

WINE

TASTINGS by Dorothy J. Gaiter and John Brecher

Sweets for Your Sweet

Why Sweet Wines Are a Great Choice for Celebrating Valentine's Day

FOR Valentine's Day this year, think about giving a whole new meaning to the phrase "sweets for my sweet."

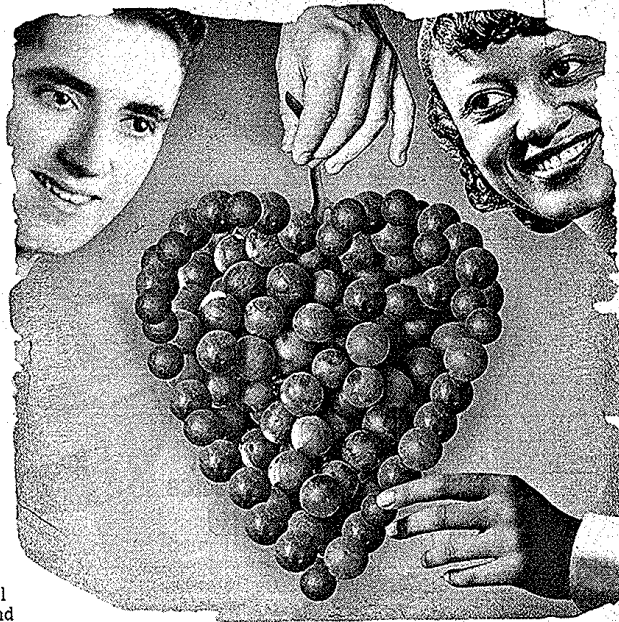
We've recommended a number of different wines for Valentine's Day over the years. Red Burgundy, when it's right, is a good choice because its combination of funkiness and velvet can be quite sexy. Champagne, and especially rosé Champagne, is always romantic. But this year, after the cards, flowers and special dinner, surprise your Valentine with something wholly unexpected: a fabulous sweet wine.

This can be less risky than you think. You and your Valentine might not believe that you like sweet wine, but we have some suggestions that will change your minds—and will impress your Valentine, showing that you not only have excellent taste, but are a risk-taker with knowledge of the wine world that spans the globe.

There are many terrific sweet wines. Here are three kinds that are generally available (although, as always, it's impossible to know exactly what will be on shelves in any specific place) and highly reliable. If you think of sweet wines as heavy and cloying, you really need to try one of these beauties. The trick in creating any fine sweet wine is having a balance of fruit and acidity that keeps the wine light on its feet and prepares you for another, wonderful sip. These are so well-balanced they could do well in an Olympic event.

ICEWINE FROM CANADA

Just as its name implies, Icewine (or Ice Wine) is made from grapes that have frozen on the vine, concentrating their juice into a tiny amount of sweet nectar. Some wineries around the world use a shortcut in which the grapes are simply frozen after they're picked; these wines tend to cost less and, we think, are not as intensely pleasurable. The clas-



Ellen Weinstein

sic Icewine is Germany's Eiswein, which is rare and very expensive. Icewine is made in some northern parts of the U.S., too. One of the best bargains we've had in some time was a 2006 Vidal Icewine from Tomasello Winery in Hammon, N.J., which cost just \$18 for a half bottle and was clean, crisp, bracing and lovely. When we called the winery to ask about its Icewine, Charlie Tomasello told us, "It's all gone. It's sold. One thing we've learned is that we can never make enough Icewine. The low yield stinks." The good news is that the 2007 vintage, around 500 cases of it in 375 ml bottles, should be hitting stores in April. Picking frozen grapes in freezing temperatures "is a joy," Mr. Tomasello deadpanned.

The Icewine you're most likely to see these days is from Canada, which has made quite a name for itself in Icewine over the past decade or so. The most common label is Inniskillin, which is fine because its Icewines are reliably delicious. We very much like its Riesling Icewine (about \$70 for a half bottle), but, in general, we prefer Icewine made from the Vidal

grape, which creates an almost-clear wine—think of it as silver—of particular, face-slapping intensity. The Vidal grape, with its sweet, fleshy earthiness, seems particularly well-suited for this type of wine. For this tasting we tried Inniskillin's 2005 Vidal, and we wrote of it: "Sweet and tight and as clean as fresh-fallen snow, with pure, focused, white-grape tastes. Tastes like concentrated fruit." This costs about \$55 for a half-bottle. We have rarely been disappointed with a Canadian Icewine, so grab one if you see it.

TOKAJI ASZÚ FROM HUNGARY

If your Valentine has never tasted Tokaji, this is a must. It's pronounced Toh-kah-YEE, but many people just say toe-KAY. This is one of the world's more unusual wines, made from grapes (especially Furmint) that have shriveled on the vine and then been made into a kind of paste that's fermented with a base wine. The result is a bronze-colored, nectar-like wine that tastes like very ripe apricots, peaches, spiced apples and other fruits, sometimes along with some cinnamon. As we wrote of the

1999 Royal Tokaji "6 Putonyos" (\$75): "Very rich, concentrated and intense, with oranges, pears and roasted almonds. It's like the essence of a whole grove of oranges, plus sugarcane and earth, but almost weightless, with just enough acidity to keep it light. Each small sip explodes with taste."

The number of putonyos listed on the label is an indication of sweetness; we would look for five or six. Don't think of it just as sweetness, though, because it's really a measure of concentration and intensity, kind of like the difference between a very good strawberry and a truly perfect one. As Dottie said at one point, "It's not a matter of sweetness, but voluptuousness." That says Valentine's Day all over, doesn't it? Royal Tokaji is a good name, and so is Disznókó, but any brand of Tokaji you see will likely be amazing. These will probably cost from \$30 to \$75 and generally come in a 500 ml bottle.

SAUTERNES FROM FRANCE

Sauternes is the sweet wine by which sweet wines are judged, and with good reason: Its combination of lusciousness, earthiness and lightness seems almost impossible to achieve, yet Sauternes does this effortlessly. Sauternes is made in the Bordeaux region of France from grapes—primarily Sauvignon Blanc and Sémillon—that have been attacked by botrytis, the famous "noble rot" that makes the grapes shrivel and concentrates the juice. The greatest Sauternes—in fact, what some people (including us) would argue is the greatest wine in the world—is Château d'Yquem, but it's hard to find and very expensive. Fortunately, most Sauternes is far more reasonably priced (because sweet wines aren't very popular, a good thing for us). Some of the names you are likely to see among our consistent favorites are Châteaux Rieussec, Guiraud, Coutet, Dosy-Daëne, Rayne-Vigneau, Sudaïraut, de Malle, Roumieu-La-

coste and Lafaurie-Peyraguey, but, again, it's hard to go wrong. These will cost around \$30 or so for a half bottle, depending on many factors, including age. Consider these notes on the 2002 Rieussec: "Like cashmere. You can wear it with jeans but it's always elegant. Relaxed, with great black soil. Still young, with vanilla and lemon and quite light. Tremendous ease and confidence." If that doesn't end your Valentine's Day on a smooth note, we don't know what will.

Sauternes ages beautifully for a very long time (this is what we laid down for our own children in 1989 and 1990) and becomes more and more golden and lovely, so if you see an older bottle and are sure it has been well cared-for, go for it.

What should you serve late in the evening with Icewine, Tokaji or Sauternes? Sophisticated desserts, such as soufflés, would be good. Fresh fruit would certainly be a winner, as would nuts. If you are exchanging some chocolate for Valentine's Day and want to try some wine with the chocolate, sure, give it a try. Personally, we prefer to pair these with a kiss.

These wines are so intense that you're probably not going to finish the bottle in one night. Don't worry about it. Just put the cork back in (pump the air or use gas if you happen to have the tools you need) and put the wine in the refrigerator. You should not keep these

SAVE THE DATE

Remember that Saturday, Feb. 23, is Open That Bottle Night 9, when all of us, world-wide, finally pop the cork and celebrate the memories that flow from that wine we've been meaning to open forever. For more on OTBN, including an archive of past columns and an index of some of the events planned for this year, go to wsj.com/OTBN. If you are planning an event or your restaurant is participating in some way, perhaps by waiving corkage fees for OTBN bottles, drop us a note at wine@wsj.com. What should we open on Open That Bottle Night? We've finally winnowed our list down to five possibilities. To vote on one, go to wsj.com/OTBN.

more than six days—not because they'll go bad, but because you should drink them up, making Valentine's Day into Valentine's Week.

Melanie Grayce West contributed to this column. You can contact us at wine@wsj.com.

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Watch John and Dottie taste and talk about sweet wines, at WSJ.com/Tastings.