

# PUNCH

## An Uncertain Future for the World's Most Iconic Sweet Wines

As global wine tastes continue to shift towards brighter and drier, what is to become of the storied regions defined throughout history by sweeter, heavier wines? Zachary Sussman explores how the makers of port, Sauternes and Tokaji are adapting to a new wine world.

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**T**here's a story wine drinkers like to tell themselves. It's a story of progress. And it usually begins with the observation that we've inaugurated an unprecedented era of wine drinking: We have rediscovered neglected regions, explored bygone styles and put new spins on old traditions. Never before have we drunk better, bolder or more widely.

The thing about this kind of grand narrative, though, is that there are always two sides. We tend to define ourselves in terms of what we've embraced—the latest discovery, the next big thing, the most recent trend—but it's often far more revealing to consider what we've dismissed. For all the newfound variety reflected on retail shelves and wine lists across the country, one area has suffered from progressive neglect: the world's iconic sweet wines.

Ironically, the examples that have fallen the furthest out of fashion—basically, port, Sauternes and Tokaji—were once revered as the coveted darlings of kings and counts and royal courts. It was by virtue of their sweetness, in fact, that they first gained international fame. Not only did high sugar contents prevent spoilage during the days before refrigeration, allowing wines to enter the export market as global commodities, but sugar also enjoyed luxury status at the time: The kind of intense sweetness found in a bottle of port or Tokaji was inseparable from its aura of aristocratic splendor.

Still, today, drinking these wines conjures a grander era of wine consumption, when they emanated a regal veneer for which few parallels currently exist. So at a time when we revere history and heritage and have reclaimed so many traditional things, it seems odd that these examples of tradition haven't made a comeback. Are we just cherry-picking the traditions we care about? Maybe. But the larger question is: What's next? Faced with declining sales and a wine culture that increasingly prizes the savory, the saline and the mineral, will these regions take the necessary steps to remain relevant? Or are they destined to survive as mere museum pieces?



## COLARES: INTO THE HEART OF WINE'S LOST REGION

The ancient wine region of Colares is fast succumbing to development and decay, even as the world has started to rediscover it. Zachary Sussman on what the slow extinction of some of the world's most compelling wines can teach us about how little we know.

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Unclear as the road ahead may be, it isn't difficult to see how we arrived at the current situation. For one thing, long gone are the days of formal fine-dining, when multi-course dinners ended with an obligatory glass of port or Sauternes, followed by Cognac and cigars. But beyond the rapid democratization of our dining culture, the decline of interest in sticky wines reflects a broader evolution of the American palate. With the memories of brands like Lancers, Mateus and Cold Duck still lingering in the popular imagination—to say nothing of the “white zin” deluge of the 1980s—we've indoctrinated ourselves into a belief system that equates dryness with sophistication and sweetness with, well, anything but. As PUNCH's senior contributing editor Jon Bonné recently put it, “All through the 1980s and 1990s, we were taught that serious wine was dry wine—and that sweetness was lowbrow.”

The numbers suggest that this narrative is still unfolding. In 2013, just 210,000 liters of Sauternes were shipped to the United States, compared to over 650,000 in 1973. Similarly, according to ViniPortugal, port sales have dropped 10 percent by volume and 9 percent by price since 2006. As for Tokaji, well, when was the last time you bought a bottle of Tokaji?

To be fair, the quandary isn't that *no one* is drinking these wines. It's that they have downgraded from world fame to niche status over a relatively short time. Given the increased competition from other categories that, by their very nature, appeal to younger drinkers (i.e., amaro, vermouth, madeira), the fear is that that, although there may still be an audience, it will only continue to diminish. “Fifteen years ago, when people were buying very expensive Bordeaux reds and California wines, they naturally thought to end a meal with Sauternes,” says Michael Madrigale, the head sommelier at New York's Bar Boulud, Epicerie Boulud and Boulud Sud. “Today, there's much more on the menu to cater to one's taste.”

It's not an uncommon conundrum in wine. Barolo, for instance, was once considered a rustic wine that was often bottled sweet. More recently, California transformed into the “new” California. And not only has Champagne become progressively drier, but it has begun to shed its time-honored luxury image in favor of a more artisanal ethos. There are still many other regions, like Sherry, whose history reads like a treatise on the volatility of taste. It's hardly surprising, then, that serious strategic adjustments have taken place as producers wrestle with the question of how to adapt and regain market share.

**“When I first arrived at [the Sauternes estate] Chateau Guiraud, we were making 6,000 bottles of dry wine,” says co-owner Olivier Bernard, who also produces a diverse range of dry Bordeaux whites under the Clos des Lunes label in Sauternes. “This vintage we’ll make 200,000.”**

One approach has involved an effort to broaden the established context for serving the wines. “We’re no longer telling people that if they’re having a formal meal, they have to finish with a glass of port and make a toast to her majesty the queen,” explains Adrian Bridge, CEO of the iconic port house Taylor Fladgate. This coincides with a general stylistic embrace of modern winemaking practices designed to reduce oxidation—and with it, a degree of the wines’ traditionally deep hue and richness of body—in favor of a lighter, fresher expression calibrated to contemporary taste. “Even at the sweetest levels, producers in Tokaji are moving towards a brighter, modern style,” explains Stetson Robbins of Blue Danube Wine, an importer specializing in Eastern European wines. “Hopefully, the traditional oxidative style won’t get lost along the way.”

The other approach is focused on branding: How do you shed a stuffy, old-fashioned image and attract younger audiences? Taking a page from sherry’s playbook, port has pushed to introduce itself to mainstream audiences in the form of cocktails, even if it hasn’t met with the same success. A similar impulse accounts for the recent proliferation of 100-ml, test-tube shaped bottles of Sauternes targeted at nightclub goers. And then there is the catastrophe that is SO Sauternes: an aperitif-styled sweet wine produced as a collaboration between Perrier and three famous Sauternes estates, designed to be served with a splash of sparkling water (“Don’t forget the ice cubes,” its website cautions) in trendy Parisian bars. It offers evidence of just how desperate matters have become.

Far beyond measures like these, however, the most profound effect of the decline of dessert wine consumption has been a new focus upon dry wines in historically sweet-producing regions. Although this can largely be explained as a cash-flow solution—it’s far less expensive and time-consuming to bring a dry wine to market—the trend demonstrates the extent to which the long-established identities of these regions might be starting to change.

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To that end, Portugal's Douro Valley, whose winding, picturesque hillside vineyards have historically fueled port production, has recently gained acclaim for the quality of its dry wines, red and white alike. Thanks are due in large part to the efforts of innovators like Dirk Niepoort, who first experimented with dry wines in the early 1990s. Today, several major port houses supplement their sweet production with dry bottlings, including Dow's, Ramos Pinto, Fonseca and Quinta do Noval, among several others.

Similar developments are underway in Tokaji, where, according to Samuel Tinon—a winemaker from Sauternes who relocated to Hungary in the 1990s—a diverse array of white wine has become a staple of the region's output. "During the first years after privatization, when we were starting new estates, we believed that everyone would be able to survive on sweet wine," he recalls, referring to the era just after the collapse of socialism. "Now most of the estates are playing in both fields, making at least as much dry wine as sweet, if not more."

Ultimately, all of these changes signal a mounting tension between the desire to preserve the time-honored expressions of these regions and the pressure to adapt to a new and uncharted landscape of market demands. For now, it's too early to tell how that tension will play out, and there's no single formula for navigating it. In the best case scenario, the shift towards dry styles will benefit some areas, showcasing diversity and broadening the possibilities for what their wines can mean. Others will be forced to devise new strategies, or else pray that the ever-fickle pendulum of taste swings back in their favor. For better or worse, this is how tradition evolves.

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