

WINE SCHOOL

When Simplicity Can Be a Winemaking Virtue

By Eric Asimov

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Sweetness in wine can make people seem crazy.

Some of the most popular wines ever sold in the United States have had at least a few degrees of sweetness to them. Do you remember Blue Nun in the 1970s, Riunite Lambrusco in the 1980s and Kendall-Jackson Vintner's Reserve Chardonnay in the 1990s (still going strong)? All had discernible sweetness.

So do more recent best-sellers, like Apothic Red and The Prisoner, which we tasted in January in our first foray into crowd-pleasing American wines.

Yet many American consumers swear they want only dry wines. They detest riesling, they say, because they think the wines are all sweet.

Wine trade observers for years have remarked on this chasm between what American consumers say they want in a wine and what they actually choose to drink. It's worth asking what on earth is going on. Why do consumers seem to have such an aversion to saying they like sweet wines?

That's a natural inquiry here at Wine School, where we try to question almost everything and assume almost nothing. Not that we expect to crack the code of American tastes in wine. But we can at least make an effort to understand the disparity between what people say they want and what they do.

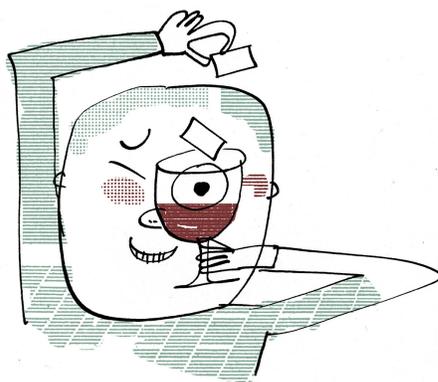
The question came up in the context of our exploration of the sort of popular American wines one might find in supermarkets and other places that sell big-production wines. After looking at highly processed examples of these wines in January, we returned to the supermarket in March to look at popular wines that were made with simpler production techniques.

As I do each month, I recommended three wines to be consumed over the course of several weeks. The wines were: Marietta Cellars California Old Vine Red Lot Number 67, Montinore Estate Willamette Valley Pinot Noir 2016 and Ridge Sonoma County Three Valleys 2016.

Drinking these wines made me think about the sweetness issue. Why? Because in comparison to the more processed wines, these wines were dry. That is, they had little detectable sweetness remaining in the wine after fermentation converted the sugar in the grape juice into alcohol.

Theoretically, at least, the process continues until all the sugar is gone. But that's not always desirable for winemakers. So they may choose to stop the fermentation by adding sulfur dioxide, a preservative that kills yeast, and by chilling the wine when it reaches their preferred level of sweetness.

That may yield something very sweet, like an auslese riesling, in which the luscious sweetness is balanced by high acidity to create a thrilling, refreshing wine. Or it may result in a low level of sweetness to soften an otherwise sharp acidity.



Serge Bloch

Wines can also be made sweet by raising and concentrating the level of sugar in the grapes before fermentation. This can be done by delaying harvest, the proverbial "long hang-time" — popular in California for the last 20 years — in which grapes desiccate on the vine, increasing the ratio of sugar to liquid.

Fermenting these wines until dry can result in ultrahigh levels of alcohol. When you see a bottle of pinot noir or cabernet sauvignon that is 16 percent alcohol, that's where it came from.

Sometimes winemakers want it both ways. They crave the jammy flavors from late harvesting, but don't want high alcohol. They may employ technology like reverse osmosis to lower the alcohol level. Or they can go low-tech and just add water.

Other ways of making sweet wine include air-drying grapes, as in Amarone; harvesting grapes shriveled by botrytis cinerea, the noble rot, as in Sauternes; or fortifying, adding neutral spirits to stop fermentation, as in port.

One more method may be used. It's primarily for cheap wines, and that is simply to add sugar to an already fermented wine. That could mean actual sugar or concentrated grape juice. This way, winemakers need not trouble themselves with more labor-intensive techniques and can simply sweeten to taste.

One notable exception to the cheap wines: Champagne is often made this way, with a last-minute addition of sweetness, or dosage, to balance things out.

The perception of sweetness, by the way, may not depend on the actual level of sugar in the wine, but by how well it is balanced by acidity. That may be the difference between a wine that is cloying and one that is refreshing.

You may wonder why I went off on this tangent. Because sometimes it's as important to understand what winemakers did not do as it is to know what they did.

Let's look at these three wines. The Montinore pinot noir is bright, with flavors of red fruits and an underlying earthy, forest-brush quality. It's taut and pure, and it tastes like Willamette Valley pinot noir. An entry-level wine that reflects both the grapes from which it is made and the place from which it comes is what I would call an awfully good value.

The Marietta Old Vine Red, a wine blended with a number of different grapes from multiple appellations, is quite different. It tastes a little of red fruits, a little of licorice and a little of root beer. Yet it's not sweet. It's medium-bodied, not too big or alcoholic, just a decent drink of wine, with character and personality.

And finally the Ridge Three Valleys, which is a little riper, with a little more alcohol at 14.3 percent than the others, which are around 13.5 percent. It is also a blended wine, with flavors of spicy red fruit, a touch of licorice and maybe a little oak, which I don't get from the other wines.

Compared with the sugary confections from the January tasting, these wines are in a different universe, one that is far closer to the world of traditional craftsmanship, which I believe is the source of the best, most compelling wines.

I know I said these wines were dry — I meant blessedly dry, as I am not a fan of sweet red still wines — but that does not necessarily mean they cannot offer the impression of sweetness. That's different from actual sugar in the wine. It might come from the brightness of ripe fruit, or from glycerol, a harmless byproduct of fermentation that is more apparent in higher-alcohol wine. It also might come from the flavors of oak.

This impression of sweetness can be amplified if a wine has insufficient acidity to counter its effects.

I particularly found this slight impression of sweetness in the Marietta and the Ridge. It's perhaps a characteristic of zinfandel, which was the dominant grape in both of these blended wines.

I've had plenty of wines from California that have crossed the line, wines that are ostensibly dry, but where the impression of sweetness becomes the dominant flavor. These wines maintained their balance, even if, in the opinion of one reader, Martin Schappeit of Forest, Va., the Marietta was too sweet to pair with simple broiled lamb chops. No matter. He said the wine was great with steak.

These wines demonstrate that pretty good wines can be made on a large scale. They are not mass-produced in the millions like those in our January exploration, but by the hundreds of thousands, which is still quite a lot. Good wine is out there, if you want it.

Not everybody embraced these wines. Peter of Philadelphia called the Ridge "pleasant and unlikely to offend anyone," while Ferguson of Princeton, N.J., referred to them as "comfortable, familiar, utility wines." Dan Barron of New York felt that the Ridge and the Montinore were "more comfortable than they are exciting."

While inoffensive may be a whole lot better than repugnant, it offers a lot of room for bottles that may be more distinctive and striking. Fortunately, a whole world of exciting wines is out there, though sometimes they are produced in disappointingly small quantities.

Meanwhile, the mystery remains: Why do people who say they want dry wines actually prefer sweet? The usual explanation is that Americans are reared on sugary soft drinks, so it's a natural progression to sweet wines.

This does not account for why Americans also embrace the bitterness of beer. Nor does it explain why people deny that they like sweet wines, which by the way are not simply the realm of the supermarket. Some of the most highly sought-after Napa Valley cabernet sauvignons in the last 20 years have had discernible levels of residual sugar in them.

The answer more likely comes from an association of "dry" with the perceived sophistication of drinking wine, while "sweet" on some level seems childish. It's another example of fears and connotations — what wine signifies — triumphing over honest expressions of tastes.

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