



David Williams's wines of the week

Sweet wines for Easter

David Williams

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Domaine de la Grange Neuve Monbazillac, France 2017 (from £11.99, 50cl, [virginwines.co.uk](https://www.virginwines.co.uk); [woodwinters.com](https://www.woodwinters.com)) Why do so few people drink sweet wines? Or rather, since so many wines masquerade as dry even as they retain a sweetness level not far shy of a can of pop: why do so few people buy and drink wines that are unapologetically made and sold as sweet? This class of wine contains, to my mind, an unusually high proportion of the world's most remarkable bottles - a profusion of WTF wines that prompt the question: how on earth do you get that from grapes? Since this is a time of year when overindulgence in sweet things is actively encouraged, I'm here to put the Easter case for these neglected vinous gems, starting with this golden southwestern French elixir. With its classic luscious honey and marmalade tang, it's reminiscent of wines from the more famous appellation Sauternes - at a fraction of the price.

Donnafugata Ben Ryé Passito di Pantelleria, Italy 2018 (from £27.02, 37.5cl, tannico.co.uk, hedonism.co.uk) As well as being gorgeously sensual, great sweet wines are testament to the ingenuity of winemakers and the fussy, peculiar lengths they'll go to in search of flavour. Monbazillac and sauternes are examples of a technique - also used in the great sweet wines of Germany, Austria and Hungary, among others - in which winemakers must cultivate and harness the grey fungus *Botrytis cinerea*, the legendary 'noble rot' that shrivels the grapes, concentrating and transforming the pulp. Other methods involve a kind of dare with the conditions, leaving the grapes to concentrate on the vine way past the harvest of those used in dry wines - in the case of the ice wines of Germanic Europe and Canada, until winter has started and the grapes have actually frozen. Still more get their concentration from drying after picking, as happens with the zibibbo (muscat) used to fashion the exquisitely balanced crystallised fruit and delicate floral and herbal notes of Donnafugata's passito from the island of Pantelleria, just south of Sicily.

Ximénez Spínola Pedro Ximénez Solera 1918, Jerez, Spain NV (£54.95, thewhiskyexchange.com) Perhaps the most extreme style of sweet wine made from dried grapes can be found in Jerez, the home of sherry in Andalucía. Pedro Ximénez, or PX as it's generally called, is made from the eponymous grape variety, but it really feels closer to treacle or molasses than it does to wine: dark, almost black, thickly syrupy; it can be served straight from the bottle, poured over vanilla ice-cream like a boozy sauce. Beyond the first, striking sip, some lesser PX can be a little too much, a little too one-dimensionally sweet, tasting simply of raisins and - since it's a fortified wine - alcohol. But, taken a little at a time in short draughts as you would a fine dark spirit, the finest PX, such as Ximénez Spínola's, can be extraordinarily complex and rewarding. Balancing all that sweetness with notes of coffee, dark chocolate, prune, fig and nuts, as well as raisins and sultanas, it's like nothing else in the world.

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