



WORDS CLIVE HARTLEY

BOTRYTIS AND BEYOND - A LUSCIOUS AND OFTEN NEGLECTED WINE

THE GREAT wines of the world, in historical terms, were often sweet. The Roman falernian, Cape Town's constantia of the 18th century, and Hungarian tokaji are three classic examples. Even champagne was a hit with the Russians, when they added a sweet mixture of wine sugar and brandy. So it is a sad comment on our modern drinking habits when dessert wines are neglected, forgotten and often passed over when offered because of over-imbibing on heavyweight red wines earlier in the evening. But more than ever, we have a sweet smorgasbord to choose from, sourced both local and internationally.

Sweet wines can be made from either botrytis-affected grapes or late picked/late harvest grapes. Botrytis cinerea is a fungal disease that can attack and destroy grapes that are close to maturity. Given favourable conditions (20-25C and high humidity) it

use between four and six local vineyards to source the botrytis grapes; it's all natural infection and generally we use the same vineyards each year. We obtain an infection of botrytis in the Riverina every vintage but to varying degrees."

Winemakers face a number of challenges in producing this style. These include knowing exactly when to pick the grapes; protecting the juice from an increased risk of oxidation; and difficulties in pressing and filtering the thick liquid. The fermentation has to be watched carefully because at these sugar levels acetic acid is produced and can spoil the wine.

World-famous botrytis wines include the Sauternes of France and the trockenbeerenauslese of Germany. However, the first botrytis wines are believed to have come from Hungary in the middle of the 17th century. Legend has it that the sweet wines of Tokaji, in the extreme north-east of the country

Tokaji is one of the most acidic sweet wines that produces a delightful sweet and sour note.

can have a desirable effect (noble rot) by dehydrating the grapes and concentrating the sugar content without rotting them. Due to their high glycerol and sugar content the grapes produce a rich, luscious, intensely sweet dessert wine prized throughout the world.

Australia produces excellent botrytis wines from both riesling and semillon. Botrytis semillon is often matured in oak and is rich and intense, while riesling is left unoaked and is usually a touch lighter and more linear and acid-driven. 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 microclimate for botrytis to occur and certain vineyards became susceptible every year.

Julie Mortlock, senior winemaker at De Bortoli and responsible for Noble One, Australia's leading dessert wine, says, "We

bordering Slovakia, were first made when the harvest was delayed because of the threat of an attack from a marauding Turkish army. Tokaji is one of the most acidic sweet wines that produces a delightful sweet and sour note; it also gives the wine great longevity.

In Australia, Brown Brothers in the King Valley claims to have produced the first Australian botrytis wines. "John Graham Brown can remember his father talking about his first experience with botrytis in 1934," says Brown Brothers winemaker Cate Looney. "John Charles Brown made a 'sauternes'-style wine from riesling and sold it to some 'wine buffs' who understood the wine but could not sell all of it, so John Charles fortified the rest into a sherry." But in 1962, after rain delayed the harvest, father and son made and bottled a botrytis riesling, labelling it as a late picked riesling. Today the company produce a successful Patricia Noble Riesling from younger vines on the original site.

In Italy, the ancient Roman tradition of drying grapes is still followed to produce sweet wines. Both black and white grape varieties make a range of wine styles such as recioto in Valpolicella and Soave, as well as the passito wines on the island of Pantelleria, which uses the muscat of Alexandria grape locally known as zibbibo.

Sweet grapes can also be obtained by cutting the vine to make the grape shrivel and dehydrate. Clare Valley is one region that uses the cane or cordon cut method on its riesling. Kilikanoon winemaker Kevin Mitchell, who produces Mort's Cut Riesling, says the vines are cut when the fruit is around 10 degrees baume, usually around mid- to late February.

Chardonnay, verdelho and sauvignon blanc are all used to produce sweet whites. The latter is used effectively in Sauternes and Barsac to complement semillon. The Loire Valley produces some stupendous dessert wines in the appellation of Coteaux du Layon and its enclave Quarts de Chaume, using botrytis chenin blanc.

Other techniques include adding rectified concentrated grape must, or stopping the fermentation short by adding a spirit in a process called mutage. Wines made by this process are called Vin Doux Naturels in France, the most famous exponent being Muscat de Beaume de Venice from the southern Rhone Valley. These retain the fresh, natural, grapey aromas of the variety, which is commonly muscat blanc a petits grains. Haan in the Barossa Valley uses viognier to produce a unique ratafia-style wine which involves adding a neutral spirit to the pressing and free-run juice and then aging in oak.

Finally, eiswein, or ice wine, is made in cold climates such as Germany and Canada, where berries undergo a constant freezing and thawing process and are finally picked frozen at a temperature of between -10 and -15C.

