The Dessert Desert: Dry Wines from Historic Sweet Regions

In the seventh century BCE, the Greek poet Hesiod described what is likely Commandaria as “the Gift of Bacchus, Sire of Joy.” Shakespeare later sang of Sherry’s ability to make the brain “apprehensive, quick, forgetive, full of nimble fiery and delectable shapes.” America’s Founding Fathers toasted the signing of the Declaration of Independence with Madeira, and Napoleon Bonaparte ordered Constantia from his exile in Saint Helena. But times have changed. Beyond industry adoration and niche enthusiasts, where did the market for sweet and fortified wines go?

“For the moment, there are not enough consumers drinking sweet wine. And it’s a shame, because sweet wines, especially in this region of Sauternes, have never been as good as they are today,” says Olivier Bernard, vigneron at Clos des Lunes and Château Guiraud. His observation echoes much chatter in the sweet wine space. In the United States alone, dessert and fortified wine consumption, which was 70% of all wine enjoyed in the US in 1950, was eviscerated to a measly 2% of the market share by 2000.

People hypothesize about the reasons behind sweet wine’s fall from grace, ranging from evolving gastronomic preferences, to palate fatigue from sugar-laden wines that flooded the market in the mid- to late 20th century, to the idea that you don’t need many ounces of dessert wine to feel satiated. Vintners, too, propose myriad antidotes, including new suggested food pairings and the inclusion in mixology. The most consequential, however, is the emergence of a dry wine sister category in nearly every historic sweet wine region. While it has taken several decades, if not centuries, to gestate these products, the results are largely stunning, offering the wine world new expressions of several of its most hallowed sites.

So why did these new wines and parallel narratives emerge? Are they a liquid insurance policy—a product strapped-for-cash wineries know they can produce every year to generate profit? Perhaps they’re the mere byproducts of sweet wine production—the grape scraps that didn’t raisinate or never met botrytis.

Winemakers suggest quite the opposite. “It’s a way to guarantee the tradition of sweet wine production,” explains Jean-Jacques Dubourdieu of Château Doisy-Daëne. Each historic sweet wine region has found its own path to dry wines, but Dubourdieu’s claim is the common thread of each of them. This article examines four historic sweet wine regions—the Douro Valley, Tokaj, Sauternes, and Pantelleria—and how dry wines now function in their industrial structures.

The Douro

Of all the world’s great sweet wine regions, Portugal’s Douro Valley, the source of Port wines, offers the most mature dry wine counterpart to its industry. For centuries, Port (as well as Madeira) shone as the face of Portuguese wine. Even its name implies how strongly it is bonded to Portugal’s vinous identity. That remains much of the case today, but consumer interaction with Portuguese wine has broadened beyond the one product, largely thanks to growing interest in Portugal as a destination. “Tourism is doing for Portuguese wines what food did for Italian wines,” notes Eugenio Jardim, US Ambassador for Wines of Portugal. The white wines of Vinho Verde have carried a portion of that weight, but so have the dry wines of the Douro Valley. The Douro’s dry revolution was several decades coming and continues today as it further defines its dual roles as both the cradle of Portugal’s most allocated dry wines and the cultivator of some of Europe’s highest quality values.

Since early in its history, Port has provided its mercantile motherland with a lucrative export product. After the English sent military support to Portugal to fend off a Castilian invasion, the 1386 Treaty of Windsor codified an alliance between the two nations, centuries before the French embargos of the late 1600s mushroomed the demand for Portuguese wines on the English table. Beyond Britain, Portugal would send its wines from the Douro to the far reaches of its empire, propelling them into the Atlantic to their settlements in Madeira, the Azores, and eventually Brazil. As such, Port demanded fortification from an early date to reach its consumers intact, but the addition of brandy, or *aguardente*, was only necessary as a preservative to these dry wines, rather than to arrest their fermentation and withhold sugar.

Many cite 1678 as a turning point for Port’s fortification process, the year two English merchants stumbled upon the Abbot of Lamego—whose name is lost to history—adding *aguardente* midway through the fermentation process. The English market responded positively to these sweet wines, effectively moving the fortification step up earlier in the recipe of Port. In 1820, a famously rich vintage encouraged shippers to preserve more residual sugar, and these progressively sweeter wines of the 19th century solidified the Port style known today. This evolution didn’t come without its detractors, though. Joseph James Forrester, shipper at Offley, Forrester, and Webber, published in 1844 a pamphlet titled *A Word or Two on Port Wine*, in which he decried the abuse of brandy in the production of Port wines, advocating for a drier product. “Rich wine requires little or no brandy,” he wrote, calling the practice “highly injurious” and obstructive of Port’s “real vinous qualities.” English writer Henry Vizetelly noted a few decades later, “There is no reason whatever why a perfectly fermented and consequently dry Alto Douro wine, which has received no addition of spirit should not find a market in England.”

Perhaps Forrester and Vizetelly would have enjoyed Barca Velha, a wine first vinified in 1952 that single-handedly rebirthed the fine dry wine category in the Douro Valley. Inspired by techniques he observed in Bordeaux, Fernando Nicolau de Almeida, Technical Director for Ferreira (and subsequently their dry sister label Casa Ferreirinha), set about harvesting a dry wine from his family estate Quinta do Vale Meão (fruit is now sourced from Quinta da Leda). “The result from the Douro was what he desired for the wine he dreamed to produce,” recalls Luís Sottomayor, Ferreira and Ferreirinha’s present winemaker, of his predecessor’s epiphany. Today, Barca Velha remains Portugal’s flagship wine, and Sottomayor, among others, likens it to Vega Sicilia’s Único, an apt comparison in both character and prestige to an icon grown just upriver in Spain’s Ribera del Duero. For decades, it was singular—a wine long-matured in cask and only released in rare vintages after meticulous deliberation—while the Douro’s dry reputation was more widely associated with rustic, difficult wines.

But eventually Barca Velha’s spark of an idea caught fire, and by the late 20th century, a determined dry wine industry took hold. “Fifty years ago, Barca Velha was alone. Nowadays, there are beautiful Douro wines,” Sottomayor says of his peers. In 1979, Portugal established a separate Douro DOC for the valley’s dry wines. In the decade that followed, Dirk Niepoort was among those who believed in the Douro’s dry potential. Niepoort recalls, “My general manager says I’m a visionary, but it happened because I was in California in 1987, and somebody asked me, ‘Are you going to be making dry wine?’” Back then, Niepoort feared he would “make a monster,” but responded, “In 20 years, I think I will be making elegant and fine wine.” That same year, Niepoort and his father purchased a property they deemed unsuitable for Port wines. The first wines he crafted, he concedes, were indeed “monstrous,” but now his extensive and somewhat eccentric dry portfolio reflects the Burgundian ethos he always hoped to imbue (his respective top red and white are not coincidentally named Charme and Coche). Niepoort would be a founding member of the Douro Boys, an influential association of Douro producers in a range of styles that collectively marketed the quality of dry wines.

Today, the reputation of Douro’s dry wines continues to expand. From January to June of 2018, the category witnessed a 6.4% leap in earnings from that same period in 2017; Port simultaneously generated 1.4% less income. From 2000 to 2014, the fortified wine’s overall production fell from 10.3 million cases to 8.66 million. All of Port’s

conglomerates and major shippers are now invested in dry wines, and the results are paying dividends. In 2014, *Wine Spectator* awarded slots three and four in its Top 100 to Douro reds: Prats & Symington's 2011 Chryseia, a collaboration between the Symington family (owners of Dow's, Graham's, Warre's, and Cockburn's) and Bruno Prats (formerly of Cos d'Estournel), and the 2011 Quinta do Vale Meão, made from Barca Velha's original vineyard source. (Dow's 2011 Vintage Port was also awarded the number one position.) In short, Port is no longer the Douro's only prestige product.

The Douro River as seen from Quinta do Arnozelo in the Douro Superior (Photo credit: Bryce Wiatrak)

To understand Douro wines, one must also reflect upon the business of Port. The vineyards of the Douro Valley, which number over 140,000, are awarded a letter grade from A to I. The classification, or *benefício* (benefit) system, was conceived by Álvaro Moreira da Fonseca in his works *The Method for the Elaboration of the Benefício in the Douro* and *Method for Distributing the Benefício in the Douro*, in which each vineyard is evaluated based on a laundry list of characteristics—altitude, yield, soil type, slope, vine age, training, and so on. Specific sectors of the Douro Valley are favored over others, as are certain grapes. The classifications were enacted in the years following World War II and have seen little reassessment since.

But the *benefício* system provides more than simply a buyer's guide to the Douro's most pedigreed vineyard sites. It also regulates and quotas the amount of Port that can be produced in any given year. Taking into consideration market demand and vintage conditions, the Port and Douro Wine Institute (IVDP) dictates how many liters of Port can be bottled from each vineyard. A-level sites are licensed to vinify the highest percentage of Port, whereas vineyards classified as G or lower cannot produce Port.

The *benefício* system creates an environment unlike any of the world's other great sweet wine regions but also, in a way, necessitates a complementary dry wine industry. For most of the past century, fruit permitted to produce Port was too valuable to vinify into dry wine. Dry wines weren't a natural choice in years deemed unsuitable to declare Vintage Port; there were other avenues within the Port category into which the fruit could be declassified. Growers made their living off the sale of Port-licensed grapes, but they also cultivated an astronomical amount of fruit that legally could never go into the flagship product. For decades, that fruit came with shockingly low price tags. "For dry wines, you're getting amazing value, as people are able to buy them cheaply from farmers—that's the sort of market distortion that we're currently experiencing," explains Rupert Symington, of the Symington family. As such, the Douro has been venerated as a region that can offer tremendous value in its dry wines, not just its handful of icon bottlings.

That may not, however, be forever the case. "You're almost having to pay as much now for dry red Douro in bulk as you would for Port," says Symington. "Once it gets to the point where the Douro production includes all of the grapes, for dry wines and Port, it will kill off the opportunity to make cheap reds."

Should it get to the point where all fruit is accounted for, will dry Douro wines compete with Port for grapes? In some vineyards, this is already happening. Symington notes that Quinta de Roriz is licensed to produce a lot of Port wine, but they instead utilize most of the fruit for Prats & Symington's dry wines, such as Chryseia. The same holds true at Quinta da Leda, where the focus today is Barca Velha and the Casa Ferreirinha portfolio rather than Ferreira Ports.

But the best grapes for Port don't universally result in the best dry wines. The Douro Valley is divided into three sub-regions, from west to east: the Baixo Corgo, the Cima Corgo, and the Douro Superior. The Cima Corgo, a middle ground between the rainy, Atlantic influences of the Baixo Corgo and the continental extremes of the Douro Superior, is widely considered the best terroir for the cultivation of Port wines. Dirk Niepoort, too, prefers the Cima Corgo for dry wines (from here he harvests the fruit that goes into his flagship Douro red, Charme), but not necessarily the same sites. "I actually think that the best vineyards for Port are not very good for wine," he says. Niepoort also finds tremendous potential for both red and white wine in the Baixo Corgo, the least venerated sector for Port production. Both Barca Velha and Chryseia, on the other hand, are born under the heat of the Douro Superior.

With altitudes that can range several hundred meters from the riverbanks to the highest rows, even individual vineyards can show dramatic changes in character. Accordingly, producers are likely to favor certain plots within their *quintas* (estates) for Port and others for dry wines. Carla Tiago, Winemaker for Kopke, explains, "The grapes for the dry wines come from the highest places, to maintain all the freshness that we want in these wines." While Douro wines exhibit extraordinary stylistic breadth, most producers seem to concede that maintaining that freshness is more paramount for dry wines than it is for Port. "Acidity is not as important for Port as it is for dry wines. Port likes the extremes," says Niepoort. Typically, vines grown closer to the river yield higher concentration but less acidity, and are more prone to sunburn and raisining. Such conditions would be damaging for fruit destined for dry wine production but can be ideal for Port grapes, which are typically harvested one or two weeks later. "For great Port, you're looking for reasonably ripe grapes and higher sugars. It's acceptable to have skin coming in that's starting to pucker," notes Symington.

There are more than 80 permitted grape varieties in the Douro, ranging from Touriga Nacional to Pinot Noir and Chasselas. Dozens of varieties can be interplanted within a single vineyard plot, and as such, most Douro wines, like Port, are blends. But producers may favor some varieties for dry wines and others for Port. Of the five classic Port grapes—Touriga Nacional, Touriga Franca, Tinta Roriz, Tinta Barroca, and Tinto Cão—winemakers seem to regard Tinta Barroca as the most poorly suited to the production of dry wines, but whose ability to reach sky-high levels of sugar makes it a perfect match for Port. Conversely, many praise the structured, aromatic Touriga Franca as the best grape for dry wines, if not for Port as well.

Working with a cornucopia of grape varieties across the climactically diverse Douro Valley provides winemakers with a broad palette from which to craft wine. The stylistic range of dry Douro wines reflects that, making it difficult to generalize about typicity. If a consumer is looking for monolithic reds that resemble Port, the Douro has those. But it also has light-bodied red wines made with a Burgundian sensibility, a full spectrum of white wines, and sparkling and rosé offerings. Few European wine regions exhibit such a New World-esque flair for experimentation while still adhering to appellation regulations.

This comes in stark to Port itself, whose strict production methods have fastidiously been dictated by law for centuries. “Some think people should have to choose,” says Rupert Symington—and indeed, there are producers who now specialize in one product over the other. The rise of dry Douro wines has also birthed smaller labels for whom it may not necessarily be economical to enter the Port wine business. For essentially all of the larger shippers, though, both Port wine and Douro wine have secured places within their portfolios without fear that one might cannibalize the market for the other. “If somebody comes along looking for a Port, they want a Port,” says Symington. Carla Tiago adds, “Port wine is the unique wine; it’s the wine that you can only get from here. With still wine, you’re competing with the rest of the world.” The experience of drinking Port is not the same as drinking a full-bodied dry red. Instead, shippers find that the products complement rather than compete with one another—two expressions of the same place. “They coexist together. The Port needs the Douro wines, and the Douro wines need the Port,” explains Luís Sottomayor.

Tokaj

For centuries, Tokaji Aszú held its place atop the tables of Eastern European nobility, and like Port in Portugal, it symbolized the Austro-Hungarian Empire’s greatest wine achievement. The region’s reawakening at the end of this past century remains one of the most triumphant resurrections in the story of wine. Tokaji Aszú is thankfully back, but its future lies largely intertwined with a new category born with it from the ashes of its 20th-century tribulations: dry Furmint.

Tokaj is the oldest viticultural region to consistently produce wine from botrytized grapes, a methodology adapted in the 17th century, if not earlier. By contrast, Schloss Johannisberg dates 1775 as the year of Germany’s first botrytized Spätlese, and the recorded history of noble rot in Sauternes doesn’t begin until the following century (although it likely appeared earlier). In the 1720s and ‘30s, Tokaj became the world’s second demarcated wine region (following Chianti) and the first to classify its vineyards. Not long after that, Tokaj was recognized among the world’s finest wines, earning favor in Europe’s high courts. King Louis XV of France famously dubbed it the “Wine of Kings, King of Wines,” and the wine achieved continued renown in Tsarist Russia after its introduction by the Hapsburgs. Tokaji Aszú was believed to possess medicinal qualities, and composer Joseph Haydn once requested his wages be paid in the elixir to relieve his ailing health.

As several of the grand courts of Europe disappeared by the early 20th century, Tokaj, too, saw its glory fade. A languid recovery from the phylloxera epidemic was bookended by World War I, after which Tokaj lost nearly 1,000 hectares to what is today Slovakia in the Treaty of Trianon. Soviet control followed, and behind the Iron Curtain, the bottling and distribution of Tokaj’s wines were consolidated into a state-run monopoly (formerly Tokaj Crown Estates, now called Grand Tokaj). During this era, Tokaj’s fabled vineyards fell into disrepair, and its wines were largely fixated on quantity over quality.

Following the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1989, the new Hungarian government offered vineyard and cellar packages to foreign investors willing to revitalize the Tokaj region. The wine world rallied, and several of Tokaj’s leading producers today are owned by iconic international estates: Oremus (Vega Sicilia), Királyudvar (Anthony Hwang, owner of Huet), Tokaj Hétszőlő (Grand Millésimes de France, owners of Cos d’Estournel), Disznókő (AXA Millésimes, owners of Pichon Baron, Suduiraut, and Quinta do Noval), among many others. It was only during this era that the region’s dry wines were born as a commercial product.

The harvest at Disznókő (Photo credit: Bryce Wiatrak)

Historically, Tokaj had vinified dry and off-dry wines from overripe and sometimes botrytized grapes that didn’t meet the quality standards for Aszú or Szamorodni (fine wines made from partially botrytized, partially healthy bunches). István Szepsy, vintner at his eponymous label and founding winemaker at Royal Tokaji and Királyudvar, describes these wines as carrying “some residual sugar and more tannin” than the modern dry Furmint wines. They were sold in bulk and meant to be drunk within two years. Hajnalka Prácser, vintner at Erzsébet Pince, notes that many locals also produced small quantities of dry wines for family consumption, but would simply leave them in barrels in their cellar where they would quickly oxidize.

While Tokaj’s new inhabitants began to experiment with a more modernly crafted dry wine in the 1990s, Királyudvar’s 2000 Úrágya Dry Furmint, made by Szepsy and Zoltán Demeter, is considered a watershed moment for the category. The wine illuminated the capacity of Furmint to express the specificity of Tokaj’s illustrious sites in a serious, dry style. “At that moment, everyone saw that as something that could be very good, or very crazy. Everyone who spoke about that wine realized that something happened,” recalls László Bálint, Director of Operations for Furmint USA, which promotes dry Furmint wines in the United States. While less than two decades have since passed, dry wines now play a role in nearly every major Tokaj portfolio.

But the dry Furmint category also benefits from more practical considerations. For smaller Hungarian-owned family wineries without large financial backing, the production of dry wines is a more economical move than Aszú. “You don’t have many options. Aszú—you’d be four years down the line until money is coming in. Young, new producers go down the line of dry wine,” explains Charlie Mount, Managing Director of Royal Tokaji. What these wineries lack in cash and equipment, they make up for with a home field advantage. Referring to the early years following the Soviet period, Hajnalka Prácser notes, "They had this love for wine and they wanted to stay in the wine industry."

What more significantly affects both small producers and foreign projects alike is the instability of Aszú production. There are no guarantees that any given vintage will yield the necessary conditions to produce Aszú wines, and some fear the escalation of climate change might even further deplete the number of Aszú-capable years. Dry wines provide a sensible solution—albeit one that was slow to be adopted. “I think it was a process of time, because you are working with healthy berries every year. We came to the realization that there was something worthwhile to do,” says Mount. (Royal Tokaji didn’t release a dry wine until the 2003 vintage.)

Nonetheless, great dry Furmint is never a simple concession when producers realize they can’t make Aszú. The production of Tokaji Aszú already necessitates the vinification of a dry base wine (or fermenting must), in which the Aszú dough, a paste made from the botrytized berries, macerates. While producers take different approaches to the base wine, it carries little semblance to the dry wines sold on the market. For Royal Tokaji, only the highest quality non-botrytized grapes are preserved for dry wine production. “The base wine is not the primary character of Aszú wines at all. The very best healthy berries from the Szent Tamás site we will vinify separately for dry wine,” explains Mount. “The berries we don’t think have that potential will perhaps go into base wines for the Aszú wine.” For Prácser at Erzsébet, the base wine grapes are picked much later than those destined for dry wine—merely the grapes that were never affected by noble rot at the end of the Aszú harvest.

To craft a great dry Furmint, the intention must be made at the beginning of the growing season. The Tokaj region forms a checkmark shape in Hungary’s northeastern corner, with the Kopasz (or Tokaj) Hill as the hinge. The volcanic Zemplén Mountains border the appellation to the northwest, with sloped vineyards rooted on their foothills. To the southeast, the Great Hungarian Plain is barricaded by the Bodrog River, which flows along the region’s edge before meeting the Tisza River at the village of Tokaj. As in the Douro, the best grapes for sweet wine production are cultivated at lower elevations near the riverbanks. Fog and warm air sit more stagnantly here, encouraging the development of noble rot.

For dry wines, vintners typically seek higher elevations, more exposed to the wind and less likely to develop botrytis. Unlike Sauternes, where some botrytis is often present in dry wines, Tokaj vintners typically seek fully unaffected fruit. “We try to make dry wines from 100% healthy grapes, without any botrytis impaction. It’s easier to do that if you have a windier vineyard,” explains Prácser. In many circumstances, a single vineyard will sustain both Aszú and dry wine production, but the plots are stacked on top of one another. Many of the most coveted dry wine bottlings will bear the names of Tokaj’s classified growths. “I think a good Aszú vineyard is also a good dry vineyard, but a good dry vineyard isn’t necessarily a good Aszú vineyard,” asserts Prácser. For vineyards or vineyard plots where both Aszú and dry wine are possible, viticulturists may choose to spray certain vines designated for dry production to inhibit the onset of botrytis.

While Furmint largely carries the banner for the entirety dry category, Tokaj’s other grapes are gaining traction in dry expressions as well. Furmint was a natural first choice—producers already touted the variety’s ability to communicate site and, as the region’s most planted grape, there was an abundance of fruit. Furthermore, “It’s the acidity of Furmint that gives it the potential for greatness in both styles,” says Mount. The monovarietal approach, in combination with classified single-vineyard bottlings, also lends greater comparison to White Burgundy, a connection not discouraged by many vintners. But Prácser believes Tokaj’s other grapes have a role to play in the evolution of the dry style. “People are realizing the power of blending the grapes, and up until almost right now, most people were making 100% varietal dry wines,” she says. Prácser bottles a Furmint–Hárslevelű blend from the Zafír Vineyard at Erzsébet, as well as a monovarietal Kabar, a rare cross between Hárslevelű and Bouvier, from the famed Zafír Vineyard. Dry Hárslevelű bottlings are not uncommon—István Szepsy has released one from Király—and are characterized by a softer, more aromatic profile than Furmint. Still, Szepsy believes the future of Tokaj’s dry wines lies in “the higher reputation and brand image from Furmint.” Occasionally, one might also encounter a monovarietal Sárga Muskotály (Muscat Blanc à Petits Grains), an unsurprising decision, as it remains the region’s most international grape.

For the larger firms, László Bálint describes three tiers of dry Furmint: an entry level, stainless steel-fermented “cash flow” wine; a wine with higher quality berry selection, often aged in used barrels; and single-vineyard wines from classified sites, fermented and aged in cask. While dry wine remains in its adolescence for Tokaj, it seems clear that the category will be foundational to the region’s future economic growth. As in the Douro, few producers fear that the dual offerings will split the consumer base. “For every person who would drink Aszú, there are 100, 200, perhaps 500 who would drink Furmint,” notes Charlie Mount. Even if Aszú vintages were less irregular, or the botrytis-prone portions of the vineyard magically expanded, Mount thinks Tokaj is selling as much Aszú as it can.

More than a quarter century has passed since the rush of international funds poured into Tokaj. While many invested to preserve the historic vineyards and traditions of a Europe long gone, together with Tokaj’s local talent, they helped provide the industry with a viable business structure that could withstand the market demands of the 21st century, and dry Furmint is no small part of that equation.

Sauternes

“Sauternes is without any doubt one of the best five white regions in the world,” asserts Olivier Bernard, who both founded Clos des Lunes, a Sauternes estate dedicated to dry wine, and holds part ownership of the classified first growth Château Guiraud. Thomas Jefferson agreed, saying, “This is the best white wine of France,” before showing particular admiration for Château d’Yquem—and ordering several bottles. When discussing sweet wine, it’s impossible to ignore Sauternes, whose “liquid gold” wines symbolize the ultimate decadence and are a quintessential nightcap to any grand dinner. They’re also famously expensive to produce, with harvesters making endless tries through the vineyards until every nobly rotten berry is accounted for. And for almost every major producer today, a dry wine can offset some of those costs.

The history of sweet wine production in Sauternes likely originates in the 17th century, when Dutch merchants arrived in Bordeaux. They favored white wines, and their Northern European consumer base preferred them sweet. Precisely when the Sauternais embraced noble rot as a necessary ingredient to their success remains more nebulous. Conflicting accounts place the moment in the mid-19th century, first in 1836 at La Tour Blanche after a rainy autumn, and second at Château d’Yquem in 1847, when the Marquis de Lur-Saluces was late returning from Russia to his own harvest, only to happen upon a botrytized grape field. Historians doubt these to be the first occurrences of botrytis-influenced wines in Sauternes. Those who have tasted the 1811 d’Yquem from the famous “comet vintage” describe the botrytis as undeniable, and documents from the 18th century allude to the harvesting of “almost rotten” grapes. Regardless, botrytis was part of Sauternes’ formula by the time the region was classified in 1855 for the Exposition Universelle de Paris at the request of Napoleon III.

Sauternes’ modern entry into the dry wine market began less than a century later. Château Doisy-Daëne in Barsac claims to be the first classified growth to produce a dry wine, beginning in 1948. “Sweet wines were doing very well. It was a shame to produce a dry White Bordeaux in a classified estate,” explains Jean-Jacques Dubourdieu, vigneron at Château Doisy-Daëne in Barsac, of his great-grandfather Georges’ decision. He continues, “It was more about an aesthetic experience, because in Barsac, we are on limestone soils, so the perfect soil for white, especially for Sauvignon Blanc.” Georges had the foresight to realize Sauternes and Barsac (one of Sauternes’ five

villages) had the ability to yield both styles, and a decade later, d'Yquem followed. The style of their dry "Y" (also written as "Ygrec"), has changed since then, at first being more a byproduct of the *grand vin*. Jean-Philippe Lemoine, the château's deputy executive manager, says, "We picked the bunches after the d'Yquem harvest…when maybe [there was] bad weather or the temperature [was] down and it was better to produce wine"—else lose the remaining fruit. Lemoine goes on to describe the wine as having "a nose very close with Sauternes wine, but on the palate, it is very dry and a very oxidative wine." Today, Y is made with full intention, as are the dry wines of all of Sauternes' great producers—many of them similarly marketed as "G" de Guiraud, "S" de Suduiraut, and the like. As no appellation exists for *Sauternes Sec*, the wines are labeled "Bordeaux Blanc" or "Bordeaux Blanc Sec."

Château d'Yquem (Photo credit: Adobe Stock)

In contrast to the other regions discussed in this article, vintners in Sauternes don't describe any specific climactic conditions preferable for parcels destined for sweet versus dry wine production. That makes sense considering Bordeaux's château model, where estates harvest fruit from their contiguous properties rather than sourcing from multiple vineyards, some closer to bodies of water or other moderating influences than others. Essentially, all of these sites have the propensity to develop noble rot, leaving that question out of the equation when choosing dry parcels. Instead, vignerons might choose their dry wine plots based on varietal composition or vine age (typically setting aside the older vines for Sauternes), but commonly the dry wine portions of the vineyard are decided upon before the growing season and rarely alter between vintages.

Like Bordeaux Blanc, the dominance of Sauvignon Blanc versus Sémillon in Sauternes' dry wines fluctuates from producer to producer. But for many châteaux, Sauvignon Blanc occupies a larger proportion of the blend in dry wines than in sweet wines, where Sémillon remains the more important variety. At Château d'Yquem, for example, the estate is planted to 75% Sémillon and 25% Sauvignon Blanc, but those percentages are inverted for Y. For some, the focus of Sauvignon Blanc for dry wines is a practical consideration. Dubourdieu finds Sémillon a safer bet in its development of botrytis. To avoid the risk, Doisy-Daëne's Sauternes is vinified entirely from Sémillon, while their dry wine is exclusively Sauvignon Blanc (although in select vintages, they bottle a special monovarietal Sauternes cuvée called L'Extravagant from Sauvignon Blanc). Others still champion the quality of Sémillon in Sauternes, regardless of its destination. "In Pessac-Léognan, if we are talking about white, I will tell you that the Sauvignon gives the structure and the Sémillon gives the roundness," explains Olivier Bernard, who also owns the famed Domaine de Chevalier and other Pessac-Léognan châteaux, in addition to his Sauternes properties. "In Sauternes, the Sémillon is not only giving the roundness; the Sémillon has this incredibly dry and vertical expression with a lovely acidity," he continues, adding that he finds a more distinctive "green" quality to Sauternes' Sauvignon Blanc that necessitates longer ripening.

But otherwise, are the dry wines from Sauternes distinguishable from the wide sea of White Bordeaux? One deviation is the willingness of many producers to permit some influence of noble rot in their dry wines, providing a subtle textured, honeyed quality. "Even if it's not a Sauternes wine, sometimes we can pick the grapes with some botrytis, so that brings some more aroma and some more particularity," explains Luc Planty, Technical Director of Château Guiraud. Guiraud further imparts a Sauternais character to G through fermentation and maturation in barrels first used for the sweet wine. At d'Yquem, they intensify those tactics, harvesting grapes at the onset of botrytis, aging the wine in 80% d'Yquem barrels (the rest new), and leaving seven grams per liter residual sugar. Furthermore, within Sauternes itself, some producers observe variations in typicity for the dry wines depending on where in the appellation they derive. Dubourdieu continues to tout the distinctiveness of Barsac's limestone soils, as his great-grandfather did when vinifying the estate's first dry white. Many characterize Barsac's wines as expressing greater finesse and elegance when compared to Sauternes at large, and some continue to draw that relationship with the dry wines.

Today, it is common to observe three wines in a Sauternes château's portfolio: the *grand vin*, the second wine, and a dry wine. For most producers, the first remains the chief objective of the property. "The purpose of the château is to produce the best Sauternes we can," says Planty. But he jokes that the grapes for the dry white are "not just the garbage of the château." He adds, "If you want to make a nice dry white, you have to decide to produce it. You need to want it." For any top producer of Sauternes, the dry white is a deliberate decision.

That doesn't mean the category's existence lacks a sense of pragmatism. But rather than acting as an alternative option for fruit usage in bad botrytis years, the insurance dry wines provide is the cash flow necessary to make great sweet wine. "It's a way to keep the sweet wine production as a very selective product. You have the dry…to pay the bills completely. And you can keep the sweet production as a very exclusive and luxury product," says Dubourdieu. The consistency of the *blanc secs* relinquishes any pressure to release sub-par Sauternes, strengthening both products. Like in the Douro and Tokaj, vintners hope the dry wines will shepherd customers toward the rest of the range. "It's the first step to come inside the brand, inside the spirit of the property, and after that you want to try the Petit Guiraud, and you want to try the first growth," explains Planty.

And like the Médoc, Sauternes' story far extends beyond the classified growths listed in 1855. Only a handful of names achieve consumer recognition, while other unrecognized vignerons share the appellation. When purchasing land for Clos des Lunes, Olivier Bernard recalls the cost of vineyards in Sauternes being one-tenth those in Pessac-Léognan. "Too many vineyards were not very well kept in the last two decades because there was not enough money in Sauternes," he says. To him, the dry wines not only help keep Sauternes fiscally feasible but also help save the very land from which both are born.

Pantelleria

Unlike Portugal, France, and Hungary, in Italy it is impossible to pinpoint a single product as the country's definitive dessert wine. Instead, Italy is overwhelmed by myriad idiosyncratic *vini da meditazione*, rarely stumbled upon outside of their homelands. Sardinia's Vernaccia di Oristano, Friuli's Ramandolo, Calabria's Greco di Bianco—the list goes on and on. With so many hyper-local traditions at stake, and without a national flagship, perhaps Italy's sweet future is at the most risk.

Many of Italy's most recognizable wines have stolen ground that once belonged to sweet wine production. Records of Moscadello di Montalcino precede those of Clemente Santi's inaugural Brunellos by three centuries, and the sweet wine out-produced Sangiovese there until the mid-20th century. (By contrast, Vin Santo del Chianti Classico nearly doubled in 2006, the first vintage where white grapes were forbidden in the red Chianti Classico blend.) In the 1950s and '60s, innovators such as Arnaldo Caprai and Bertani pioneered the dry categories of Sagrantino di Montefalco and Amarone della Valpolicella in regions where red appassimento wines—Sagrantino di Montefalco Passito and Recioto della Valpolicella, respectively—were considered the apex of expression. Marsala, Sicily's once great answer to Port, Sherry, and Madeira, has been notably absent from the island's feverish wine revival, even as dry Grillo gains more fashion.

But consider another of Sicily's great dessert wines that's achieving a resurgence: Passito di Pantelleria. The island of Pantelleria emerges closer to the coast of Tunisia than it does to mainland Sicily. Its 52 square miles ring around the Montagna Grande, and it takes less than 90 minutes to drive the island's circumference. It's a stark topography, void of the lush, paradisal landscapes one might imagine. The island is peppered with cubic structures called *dammusi*, small buildings and homes constructed from black volcanic rock and gently domed roofs. Pantelleria derives much of its architecture, culinary heritage, and culture from Northern Africa and Islamic influences, as further evidenced by the Arabic names given to many of its wines.

Zibibbo, the local name for Muscat of Alexandria, blankets roughly 90% of Pantelleria's vineyard area—favored for its uses as wine, raisins, and table grapes, all three significant to the local economy. (Capers remain the island's other important agricultural export). Rooted in young volcanic soils, the vineyards both ascend the slopes of the Montagna Grande and march low to the banks of the Mediterranean. The warm Sirocco wind sweeps north from Africa, augmenting already arid conditions for the vine and aiding the raisination process. Each head-trained Zibibbo vine grows inside a *conca*, a small hole designed to shield fruit from the harsh currents, and vineyards are often further protected by stone walls. Pantelleria's star is its Passito di Pantelleria, a dazzlingly unctuous wine vinified from sun-dried Zibibbo grapes in the appassimento tradition. The highest quality examples come unfortified, as do those of Moscato di Pantelleria—a less but still rather sweet designation. Pantelleria's dry Zibibbo wines are the island's most modern invention.

The Donnafugata estate on Pantelleria (Photo credit: Bryce Wiatrak)

Pantelleria's winegrowing history is believed to have ancient origins, and its tradition of sun-drying grapes dates back just as long. It is believed Casanova took a liking to what is referred to today as Passito di Pantelleria, a nectar with which he would seduce his inamoratas. It would take another century, however, for Pantelleria's wines to gain hold in the international wine market, which happened in the late 1800s. That glory was short-lived, stunted by the delayed arrival of phylloxera in 1928. The vineyard pest was followed by fascism and the onset of World War II, which further hindered viticultural recovery. Benito Mussolini took advantage of the island's strategic positioning in the Mediterranean and equipped it with military strength, subsequently leading to bombardment from the Allied forces. Much of Pantelleria was destroyed, but the war did bring new, modernized infrastructure, such as the development of roads and an airport. Upon World War II's end, many Pantelleria locals emigrated, diminishing labor forces.

The contemporary renaissance for Pantelleria begins in the 1980s, with the arrival of two pillars of Marsala: Marco De Bartoli and Donnafugata's Rallo family. De Bartoli came at the beginning of that decade, and by 1990, he had already vinified the first of his two dry wines from the island, Pietranera. His goal, according to his son Sebastiano De Bartoli, was to "amplify new methods of production with old indigenous varieties." While no other commercial dry wines from Pantelleria existed at that time, today there is a dry wine in the portfolios of many of the island's major producers.

While the idea of producing a dry Muscat, like so many regions of the wine world do, might seem simple or obvious, exactly what a dry Zibibbo wine means to each producer is not uniform. The most visible on the United States market is Donnafugata's Lighea, a deliciously crisp and aromatic young white that stands in stark contrast to the estate's signature Ben Ryé Passito di Pantelleria. But, in truth, Lighea is already a component of Ben Ryé. Like Tokaji Aszú, but unlike most other notable appassimento wines, the typical production of Passito di Pantelleria involves the vinification of a white wine (or fresh must) made from healthy berries. The wine gets its sweetness and character through the addition of the raisinated grapes, similar to the work of Aszú berries. Lighea is this base wine, fermented fully dry and bottled on its own. Marco De Bartoli takes a different approach in their two dry Zibibbos, Pietranera and Integer. Pietranera offers a similar profile to Lighea—vinified and aged in stainless steel, albeit unrelated to the base wine of their Bukkuram Passito di Pantelleria. Integer diverges further, fermented in used barrels and amphorae and allotted extended skin maceration, before *élevage* sur lie.

Most producers agree, however, that grapes for the dry wines and the base wines are better suited in the higher parcels of the island. “To produce the fresh juice, it is better to go a bit more in altitude, to get more acidity, more freshness,” says Antonio Rallo of Donnafugata. Sebastiano De Bartoli further prefers grapes for Pietranera from the north end of the island, where the vines see less sunlight and the Montagna Grande blockades the Sirocco wind from the south. Generally, the grapes closer to the water achieve more ripeness and serve as the best candidates for raisination.

The labeling of Pantelleria’s dry Zibibbo can also be a source of confusion. While all under the larger Pantelleria DOC, Passito and Moscato di Pantelleria exclusively refer to sweet wines, while Bianco di Pantelleria can include dry wines. Nonetheless, Donnafugata chooses to label Lighea as Sicilia DOC. The grape has achieved increased popularity on mainland Sicily and can be bottled varietally there as well. Marco De Bartoli, on the other hand, designates Pietranera and Integer as Terre Siciliane IGP. Despite the quorum of existing dry Zibibbos from Pantelleria, they’re not united under a single umbrella communicable to the consumer (although most do feature the word “Zibibbo” somewhere on the bottle).

And although their producers cherish these wines, Pantelleria’s dry Zibibbos aren’t yet seated in the same echelon as the passito wines, in the way that top dry Furmints compete in seriousness with Tokaji Aszú or Douro reds do with Port. “I’m not sure we can produce something that can be considered better than the passito wine,” says Rallo. The survival of Passito di Pantelleria sees little threat from the encroachment of dry Zibibbo—not in the way, say, Moscadello di Montalcino or Sagrantino di Montefalco Passito might. Still, the dry wines remain important to the financial feasibility of the sweet wines. Each bottle of Passito di Pantelleria requires five times the amount of fruit for a dry Zibibbo, as well as higher labor costs on an isolated island where the stock of vineyard workers continues to dwindle. “Sometimes one helps the other one,” says De Bartoli, speaking to the dry wine’s ability to incite interest in the sweet wines. But for him, the importance of the dry wines is greater than that. “I think we lose the other part of the expression. If you really want to understand the climate, the traditions, you have to make different kinds of work,” De Bartoli says. To really understand Pantelleria—and Tokaj, Sauternes, and the Douro Valley—perhaps you must taste the two sides to its coin.

Tasting Notes

Casa Ferreirinha Barca Velha, Douro 2008

Since Fernando Nicolau de Almeida crafted its first vintage in 1952, Barca Velha is the wine that has redefined dry reds in the Douro. It is only declared after scrupulous consideration—the current release, 2008, is the 18th. At its inception, the wine was cultivated from Quinta do Vale Meão, but since 2001, Quinta da Leda has been the source of fruit. Upon harvest, the grapes are destemmed and placed into stainless steel tanks and granite *lagares*, where they macerate and endure intensive pumping over and *pigéage*. The juice is then transported to Vila Nova de Gaia to ferment, before 18 months of aging in 225-liter new French oak barrels. The wine—a blend of 50% Touriga Franca, 30% Touriga Nacional, 10% Tinta Roriz, and 10% Tinto Cão—rests in barrels for many years before release. Barca Velha achieves that rare, compelling balance between complexity and rusticity—a wine whose pedigree and charm are undeniable, yet tastes of a different time. It often garners comparison to Vega Sicilia’s Único, and the kinship is felt in Barca Velha’s medieval gaminess and savory breadth. Its fruit flavors lean desiccated, while earth tones dominate the palate—leather, sarsaparilla, and turned soil.

Niepoort Charme, Douro 2015

Dirk Niepoort’s Douro wines are at once singular for the category and monumentally influential in their promotion of the region. One of the original Douro Boys, Niepoort released his first vintages of dry wine at the end of the 20th century, beginning with the 1991 Redoma Tinto. Charme sits in the highest tier of Niepoort’s portfolio, a wine whose elegance and name pays tribute to Dirk’s Burgundian approach (and specifically Charmes-Chambertin). The fruit for Charme, primarily Tinta Roriz and Touriga Franca, is harvested from 80- to 120-year-old vines in the Vale de Mendiz of the Cima Corgo. Whole clusters are foot trodden in stone *lagares* before an extended pre-fermentation maceration. The wine is transferred to French oak barrel midway through fermenting, after which it ages for 15 to 19 months. The resulting wine carries low pigment, bearing little semblance to the other Douro reds listed here, but reveals an ethereal lightness, with notes of smoked cherry, rosewater, and medicinal herbs.

Niepoort Redoma Branco Reserva, Douro 2016

Niepoort’s dry portfolio demonstrates both inventiveness and at times tremendous value. Redoma Branco and its big sibling Redoma Reserva Branco illuminate how the Douro’s dry wine potential extends beyond red. Harvested from 80-year-old Rabigato, Códega, Viosinho, and Arinto vines, Redoma Branco Reserva ferments and ages in French oak *pièces*, completing only partial malolactic conversion. Bright and pure, yet bodied and tactile, it exhibits a chalky melon rind and ripe pear flavor.

Prats & Symington Chryseia, Douro 2014

The Prats & Symington label is a collaboration between the Symington family (owners of Dow’s, Graham’s, and Warre’s, among others) and Bruno Prats (former owner of Château Cos d’Estournel in Saint-Estèphe), and Chryseia is its flagship. First vinified in 2000, Chryseia is already among the Douro’s most prized bottlings. The fruit for Chryseia primarily derives from Quinta de Roriz and Quinta da Perdiz, both in the Douro Superior. A near even blend of Touriga Nacional and Touriga Franca, the wine ages in 400-liter new French oak barrels for 15 months. Chryseia shows impeccable polish. Its silky yet structured tannins ground the wine’s blue-toned flavors of fresh violet, blueberry, and sage.

Kopke Vinho Tinto Reserva, Douro 2013

Founded in 1638, Kopke is the oldest Port shipper. Widely respected for its Colheita Ports, Kopke was acquired by Sogevinus in 2006, which also owns Cálem, Barros, and Burmester. The grapes for the Tinto Reserva, primarily Touriga Nacional and Tinta Roriz, are harvested from Quinta de São Luiz in the Cima Corgo. Fermentation takes place in stainless steel tanks, followed by 14 months *élevage* in a combination of new and used French oak barriques. The wine has a generous, dark-fruited core, grounded in its plush tannins and flavors of blackberry and ink, with a dusty, violet nuance.

Royal Tokaji The Oddity, Dry Tokaji 2015

Founded in 1990, Royal Tokaji has risen to become one of the most successful foreign investment projects in the region, whose backers include seminal British wine writer Hugh Johnson. While Royal Tokaji also bottles single-vineyard Furmint, mainly for domestic consumption, the Oddity is its entry-level dry wine and the most present in the United States. Sourced from multiple vineyards, the wine is fermented in stainless steel tanks before roughly half is aged in large oak casks, of which 15% are new. Despite its name, the Oddity is easy to enjoy, with melon and orchard fruit flavors and a subtle waxy tactility.

Erzsébet Pince Zafír Dűlő, Dry Tokaj 2012

Erzsébet Prácser, one of the region's first female winemakers, bottled her first vintages of Erzsébet Pince in 1993 after purchasing a cellar in the heart of the Tokaj village. Today, Erzsébet works with several of Tokaj's top sites, producing a portfolio of both Aszú and single-vineyard dry wines. Zafír hails from the town of Tarcal, the vineyard's name meaning "sapphire." The wine is fermented and aged in used Hungarian oak barrels and bottled the spring after its harvest. A blend of 65% Furmint and 35% Hárslevelű, the 2012 Zafír has developed a more mature profile, redolent of roasted nuts, dried apricot, and cream.

Château d'Yquem Y, Bordeaux 2017

Château d'Yquem, Sauternes' sole estate to earn superior first growth status in the 1855 Classification, has been producing its dry wine Y (or Ygrec) since 1959. For decades, the profile of this wine was profoundly different than it is now, only vinified in troublesome years for noble rot. The wine was aged 36 months in new oak barrels and showed a more profound impact of botrytis. Those notes are subtler since the 2004 vintage, and today's Y, a blend of 75% Sauvignon Blanc and 25% Sémillon aged in one-fifth new barrels, maintains roughly seven grams per liter of residual sugar. The wine's vibrantly herbal aromas of Thai basil, lemongrass, and jalapeño hardly imply the concentration the wine achieves on the palate, a structural likeness to a great Montrachet. Unctuous, yet focused, its flavors lean tropical with a gratifying candied kiwi roundness.

Château Guiraud Le G de Guiraud, Bordeaux Blanc Sec 2016

Château Guiraud, a classified first growth in the commune of Sauternes, offers a tremendous value for White Bordeaux in G. Organically farmed, the wine is evenly split between Sémillon and Sauvignon Blanc. It is fermented 80% in barrels used for Guiraud's Sauternes *grand vin*. The Sauvignon Blanc's character dominates the palate, where dynamic, grassy flavors are coupled with sour fruit notes and a snappy salinity. Nonetheless, the wine structurally finds ample breadth, and finishes long and focused.

Château Doisy-Daëne, Bordeaux Grand Vin Sec 2015

Château Doisy-Daëne produced the first dry wine from a Sauternes or Barsac classified growth, a decision made by Georges Dubourdieu in 1948. Located in Barsac, the property remains in his descendants' hands, and the family now operates several other châteaux in Sauternes, Cadillac, and Graves. While Doisy-Daëne's Sauternes is crafted predominately from Sémillon, the dry wine is exclusively Sauvignon Blanc. The result is a sensationally tactile and spicy White Bordeaux, whose fresh ginger and lime zest flavors provide refreshing contrast to the wine's ample body.

Clos des Lunes Lune d'Argent, Bordeaux Grand Vin Blanc Sec 2016

Founded in 2011 by Olivier Bernard, owner of Domaine de Chevalier in Pessac-Léognan and partial owner of Château Guiraud, Clos des Lunes is the rare Sauternais winery to focus almost exclusively on dry wines. Clos des Lunes bottles three wines: Lune Blanche, Lune d'Argent, and Lune d'Or. Lune d'Argent represents the heart of their portfolio and is harvested from plots in the communes of Sauternes, Barsac, and Bommes. A blend of 70% Sémillon and 30% Sauvignon Blanc, a quarter of the wine is aged in barrel. A mellower expression of White Bordeaux, Lune d'Argent soothes with acacia blossom, peach skin, and pear tones, as well as a soft herbal grip on the finish.

Donnafugata Lighea, Zibibbo Sicilia 2017

The Rallo family has made wine in Sicily since the mid-19th century, but the Donnafugata label was not created until 1983. The family invested in Pantelleria in that same decade, and in the years since, has evolved into a major player both there and on the mainland. Today, the Rallo family is the largest landowner on Pantelleria. The Passito di Pantelleria Ben Ryé is one of the most visible in the category on the American market. Their dry Zibibbo, Lighea, both serves as the base wine for the passito and as its own bottling. Crunchy and refreshing, its peachy ease is juxtaposed with the wine's hyper-floral aromas and scents of jasmine, white pepper, and thyme.

Marco de Bartoli Pietranera Zibibbo, Terre Siciliane IGT 2012

Marco de Bartoli set out to rehabilitate the Marsala name but has also helped reawaken the world's attention to the wines from Pantelleria. He set up shop on the island in the early 1980s and, in 1990, vinified Pantelleria's first commercial dry Zibibbo. Today, Marco de Bartoli, the label run by his sons Renato and Sebastiano, bottles two dry Zibibbos: Pietranera and Integer. Pietranera is the more traditional, fermented and aged in stainless steel. At six years of age, this library release has lost its more boisterous aromatic vibrancy. Instead, it embraces a more wilted rose character, with a creamier breadth and subtle impression of vanilla blossom.

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