

# CUISINE & WINE ASIA

## Sweet, *But Not Just,* Dessert Wine

By Curtis Marsh

THE NOBLE SWEET WINES FROM SAUTERNES AND BARSAC IN BORDEAUX, FRANCE ARE NOT ONLY UNDERAPPRECIATED FOR THEIR EXTRAORDINARY COMPLEXITY BUT ARE ALSO MISUNDERSTOOD AS BEING LESS THAN VERSATILE!



Photographs courtesy of Curtis Marsh.

# CUISINE & WINE ASIA

## Dessert & Wine Pairings



1998 Château Giraud  
(65 percent Semillon, 35 percent Sauvignon Blanc)  
Sauternes, [www.chateau-guiraud.fr](http://www.chateau-guiraud.fr)  
*paired with belgian chocolate marquise*

Very seductive perfume of truffle oil, vanillin, roasted nuts and nougat, crème brûlée sweetness, baked apple, creamy, very harmonious – gorgeously unctuous palate entry, creamy and seamless, layers of richness, dark honey and toffee, a white Burgundy like nutty-oiliness, smooth wine, drinking beautifully, excellent acidity keeps it lively throughout, amazing length with a peachy creamy syrupy tailing.

*This sweet, heavy and also slightly acidic dessert – from the raisins and rum-soaked cherries – is best balanced out with a wine of high sweetness and moderate acidity.*

# CUISINE & WINE ASIA

One of nature's miracles and an aberration in viticulture is a peculiar mould that transforms the otherwise tart and shy white grape, Semillon, to nectar of unparalleled concentration of exotic fruits, honeyed sweetness, sumptuous richness and a creamy viscous texture, yet with a harmonious marmalade-like piquancy, pleasant bitterness and powerful natural acidity that imparts a perceived dryness. The scientific or Latin name of this extraordinary fungal organism is *Botrytis Cinerea*, although it is known more colloquially as 'Noble Rot' or 'Pourriture Noble' in France. Whilst biologists and winemakers who toil with late-harvest style wines have an intimate, if not metaphysical knowledge of its behaviour, the genome of this unique and naturally occurring phenomenon, there being so few moulds that can be considered beneficial or friendly to the taste, has yet to be fully explained and continues to fascinate scientists.

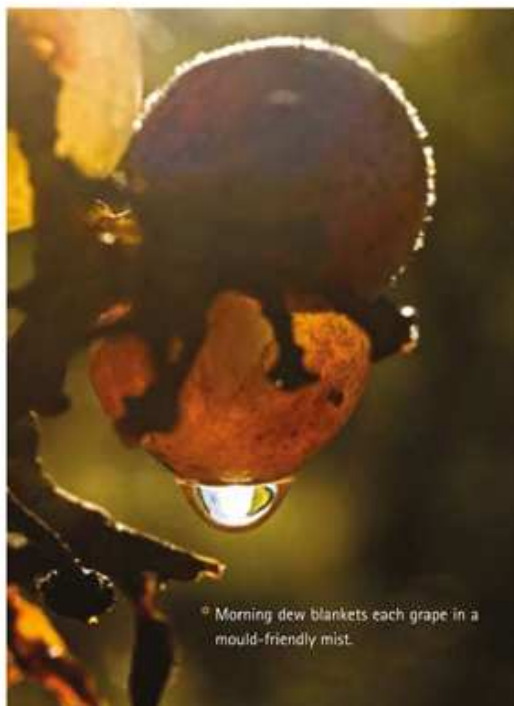
In layman's terms, the cooler autumn waters of a small tributary river bordering Sauternes and Barsac called the Ciron, flowing into the warmer Garonne River estuary, creates conducive misty and humid morning conditions to awaken the *Botrytis* spores that have been hibernating during the winter months. Transported through the air on water molecules, these spores cling to the grapes, already approaching their full ripeness. It only takes a single spore clinging to a healthy grape to facilitate the spread of *Botrytis* throughout the whole bunch, the fungus penetrating the grape skin and feeding off the natural sugars beginning a process of dehydration, slowly extracting the water within the grape, concentrating the sugars, intensifying and preserving the fruit flavours. It is an incredibly risk-prone transformation at the mercy of the weather and devastatingly unwelcome rain, requiring drier, warm afternoon sun to inhibit the onset of the conversely detrimental Grey Rot, which can rapidly turn the grapes into an unusable mush.

As the grapes take on an unsightly shrivelled, raisin-like appearance within a web of fungal growth, expert grape pickers begin the labour-intensive harvesting of individual berries, selecting the most *Botrytis* infected grapes and leaving those requiring further hang-time. Needless to say, this is painstaking work as the yields are meagre, as little as two or three glasses of wine per vine. It is here that the inequitable disparity in the selling price and ratio to yields between Bordeaux sweet wines and the château that produce red wines is clearly, if not frustratingly, evident. Depending on the vintage, red wine producers can be permitted up to a maximum of 50 hectolitres per hectare (hl/ha), whereas Sauternes and Barsac producers are normally restricted to 25 hl/ha, although in actuality the top estates in both regards will crop significantly lower, in Sauternes and Barsac it can be as low as nine hl/ha, about one glass of wine per vine!

However, the harsh reality is that red Bordeaux is eminently more popular than sweet or dry white Bordeaux for that matter, particularly in the strategic emerging markets of Asia and subsequently reflected in the secondary market, with sweet wines simply not achieving the exponential returns of their red peers. To add insult to injury, such is the obsession with red Bordeaux vintage ratings that a poorly rated year for reds does not auger well for Sauternes and Barsac, even if the conditions are exceptional for the white grapes and the onset of *Botrytis*. Take 2001 as an example, a supposedly mediocre vintage for red Bordeaux wines (which is unjust as many 2001 wines are delightful) but a fabulous year for sweet wines, yet the stigma of the lighter red wines imparted an overriding negative sentiment making it a 'hard-sell' for the châteaux in Sauternes and Barsac.

Having not partaken in a Sauternes or Barsac wine for a considerable time, a few months ago I found myself in the cellars of Château Coutet in Barsac, immersed in a line-up of some 26 already lusciously inviting, albeit decidedly youthful barrel samples of 2007 Cru Classé châteaux as well as a handful of non-classified producers. There was already an air of high expectation at this en primeur press tasting – the word well and truly out on this spectacular sweet wine vintage. However, tasting barrels samples of any wine has to be put into perspective, as the wines are unfinished and are invariably obscured by yeasty-less fermentation characters and high levels of free sulphur. Moreover, in this primary state the defining elements of provenience and distinctive soils (terroir) are subdued. Essentially one should treat the exercise purely to form an impression of the vintage and subsequent characteristics in the wines.

It is important to note that all the following wines were tasted blind; an imperative if one is to form an objective opinion and commentary. Frankly, scoring wines in this state is absolutely absurd however; I have grouped the wines that I felt had particular merit. Full tastings notes are posted on our wine website, [www.asianwinejournal.com](http://www.asianwinejournal.com). From an overall perspective, one can draw a comparison to the amazing harmony of the 2005 red Bordeaux vintage – the 2007 conditions in Sauternes and Barsac were perfect in every respect, engendering exceptional quality across the board, and particularly in the lesser ranks, where there will be some excellent price/quality rapport. The wines exhibit pronounced perfumes with marked musky, apricot, honeyed scents indicative of high levels of *Botrytis* and sugar. There is a marvellous intensity to the fruit flavours and sweetness, also superb textures, noticeably more viscous yet balanced by impressive acidity. Such harmonious wines will no doubt be attractive in their youth but clearly there will be wines capable of extraordinary longevity – easily 20 to 30 plus years, indeed eternal for the top wines and in larger bottle formats.



Morning dew blankets each grape in a mould-friendly mist.

C&W 079

# CUISINE & WINE ASIA

## Sweet Sensations in Hong Kong's VinExpo Asia Pacific

A few months later, I attended a most enlightening Sauternes and Barsac masterclass at Vinexpo Hong Kong, chaired by Bérénice Lurton, proprietor of Château Climens and the new president for the Crus Classés de Sauternes et Barsac, and conducted by Andreas Larsson, the world's leading sommelier. Larsson's commentary brought an informed and objective view, his refreshing impartiality and innovative approach to matching these wines with Asian cuisines was inspirational, motivating me to re-evaluate my interpretation of Sauternes and Barsac. You may have noticed I have not used the term dessert wine at all yet.

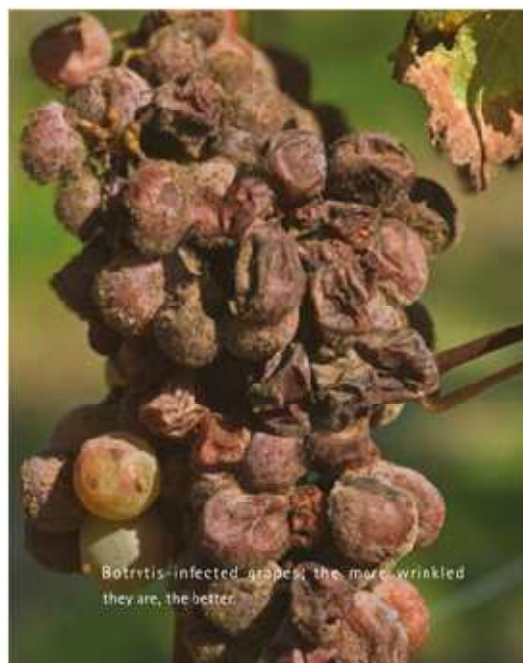
The format of the tasting and the 12 carefully chosen wines by Larsson, spanning 2005 to 1978 vintages covered a broad range of distinctive terroirs and sub-regional styles, stimulating the interaction between Larsson and participating tasters. Much of the dialogue was centred on food pairings, but also on how the wines clearly had a rich framework yet the actual sugar sweetness had dissipated with bottle age to the point of perceived dryness of the finish, augmented by pronounced acidity and spiciness. What was most evident is how bottle age can magnify the soil characters and minerals in these wines, also the huge difference in textures and colours between the wines.

It appeared to me, the most potential with Asian food pairings would be with lighter, very young wines, their lively acidity, pureness and intensity yet subtle sweetness capable of handling spicy or relatively warmer cuisines, although not a complete broadside of chilli. Some of the pairings put forward encompassed universal produce but with Asian flavours; rich seafoods such as lobster, crab or scallops in sweeter yellow curries with spices like turmeric and saffron – fish curries or steamed fish where fresh ginger is used, as ginger is a spice element often found in these wines. In the same vein and much like how the Germans serve their powerful Auslese Rieslings with pork, venison, game birds, duck and poultry, Sauternes and Barsac wines work equally well and again the sweetness in the wine will counteract spicy warmth. One can also see many possibilities with the milder, subtly spiced northern Indian cuisine, indeed I am experimenting with this myself, already with surprisingly harmonious results. One of the most perfect pairings, according to Larsson, is Peking roast duck with a lighter Sauternes or Barsac, to which I concur, having promptly tried it. I can see where he may have drawn his inspiration for this adventurous pairing, using the time-honoured match of Sauternes and foie gras, the fattiness and richness of the roasted duck skin and gamey flavour of the duck breast similar to pan-fried goose liver. It is indeed gastronomic heaven, albeit indulgent and reinforces there are no set rules with wine and food pairing and to be adventurous. Imagine if this catches on and every Chinese restaurant around the world was to endorse this, serving up a glass of Sauternes or Barsac, it would certainly change the region's fortunes!

There is of course the natural affiliation with sweet wines and dessert but one must be careful that the dessert itself is not too sweet as this can often overpower the wine. In my opinion, chocolate is not good with Sauternes and Barsac, although white chocolate can work as a component of a dessert. There are of course infinite variables of dessert pairings, some of the more conducive being tropical fruits, also poached stone fruits and desserts that have vanilla or caramel flavours. However, sometimes I think Sauternes and Barsac wines have evolved expressly for cheese, for it is here that you will achieve some of the most harmonious pairings. The variations are as endless as the different types of cheeses, made even more infinite by the subtle differences in type or age of the wine.

But most of all, savouring Sauternes and Barsac on its own, either before or after a meal is most satisfying. My experience of Bordeaux sweet wines began this way, working with French chefs and restaurateurs who would always recommend a glass of sweet wine to open up the palate. Social occasions or Sunday lunches with them usually began with a nicely chilled, lighter Barsac or Muscat Beaumes de Venise.

“As the grapes take on an unsightly shrivelled, raisin-like appearance within a web of fungal growth, expert grape pickers begin the labour-intensive harvesting of individual berries, selecting the most Botrytis-infected grapes and leaving those requiring further hang-time.”



Botrytis-infected grapes; the more wrinkled they are, the better.

C&W 081