



**VENI, VIDI, VINO!**

# If Your Sweet Tooth Could Order a Glass of Wine...

*Pumpkin pie, apple pie, flan, oh my! With the holidays just around the corner, so are all the delicious, grandma's-recipe-inspired, traditional desserts that we look forward to all year! And the only thing I can imagine making those treats more hedonistically wonderful is a perfectly paired dessert wine.*



By Samantha Metzger

*“Penicillin cures, but wine makes people happy.”* – Alexander Fleming  
(who discovered Penicillin)

Still, with all the wining and dining that goes on during the holidays, it can be a bit overwhelming selecting yet another wine to go with dessert. Read on to learn the basics of choosing a dessert wine sure to finish off your holiday with a bang (and perhaps a bubble or two).

First and foremost, consider the dessert you'd like to serve. It's important not to go too sweet, as a superfluously sugary dessert will overwhelm your palate and make the wine you've selected taste too blunt or even sour. If you're serving chocolate, try selecting a darker variety (around 60% cocoa) so it will compliment, rather than compete with, your wine. Try avoiding cold desserts such as ice cream or sorbet, as the temperatures will numb the palate and make wines taste bland (it's okay to serve them as a compliment to a dessert, such as pie, but avoid serving them on their own as a wine pairing).

It's also important to consider the meal that will be served prior to your desserts. If the food will be heavy and rich, keep dessert light. For example, try serving a lovely biscotti with a traditional Italian Vin Santo. These grapes are harvested and dried indoors rather than on the vine, which gives the wine a nutty taste that would be a nice compliment. If, on the other hand, the dinner is lighter side, consider a more decadent dessert as a highlight of the meal. Perhaps a delicate yet rich Tiramisu with a Muscat would be a good choice. Also, keep in mind that some dessert wines are sufficient enough to stand on their own as the encore to your holiday meal.

Perhaps the most classic dessert wine go-to is a port. R.S. Surtees wrote in his book *Handley Cross*, “A pint of port and a devilled bisquit can hurt no man.” There are three types of this bold red



from Portugal: tawny ports, which are aged at length in wooden barrels to bring out a nuttier flavor; ruby ports, which are typically younger and fruitier, and vintage ports, which are aged for long periods in the bottle to give them spicy, dark grape flavors. All ports are fortified with brandy; the addition of which halts the fermentation process early, bringing out the natural sweetness of the grape and raising the alcohol level. Because they are so sweet, ports pair well with any kind of fruity dessert. Cherry pie or



apple cobbler, anyone? Dairy-based desserts (cheesecake, crème brûlée) are also a good pairing with ports. Tawny ports specifically pair well with milk chocolate, caramel, and toffee because of their nutty flavors, while heavy vintage ports pair well with darker chocolate. If you are serving some sort of cheese plate to finish the meal, include walnuts paired with a vintage port — its high tannin levels will be a nice compliment.

The ever popular Riesling and Gewurztraminer both fall under the category of ice wines, which are made from grapes that are frozen on the vine and then crushed while frozen. Ice wines are made from a variety of grapes, including Riesling and Gewurztraminer, but will generally say either ice wine or Eiswein (German for “ice wine”) on the label. Canada is also famous for producing delicious (and expensive) ice wines. These wines are interesting and well-balanced because though they are typically very syrupy and sweet, their high-acidity manages

to keep them crisp and clean at the same time. Their flavors are that of pear, peach, apple, tropical fruits, and even hazelnuts, so all of those make good dessert pairings. As a rule of thumb (for ice wines and any others) make sure that your wine is always sweeter than your dessert.

Muscats are another beloved dessert wine. Muscat is a very diverse white grape family enjoyed for its incredible fragrance and its mild fruit flavors of apricot and peach. (It’s also often used to make raisins.) Muscat does not need to mature for the most part; it can be drunk the same year as harvest. And because there is such a variety of grapes, the particular sweetness of this wine varies. These wines pair wonderfully with fruit, cobblers, and lighter chocolates (white and milk) and even milder, creamier cheeses.

Germany, known for its sweet tooth, boasts the Auslese. It’s pronounced “owss-leh-zeh” and means “selected harvest.” Auslese wines are made primarily with Reisling grapes and are harvested late in

the season, enhancing their sweetness. A good Auslese is very palatable because of the balance between its high acidity, high fruit, and high sweetness. Germany ranks its wines according to sweetness, the sweetest being the most valued. Auslese is picked very ripe and is moderately sweet, and pairs well with peach or almond-based desserts. Beerenauslese (meaning “selected berry harvest”) is picked even riper and, as such, is sweeter. Topping the list is Trockenbeerenauslese (meaning “selected dry berry harvest”), which is picked shriveled. These are so incredibly sweet that *New York Times* wine writer Eric Asimov says they “must maintain teeth-jarring levels of acidity to keep them balanced.” The later two are also described as having a somewhat oily texture and are so decadent that they could easily be served as dessert alone.

If you are set on serving creamy desserts like crème brûlée, cheesecake, and even cheese plates this holiday season, consider a Sauternes and Barsac. The “noble rot” or “pourriture noble” in French refers to bacteria called *botrytis cinerea* that attacks grapes left on the vine. This bacteria dramatically concentrates the sweetness of the grape far more than in normal wine grapes, resulting in the classically strong, sweet, French dessert wine. (Sauternes refers to wines from the Sauterne region in France while Barsac refers to the nearby Barsac region.) A really classic pairing for Sauternes is with a blue cheese, notably Roquefort. In addition to the pairings mentioned above, these wines are also excellent with tropical fruity desserts and desserts flavored with honey and butterscotch. And similar to the Auslese, these wines are rich and powerful enough to stand on their own at the end of a delicious meal.

Now that you’re well versed in dessert wines sure to please the palate, check out the local selections! WineStyles is



carrying two great alternatives to the Portuguese port: one is from Mendocino, Calif., and the other (called “Landskroon”) is from South Africa. Both are promising choices at around \$24. Their Kings Estate Vin Glace Pinot Gris (\$24.99) is a great, clean dessert wine at an excellent price. Plus, not only is it delicious; it’s organic and biodynamic in farming. If you’re just sharing dessert with your sweetie (pun intended), try the Tobin James “Liquid Love” late harvest zinfandel (\$20.99) for a romantic and delectable treat. And, for my personal favorite (and sure to be for those who love bubbles like I do), try a Moscato di Asti. WineStyles carries an Italian Moscato at \$16.99 and a half-size Australian titled “Innocent Bystander” at \$13.99, both sweet treats complete with some fizzy fun!

Dessert wines seem to have a love ‘em or hate ‘em stigma — but with all these great options you’re sure to find at least one to love. Cheers to you and yours (and all those sweet teeth in between) this holiday season! ★