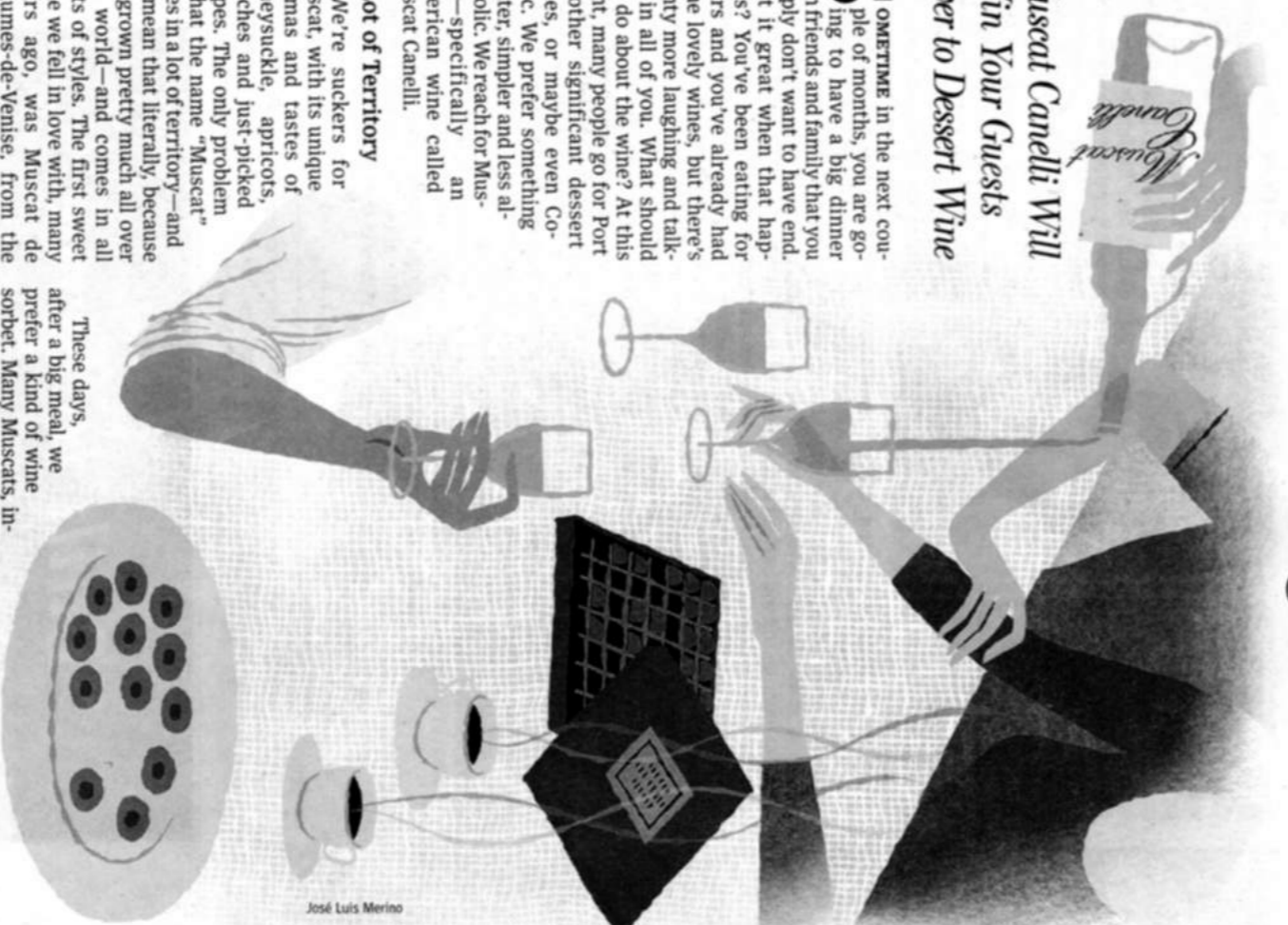


Tastings | Dorothy J. Gaiter and John Brecher

A Great Finishing Touch

Muscatale Canelli Will
Win Your Guests
Over to Dessert Wine



SOMETIMES in the next couple of months, you are going to have a big dinner with friends and family that you simply don't want to have end. Isn't it great when that happens? You've been eating for hours and you've already had some lovely wines, but there's plenty more laughing and talking in all of you. What should you do about the wine? At this point, many people go for Port or other significant dessert wines, or maybe even Cognac. We prefer something lighter, simpler and less alcoholic. We reach for Muscat—specifically an American wine called Muscat Canelli.

A Lot of Territory
We're suckers for Muscat, with its unique aromas and tastes of honeysuckle, apricots, peaches and just-picked grapes. The only problem is that the name "Muscat" takes in a lot of territory—and we mean that literally, because it's grown pretty much all over the world—and comes in all sorts of styles. The first sweet wine we fell in love with, many years ago, was Muscat de Beaugues-de-Venise, from the Rhone Valley of France. Dry Muscat from Alsace is a wonder, and there are few wines more charming than slightly sparkling Moscato d'Asi from Italy.

These days, after a big meal, we prefer a kind of wine sorbet. Many Muscats, including our old favorite Beaugues-de-Venise, are fortified, leaving them not only sweet but high in alcohol (at least 15% or so). How can you identify a

Muscat that is lower in alcohol and lighter in taste? Here's one tip: Look for Muscat Canelli.

Muscat is an ancient grape and there are several main varieties. The finest variety is Muscat Blanc a Petits Grains, which is the one usually called Muscat Canelli in the U.S. For years, our favorite lighter Muscat wine has been Moscato d'Andrea from Robert Pecota Winery in California, which is made from Muscat Canelli. We wondered if there were many other Muscat Canellis out there and how they were, overall. We checked stores nationwide and ultimately chose a large sample. These tend to be made in very small quantities, so, in this case, we went particularly deep to get a good sample. We ordered Texas wines from a large store in Texas, for instance,

bought some made in Missouri, found a good selection from California's Temecula Valley at shopreticulawines.com and got some from wineries in some other states from a Web site called appellationsamerica.com. With an Internet connection, a little time and a bit of creativity, most people now can order all sorts of interesting wines online, and this is one example.

Because sweet wines aren't very popular, these tend to be reasonably priced. Indeed, we didn't pay more than \$20 for any of them. (The Pecota was the most expensive, \$12.99 for a half bottle.) Almost all of them were identified as Muscat Canelli on the front label, though in a few cases we had to look at the back label, ask a wine merchant or check a winery's site on the Internet. The alcohol content ranged from 7% to 12.7%, but most were around 10 or 11.

Having a Wonderful Time

Having tasted the wines in blind flights over several nights, we feel quite comfortable with this advice: Find a Muscat Canelli that's 12.5% alcohol or less, chill, open for your guests—and you will have a wonderful time. The wines, on the whole, were a delight. They were filled with honeysuckle and orange blossoms; with all sorts of fruits, from apples to pineapples (some actually reminded us of pineapple upside-down cake and, really, who

doesn't smile at the thought of pineapple upside-down cake?). While the wines were sweet, and we know that many people don't think they like sweet wines, the good ones were balanced with lemony acidity that made the wines light on their feet as well as light in texture. Dotrite summed it up nicely at the end of one flight when she said simply: "These are gentle wines."

Of course, they were not all winners. Some were too sweet and heavy, without the necessary balancing acidity. These wines should ooze charm, not sugar. And unfortunately, there's not much room for error in these wines. Because they are best when they are light and airy, even just a little too much of anything can make them unbalanced and clumsy. But overall, the wines were lovely and perfect for after-dinner conversation. Generally, the wines in our sample from California were the best, with more of the essential balance of light and sweet.

Our favorite, once again, was the Pecota, which always makes us feel like we're in the middle of a field of flowers. ("This makes me think of Easter," said Dotrite, recalling Grandma Dor's brown-sugar basted ham set in a halo of peaches and oranges.) It's a happy wine that's best served with cookies and close friends. Readers often ask us how long to age various wines. Our response is that, truth be told, you can never tell for sure, and

| VINEYARD/VINTAGE | PRICE | RATING | TASTERS' COMMENTS |
|---|---------------------|--------------------|---|
| Robert Pecota Winery Moscato d'Andrea 2003 (Napa Valley) | \$12.99 (375 ml) | Very Good | Best of tasting. The real thing, with clean, crisp, ripe fruit. Tastes like great grapes left alone, without manipulation. Bursting with lychee and white peaches. Perennial favorite. |
| Powers Winery 2006 (Columbia Valley) | \$10.33 | Very Good | Best value. Nectar-like, with very real, very intense fruit. Plenty of lychee, with a dash of lemon. Jazzy blue bottle. |
| Callaway Vineyard and Winery 'Special Selection' 2005 (California) | \$18.00 | Very Good | Clean and fresh. Filled with light, honeyed apricots and oranges, with fine acidity. Fetching. |
| Maddalena Vineyards 2004 (Paso Robles) | \$10.50 | Very Good | Very fresh, with all sorts of vibrant, tropical-fruit flavors. Serve this at a party and no one will leave until it's all gone (you've been warned). |
| Bargetto Winery 'Amorosa Vineyard' 2006 (Lodi) | \$18.00 | Good/ Very Good | Good mouthfeel, with orange blossoms, all sorts of fleshy fruits and a little bit of weight. Reminded us of ambrosia. |
| Castoro Cellars 2004 (Paso Robles) | \$8.75 | Good/ Very Good | Pears and peaches, clean and pleasant, with some green-grass freshness. Better with food than most: made us think of ham, deviled eggs and smoked salmon on pumpernickel. |
| Martin & Weyrich Winery 'Moscato Allegro 2005 (California) | \$11.99 | Good/ Very Good | Light and airy. Bright, with flowers and honey. Just 7% alcohol. |
| Maurice Car'rie Winery 2006 (Temecula Valley) | \$12.95 | Good/ Very Good | Crisp fruit, toasted almonds, peaches and lychee, all in balance in a lightweight package. Easy and pleasant. |

NOTE: Wines are rated on a scale that ranges: Very OK, Good, Very Good, Delicious, and Delicious+. These are the prices we paid at wine stores in California, Idaho, Illinois, New York, Oregon and Texas. Prices vary widely.

we were reminded of that during this tasting. We would most certainly recommend that you buy and drink Muscat Canelli as young as possible. Good ones taste like a soufflé—light and ephemeral—and you wouldn't want to eat an old soufflé. But in the course of this tasting, we decided to open a 1997 Pecota Muscat that had been sitting in the cellar for no good reason—and it was pretty darn spectacular: rich and dark, with ripe, roasted mangoes, oranges and carambolas, sprinkled with cinnamon, nutmeg and coconut (yep, coconut). It was amazingly light despite its richness.

It probably will take some effort to find a Muscat Canelli. Many stores won't have any and it's unlikely you'll find a big selection anywhere. But they're out there—we bought ours from six states. So our advice is that sometime soon, long before your next big dinner party, call around and see if you can find one. Then, after dinner, don't ask your friends if they'll likely try a sweet wine—they'll likely say no. Just open and pour. The wine will do the rest.

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

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Watch John and Dotrite taste—and talk about—Muscat Canelli at WSJ.com/Tastings

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