration of tartaric acid and sugars, which gives viscosity, aroma and flavour. Botrytis can fail to arrive or arrive very late, in fact the most famous producer in Sauternes, Chateau d'Yquem, will not make any wine from the poor 2012 harvest.

D'Yquem is one of the oldest vineyards and was well known by 1785. At harvest, which is often in October, an average of five “passages” or “tries” are made through the vineyards to collect the berries. It is a highly selective process as the individual berries become affected by botrytis at

around 13.5 per cent with 125g/litre of residual sugar. Often a proportion will be barrel fermented and the wine usually goes into oak for 18 to 36 months. Some sauternes producers use 100 per cent new oak while others use considerably less and this influences the early life of the wine.

In Australia we source botrytis wines from both riesling and semillon. The Riverina is our most famous area for botrytis affected semillon. In the past the region tended to use flood irrigation and the vines developed large overhanging canopies. This environment produced the right moist micro-climate for botrytis to occur and certain vineyards became susceptible every year. Julie Mortlock is senior winemaker at De Bortoli Wines and responsible for Noble One, Australia's leading dessert wine. “The grapes are sourced from about four or five vineyards

each year, the same vineyards have been used for quite a few years as they are able to achieve an excellent botrytis infection (all natural), weather conditions pending. The vineyards are located around Bilbul and Yenda." Mortlock comments.

Botrytis wines can be difficult to produce. "Firstly, we have to decide when to harvest to obtain maximum flavour and sweetness balance whilst keeping one eye on the weather conditions," she says. "Once harvested, controlling the ferment to keep the fermentation going without excessive volatile acidity being produced is a challenge and then when to stop the fermentation with the right balance of alcohol and sweetness is the next decision to make." They use special yeast (*saccharomyces cerevisiae*-EC118) which can handle high sugar levels without creating excessive volatile acidity. After fermentation the wine is aged in oak. "Since the beginning of 2000 we have been keeping a parcel of botrytis unoaked to blend back to keep some freshness in the wine and lighten the style slightly." Mortlock adds.

Australian examples tend to be more luscious and heavier than their French counterparts, with honey, marmalade and dried fruit aromas. Repeatedly sauternes show more oak influence with earthy, mineral aromas and tastes comparatively lighter, savoury and more acidic. This allows sauternes to be served with an array of dishes before the dessert course. Classically foie gras (fattened duck or goose livers) would be served either simple fried or made into a parfait or terrine. But this can be expanded to other dishes that perhaps have a similar intense flavor such as strong cheese souffle or a caramelised onion and blue cheese tart. You could crack a bottle open and use it at both ends of the meal. 