

A selection of dessert wines from David Ransom's personal cellar.

DESSERT WINE
REMAINS A
SCRUTINIZED WINE-
LIST CATEGORY,
BUT IT'S HIGH TIME
FOR A CHANGE



Sweet Disapproval

story and photo by David Ransom

THERE'S CERTAINLY A place in the world for dessert wines: those rich, velvety, sometimes unctuous late-harvest bottlings meant for savoring while basking in the glory of a good meal. Yet for most sommeliers, these wines tend to be a "sticky" subject (pun intended), as they're seen as languishing residents of a required section that's challenging to sell bottles from.

So, what's a sensible som to do? In anticipation of the holiday season, a time when many restaurants stock up on the category, I reached out to some sommeliers to see if they had any good ideas on how to kickstart dessert-wine sales. Here's what they had to say:

"I think the biggest key to creating a successful sweet-wine program is diversity," says Hudson L. Austin of The Wine Merchant, a sales and consulting company that works with restaurants in the greater

Philadelphia area. "There is a huge breadth of dessert wines out there. By looking past the staples like Sauternes, Barsac, Beaume de Venise, et cetera, to offer lesser-known wines from other parts of the world, you pique interest and make it fun for the consumer. Also offering dessert pairings is a plus, since people rarely want a whole bottle, but will try a glass."

Gregory Stokes, who runs the wine program at Veritas in Columbus, Ohio, concurs—and he does the numbers to prove it. "We actually do a very good business with dessert wines, and key for us are pairings," he says. "We offer only three desserts each night and pour 25 dessert wines by the glass, including wines like Klein Constantia Vin de Constance. It's all presented on the same menu and our floor staff is very well briefed on describing the nuances of what pairs well together and why. As such, our

dessert wine sales are 7–10 percent of our total wine sales, which I basically consider a 7–10 percent profit."

Jon Cross, Wine Director at Hinoki & the Bird in Los Angeles, employs a slightly different methodology in his highly recognized program. "Dessert wines are a bit of a catch-22 in that to build an award-winning list you need to include them," says Cross, "but you also need to then sell them, and bottles don't sell." When it comes to confronting this dilemma, Cross adds that he's found the Coravin to be his "savior." "I can offer great dessert wines by the glass—including 1912 Madeira or even the [Donnafugata] Ben Ryé—and sell them all night," he explains.

While each approach is different, all three represent solid building blocks for attaining the sales figures these delicious wines rightfully deserve. **\$**