

Sweet wine for an aperitif?

Recently, I attended a dinner that celebrated the life and times of Henri IV, king of France from 1589 to 1610. Henri was born in Pau, in the south-west of France, close to the Pyrenees. This is the Jurançon wine region and tradition has it that the sweet wine of Jurançon was rubbed on Henri's lips at his baptism. And so began a great tradition for the wine region.

The Jurançon region is best known for its white wines made from Petit Manseng and Gros Manseng, varieties that are not known here. The wines are made in a dry (*sec*) or sweet (*moelleux*) style. Petit Manseng is perhaps the better variety for production of the sweet wines. The vines are trained high (see image) and the bunches contain a large number of tiny berries with very thick skin, which allows prolonged ripening and sugar accumulation without berry splitting.

The dry wines are a great accompaniment to food, especially fish and white meats. It is the *moelleux* wines that I wish to discuss here. This may seem a little strange, given that some of my previous columns have focused on the pleasures of dry, high acid wines. However, some years ago when working in the Anjou region of France, I was introduced to the sweet Coteaux du Layon wines as an aperitif and this brought me to the *moelleux* wines of the Jurançon. They are delicious wines and an ideal way to relax on a warm summer's evening with *foie gras* or *pâté*. All the world's problems can be solved very easily while enjoying the wine. The locals will drink the sweet wine with strong meat dishes such as *confit d'oie* (goose), the sweetness blending with the strong meat flavours. And, of course, they make great dessert wines.

The wines are concentrated, perhaps almost honey-like. I use 'viscous' to describe the palate, viscosity in wine sensory terminology referring to the force required by the tongue to move the wine around in the mouth. The sweet wines will age from five to 20 years with 'ripe peaches' and 'cinnamon toast' aromas. And, importantly for me, there is also plenty of acid that carries the flavour right through the palate. The reputation of the sweet *moelleux* wine of the Jurançon was really established by Colette, who described the wine as *séduction du vert gallant*, a term applied to Henri IV, a well-known womaniser. This link with Henri IV and the lifestyle of Colette created a marketer's dream for the region's wines.

There are several ways to prepare a sweet wine. One is simply to stop the ferment before it finishes, by cooling and the addition of sulfur dioxide to kill the yeast. It would be fair to say that great sweet wines are not made this way. Concentration of sugars in the grape berry while the bunches are still on the vine is a better way to produce a sweet wine. This can be achieved when *Botrytis cinerea* (noble rot) infects the vine, causing desiccation and consequent concentration of the sugars or by allowing the grapes to freeze on the vine as in Icewine (*Eiswein*).

In the Jurançon, climatic conditions allow long, slow ripening, with the harvest taking place in November and



A Jurançon vineyard in the foothills of the Pyrenees

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What to try

The Jurançon wines are not widely available in Australia. Recently, I tried the 2009 Domaine Bellegarde Jurançon Moelleux Cuvée Thibault and the 2010 Chateau Jolys Cuvée Jean, accessed through Discovervin. Both have a lovely gold colour with a sweetness matched by acid. They are not cloying and show a delicacy that opens in the mouth for a long, lingering finish.

December, at least two months after the regular harvest period. During this long period on the vine, the berries start to shrivel, concentrating the sugar and acidity. This is sometimes referred to as *passerillagé*. The juice is difficult to extract during pressing as it a highly viscous solution. Fermentation is slow, maybe taking 2–3 months, before barrel ageing of 12–18 months. Patience and care is needed to produce a wine with 12.5–13% alcohol and 30 or more grams per litre of residual sugar. Hygiene is also important as the residual sugar is a great food source for microbial activity. And the residual sugar, being an aldehyde, can bind sulfur dioxide, reducing its availability for antimicrobial activity. Production costs are high and this pushes up the bottle price considerably. But maybe one has to pay a price for pleasure.



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