

An oldie but a goodie

MUSCAT IS ONE OF THE MOST ENDURING LOVE AFFAIRS BETWEEN MAN AND GRAPE. LIKE ALL AFFAIRS THERE ARE MOODS, FALSE STARTS AND CHANGES OF HEART, BUT OUR LOVE OF THIS VERSATILE GRAPE HAS REMAINED CONSTANT FOR NEARLY AS LONG AS WINE HAS BEEN PART OF OUR LIVES.

Words **Rob Geddes** Photography **istock**

The Muscat family is the world's oldest cultivated grape variety thanks to its distinctive perfume, strong flavour and tough, drought resistant nature. This is a grape that has survived generations of ancient history and the markets of modern times to become one of our most widely grown varieties.

The vineyards of the 'Old World' allow us to trace it back along the shores of the Mediterranean for over 2,000 years. The exotic range of styles is united by the floral grape aroma and sweet, ripe flavour. Every Old World wine country and virtually all New World ones have a famous wine based on Muscat.

Muscat is the only grape to produce wine with the same aroma as the flavour of the grape itself. Driven by compounds produced in the skin called linalool, it belongs to the same family of smells as roses, jasmine, geranium and citrus. I'd also add Riesling, Gewürztraminer and raisins to that list.

The variety's strong fruit flavours allow for diverse styles to be made; from the light froth of Sparkling Moscato, to semi-dry and crisp, to the syrupy Christmas pudding in a glass of a Rutherglen Rare Muscat.

Most Muscat is drunk young, but when well made, it has a great capacity to mature with age, taking on extraordinarily diverse flavours, lusciousness, great depth and smoothness.

THE MANY FACES OF MUSCAT

Of the four principal varieties of the Muscat grape, the most widely propagated and also the most representative of the family character is Muscat Blanc, known as Muscat Frontignan in France and Moscato di Canelli in Italy.

The full name is Muscat à Petits Grains Blanc and the berries are quite small and round, but not always white. The spectrum includes pale green, pale yellow, golden, pink, red, brown, and black berries.

This grape is used for the wines Asti Spumante and Muscat de Beaumes-de-Venise, while the brown-skinned Rutherglen Muscat is officially called Muscat à Petits Grains Rouge. It has a big berried cousin called Muscat Gordo Blanco, or Muscat of Alexandria, which makes wines with less finesse.

It's as a sweet wine that Muscat really excels. Many methods are used, such as on the island of Samos where the grapes are picked but left to dry and almost shrivel on matting on the ground before fermenting, while in Victoria's Rutherglen,

Muscat's ability to ripen to really high sugars is used and the grapes are picked at sugars that would yield 20% alcohol if fermented completely.

An intriguing range of methods for stopping fermentation to harness the grape's sugars and the intense flavours have been developed, including the Asti method, a cunning practice of stopping ferment in the tank by exhausting yeast's micro nutrients, and fortification, which means stopping the yeast's ability to ferment sugar by the addition of a spirit, often brandy or another grape-based alcohol while in tank.

THE TRADITIONS OF OLD

Muscat is grown around the world, but let's start our review in France where it appears in lots of interesting forms, including Muscat d'Alsace, in the north, whose full, rich bouquets are very aromatic and wonderfully grapey. Alsatian Muscat is a dry wine, and there is a little in Germany, very different from the sweet Muscats of the Mediterranean.

Muscat is used in the south of France to make sparkling wines called Clairette de Die from Muscat Blanc by a traditional sparkling wine method that yields a low alcohol wine (7% volume) with about 50g/L of residual sugar. Some French have suggested this wine was created before Champagne as the Romans talked of a wine being made there from leaving wines in jars over winter for them to emerge 'sweet and sparkling'.

A good retail store will be able to find many of these wines, especially the French Vins Doux Naturels meaning, 'naturally sweet wines', which in contradiction to their name, are made by adding grape spirit to partly fermented wine. The name comes from the fact that no extra sugar is added, unlike the production of many other French wines.

These white/brass/gold wines made from Muscat usually have a strong flavour and sweet taste and are called 'pudding wines' by the British who serve them in place of Sauternes. They include Muscat de Beaume-de-Venise from the Rhône Valley and Muscat de Rivesaltes from Languedoc-Roussillon. In Beaume-de-Venise ripe grapes and careful winemaking creates a minimum alcohol content of 15% volume and at least 125g/L of sugar, producing an extremely fine and luscious wine, sweet and full bodied, with a beautiful golden colour and a lovely, distinctive aroma. It's particularly noted for its ripe aromas, warm, silky taste and soft, fruity harmony.



Muscat de Rivesaltes, made from Muscat Blanc and Muscat of Alexandria, is required to have a richness – alcohol plus residual sugar – of 21.5% including at least 15% alcohol and 100g/L of sugar. Many Muscat lovers look on this aromatic, chewy wine as the king of Muscats. It has a lovely, long finish and its distinctive luscious flavour and floral aroma are due to the hot southern European sun and to the blending of the two Muscat varieties.

Elsewhere in Europe, Muscat is also a star performer. The small, round-berried Muscat Blanc, identical to Muscat Frontignan, is found from Hungary to Russia and in Italy where it's known as Moscato. Muscat also pops up in Cyprus and Greece and on the islands of Lemnos, Rhodes and Samos. In fact, Samos proved to be something of a salvation for the 19th Century European wine trade. After phylloxera destroyed the European vineyards, English merchants and French winemakers had to find alternatives. Samian Muscat proved popular and consequently the price increased dramatically.

THE AUSTRALIAN WAY

In Australia, the arrival of the Muscat grape has resulted in the production of exquisite semi sweet and dessert wines that are absolutely delicious as well as truly unique. These are made mainly in the north west of Victoria, around Rutherglen and Glenrowan. Liqueur Muscat is made from the dark-skinned strain called Rutherglen Brown Muscat. As the term 'liqueur' suggests, these wines are very sweet and luscious although they should finish dry and fresh.

Rutherglen's proximity to the Australian Alps produces a unique climate that allows the grapes to become extremely ripe and still be packed full of floral fruit. Fermentation by yeast is stopped early, by fortification, involving the careful addition of grape spirit to ensure that aroma and flavour are retained, regardless of how long the wine is stored.

After fortification, these very sweet wines, sometimes over 300g/L of sugar, are left to mature in a mixture of stainless steel and oak barrels, in a variety of locations within the winery, from

just under the hot tin roof to cooler locations in the deep cellars. The best of these 'sleeping giants' age for years, sometimes for over a century in the case of the Rare classification, gaining immense complexity, becoming pungently aromatic wines, with immense depth and concentration of flavour.

Each Rutherglen producer has their own distinct style, from the generous fruit richness of Morris, to the elegance and complexity of Campbells, the strength and complexity of Stanton and Killeen or the perfumed floral fragrance of Pfeiffer Wines.

WHAT'S IN A NAME?

Rutherglen Muscats are classified as either 'Rutherglen', (under \$20) 'Classic' (under \$30), 'Grand' or 'Rare' – with Rare being the oldest and richest. These are the most intense, Muscat-flavoured dessert wines you're ever likely to experience. They are dark amber, sweet, rich, alcoholic, all very high quality and becoming extremely expensive.

Even the locals will tell you that the 'Rutherglen' and 'Classic' are for drinking and the 'Grand' or 'Rare' for sipping.

All Saints winery has just released a bottle at \$1000 for 750ml and I can't blame them. The wine has sat for 80 years slowly evaporating, concentrating in wood, gaining a flavour unmatched anywhere else in the world before bottling. With the amount that evaporates winemakers never grow rich with these wines, despite the rich prices.

Such is the versatility of Muscat, that in Peru and Chile they even make brandy from it. And we mustn't overlook Californian Muscat either, a loose and large-clustered variety, that's served as a sweet and delicious table grape all over the world and cunningly made into the finest Liqueur Muscat from Queensland's Granite Belt.

This illustrates a key point. Take your time selecting Muscat. It can deliver a varied wine drinking experience that no other grape can equal. So here's my advice; put a bottle or two of different styles away in your cellar, and prepare to be amazed. ■