

Feb 4, 2021, 07:00am EST | 148 views

# Why You Should Explore Sicily's Dessert Wines



**Joseph V Micallef** Contributor  

Spirits

*I write about wines and spirits and the hidden corners of the world*



Passito di Pantelleria (dessert wine, Italy) GETTY

Sicily, one of [Italy's largest producers of wine](#) both by volume and by vineyard acreage, has a long history of making sweet dessert wines. It's a tradition that goes back to classical antiquity. Historically, sweet wines were highly prized. The high level of sugar and alcohol in the wine extended its shelf life and also helped stabilize it during long sea voyages

The sweetness also masked off-flavors in wines that were too tannic or acidic or had become oxidized. Indeed, overly acidic wines benefited from high sugar levels. The sweetness also gave a wine body and smoothness.

In recent years sweet wines have become unfashionable. The higher sugar and alcohol levels lead many consumers to associate them with high calorie wines. In most restaurant menus, sweet wines are typically listed as dessert wines and appear on the last page of the menu. A high alcohol wine is not what diners usually look for at the end of a long and presumably vinous meal.

Those concerns are misplaced. Since portion sizes of dessert wines are smaller than dry wines, the number of calories and alcohol per serving is usually comparable. Moreover, notwithstanding the fact that these wines are sweet, they can pair well with a variety of main dishes.

Typically, sweet wines are paired with cheeses, pastries or a dessert dish. They go superbly well with chocolate. Their acidity complements creamy Italian deserts like Tiramisu or Zabaglione. They also pair well, however, with rich, fatty foods like foie gras or barbecued pork belly. They can complement spicy dishes, not surprising since sweet and spicy is a classic culinary matchup, or a rich and creamy bisque.

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In addition to food pairings, Italian sweet wines have one other interesting use. There is a long-standing tradition in Italy of using sweet wines as *vini da meditazione* (wines of meditation). The term was coined by Luigi Veronelli, a pioneer of Italian wine journalism, to describe a wine whose consumption demanded “quiet, respect and contemplation.”



Close up Red grape dried on the vine GETTY

There are several different ways of producing sweet wines. One popular technique is appassimento. This is a process of partially drying or “raisinating” the wine grapes before they are crushed and fermented. The partial drying of the grapes concentrates the sugars. It also increases levels of glycerin, which imparts smoothness and palate weight to the

wine, and also increases acidity. These wines are called passitos.

One method of drying grapes is to place them on straw mats after harvesting to dry under the influence of sun and wind. These wines were historically referred to as straw wines. Grapes are turned every few days to inhibit molds from forming.

Another technique is to leave the grapes on the vine but to cut the canes. This is an ancient Roman technique that was favored in cooler climates where grapes left on the ground to dry would otherwise rot. By remaining suspended on their canes, these grapes had the benefit of additional air flow, which helped inhibit molds.

Appassimento is different from late harvest grapes. Those grapes are left on the vine to over ripen and then partially desiccate before they are picked and crushed. While they share some common flavors and aromas, wines from raisinated grapes are different from wines made from late harvest grapes. Sicily produces both kinds.

Additionally, there is the role of botrytis or noble rot. Under the right conditions, typically an environment that has a high degree of moisture in the mornings followed by dry sunny afternoons, the botrytis mold can both accelerate the desiccation of the grapes while adding additional aromas and flavors as a result of the mold's own metabolic processes.

Fully botrytized wine, like Sauterne, are rare in Sicily but botrytis is often found in a portion of the grapes that have been either sundried or picked as late harvest. The degree of botrytis in the grapes can be an important factor of vintage variation from a producer. Botrytis, however, is a fickle task master. Under the right conditions it can create complex, flavorful wines. Under the wrong conditions it can ruin a grape crop.

Sicilian sweet wines are typically made from white grapes, although a handful are made from red grapes. The white wines range from pale gold to a deep burnished gold or bronze color. They feature aromas and flavors of dried fruits like raisin, fig, prune and date, along with stone fruits like apricot and peach, tropical fruits like mango, melon and pineapple, as well as notes of honey, nuts, cinnamon and vanilla.

Below are tasting notes on a variety of Sicilian sweet wines. All of these wines are available in the United States and, typically under \$30, are very reasonably priced. These are wines

that can be easily be aged for 5 to 10 years, and the better ones can last for 20 or more years. Alcohol levels range from 11% to 16%. All wines, unless otherwise noted, are 500 ml in size.

### **Cantine Colosi Passito Terre Siciliane IGT, 2016;**

**Feudo Maccari ‘Sultana’ Terre Siciliane Passito Moscato, 2014; L’Ecrú Passito, Terre Siciliane, Firriato, 2017; Assuli, Passito Terre Siciliane, Grillo, IGT, 2016; Cusumano, Moscato Dello Zucco, 2012, Sicilia IGT**

All five of these wines are passitos. They carry the IGT designation (Indicazione Geografica Tipica). This designation means that it is a Sicilian wine but it is not produced in a region that has been designated as a DOC (Denominazione di Origine Controllata) or DOCG (Denominazione di Origine Controllata e Garantita). IGT wines are typically less expensive than DOC or DOCG wines, although their quality is often just as good.



Cantine Colosi, Passito, Terre Siciliane IGT, 2016 PHOTO, COURTESY CANTINE COLOSI

The Colosi is made from Moscato Bianco. It features dried apricot, peach, figs and dates, along with candied citrus notes, sweet honey and a subtle earthiness. The Sultana is made from a combination of Moscato di Noto Passito grapes that have been dried on the vine and grapes that have been dried on straw mats for approximately three months. They are vinified without grape skins. The wine features dates, golden raisins, with subtle hints of candied citrus zest. It’s honey sweet with a touch of iodine and a subtle briny note.

The Assuli Passito is made from Grillo grapes grown in Mazara del Vallo in northwestern Sicily. Grillo is widely used for making Marsala and is featured in a number of DOC white wines, either singly or blended with Chardonnay, from western Sicily. Assuli induces a second fermentation in the must by adding a second batch of dried grapes. This is a common technique that maximizes esters, the compounds that contribute to aroma and flavor. The wine features intense aromas of candied citrus peel, along with dried fig, honey and candied fruit.

The L’Ecrú is made from sundried Zibibbo grapes. Zibibbo is the local name for Muscat of Alexandria grapes and is derived literally from the Arabic word (zabib) for “fruit withered under the sun.” L’Ecrú uses a technique called infusion. The grape vines are picked twice. The first harvest is dried under the sun. The second harvest of ripe and overripe grapes are vinified into the base wine. The dried grapes from the first harvest are then added to the base wine. The wine is intensely flavored with aromas of orange blossom, sweet honey and lemon grass, along with flavors of dates and orange zest.

The Cusumano is a passito made from dried Moscato grapes. It offers up intense aromas of orange marmalade, along with floral notes of jasmine, honey, ripe apricot, white peaches, almond and a subtle earthy, dried black tea quality.

**Cantine Gulino ‘Don Nuzzo’ Siracusa Moscato, DOC; Cantine Gulino ‘Jaraya’ Siracusa Passito, DOC**



Firriato, L'ECRU Passito, Terre Siciliane, 2017  
PHOTO, COURTESY FIRRIATO

Cantine Gulino is a winery located in Siracusa in eastern Sicily. Both the Don Nuzzo and the Jaraya are made from 100% Moscato Bianco, both ripe and overripe, in the Siracusa DOC. This is an ancient wine that local producers claim has been produced ever since the Greeks settled eastern Sicily. Local legend has it that the local Moscato is descended from a Thracian variety that was brought to Sicily in the 7th century BC. The wine was mentioned by Pliny the Elder.

The Don Nuzzo is one of the top rated sweet wines from the Siracusa DOC. This is an aromatic wine that offers a range of floral and herbal aromas featuring orange blossom and fresh fennel. It has flavors of apple, apricot, yellow peach, fig, date and grapefruit, with a hint of candied ginger spiciness on the finish.

The Jaraya is the highest rated Siracusa passito wine. It offers up intense, concentrated aromas of honey and ripe stone and tropical fruit and also featuring peach, candied apricot, figs and dates with hints of clove.

**Cantina Feudi del Pisciotto, Gianfranco Ferre, 2014, Terre Siciliane, IGT;  
Tenuta Gorghi Tondi 'Grillodoro' Passito, 2015, Terre Siciliane, IGT**

The Gianfranco Ferre is a passito named after Italian fashion icon Gianfranco Ferre, and is part of the Italian Fashion Top Designer Collection of wines from Feudi. Ferre designed the wine's label. It is an equal blend of Gewurztraminer and Semillon grapes that brilliantly combines the sweetness of Semillon with the brisk acidity of Gewurztraminer. This is an intensely aromatic wine with the telltale Gewurztraminer note of rose petal, along with hints of honey and dried fruit.

The Tondi is a passito that is heavily influenced by noble rot. Its common for grapes undergoing appassimento to experience some degree of botrytis, but the Tondi is the only botrytized wine being produced in Sicily. It's obtained from raisinating a late harvest of overripe Grillo grapes, and is produced in the Mazara del Vallo countryside around the town of Trapani in western Sicily.

This is a very Sauterne like wine that offers up floral aromas of orange blossom, jasmine and earthy saffron notes. There are sweet notes of honey, along with tropical fruit notes of mango, melon and a touch of pineapple.

**Tenute Lombardo, Passadinero, Vendemmia Tardiva, 2012, Sicilia DOC**

The Passadinero is a passito made from Nero d'Avola grapes that have been raisinated on the vine. This is an unusual red dessert wine. It offers up notes of dried dark fruits of boysenberry, prune, raisin and blueberry, along with notes of black cherry jam and milk chocolate. This is a wine that can be paired with a wide range of pasta and meat dishes.

**Alessandro di Camporeale, KAID, Vendemmia Tardiva, DOC Sicilia, 2019;  
Caruso & Minini, Tagos Grillo, Vendemmia Tardiva, 2016, Terre Siciliane,  
IGT**

The KAID is a late harvest Syrah. This is a big, rich, complex wine that offers up floral aromas and black fruit flavors of blackberry, blueberry and prune. There is a pronounced, but well integrated, oak note, along with elements of chocolate, coffee, cinnamon, clove and old leather set against a backdrop of earth, forest floor and a hint of smoke. A complex, nuanced wine that offers soft tannins and a long finish that pairs exceptionally well with pasta and meat dishes.



Tenute Lombardo, Passadinero, Vendemmia tardiva, 2012 Sicilia DOC PHOTO, COURTESY TENUTE LOMBARDO

The Tagos is a late harvest Grillo made from partially raisinated fruit that have become overripe and allowed to dry on the vine. The result is a very aromatic wine with pronounced floral and fruit aromas of stone and tropical fruit, along with sweet honey notes and a touch of cinnamon.

Sicily is surrounded by smaller islands, all of which have their own wine making traditions. Two in particular stand out: the Aeolian Islands and Pantelleria.

The Aeolian islands, also referred to as the Lipari islands, are a volcanic archipelago in the Tyrrhenian Sea off the northern coast of Sicily. The largest island is Lipari. The archipelago has two active volcanoes: Stromboli and Vulcano. The islands host a rare variety of Malvasia grapes called Malvasia delle Lipari.

**Cantine Colosi, Nurah, Naturale di Salina, Malvasia Delle Lipari, DOC, 2016; Cantine Colosi, Na'jm, Malvasia Delle Lipari, Passito di Salina, DOC, 2016**

The Nurah is made from Malvasia delle Lipari (95%) and Corinto Nero (5%) grapes from the island of Salina. These grapes are late harvested, but they are not raisinated. The result is a smooth, satiny wine that offers up notes of apricot and honey, along with a lingering herbal/resinous eucalyptus quality on the finish.

The Na'jm, on the other hand, is a passito wine. It also is made from Malvasia delle Lipari (95%) and Corinto Nero (5%) grapes. These are also late harvest grapes, but they undergo additional drying before being pressed. It offers up aromas of jasmine and flavors of fresh stone fruit and fig, along with notes of honey and almond.



A Donnafugata vineyard on the island of Pantelleria PHOTO, J MICALLEF

Last, but certainly not least, is **Donnafugata Ben Ryé, Passito di Pantelleria, DOC, 2017, 750ml**. The Ben Ryé is one of the best known of the Sicilian passito wines, and is considered one of the world's great wines; one capable of aging for decades. It is produced on the island of Pantelleria, a small volcanic island between Sicily and North Africa, that sits about 60 miles off the coast of Tunisia.

Pantelleria is a dry chunk of volcanic rock in the middle of the Mediterranean. Grapevines are planted in shallow depressions and trimmed close to the ground to protect them from the incessant winds and drought.

The Ben Ryé, is produced from the Zibibbo grape, using the infusion method. The production process lasts three to four months. Grapes are typically picked around mid-August, laid out in wooden trays and dried by a combination of sun and wind for three to four weeks. A second picking of fresh grapes is then vinified and the dried grapes from the first picking are added directly to the must.

The result is an intense, aromatic wine with an extraordinary rich bouquet that features flavors of candied orange, dried apricots, yellow peach, overripe pear and golden raisin, along with herbal notes of saffron, chamomile tea and cooked artichoke heart accompanied by sweet honey notes and a hint of wet stone minerality. Pair it with a cannolo or almond biscotti for a perfect dessert.

Sicily's sweet wines offer concentrated, aromatic wines that, notwithstanding their underlying sweetness, will pair very well with a variety of foods. At the very least, they are the perfect accompaniment to cheeses and desserts. The perfect start or finish to an Italian meal. Don't wait until you get to the last page of the menu. These are wines to be savored and definitely not to be missed.

Cin cin!

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**Joseph V Micallef**

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