



Name Dropper: Château d'Yquem

THERE AREN'T MANY THINGS IN THIS WORLD THAT ARE PRAISED FOR BEING SHRIVELLED UP AND FULL OF ROT. BUT WHEN IT COMES TO GRAPES, THIS IS THE HIGHLY PRIZED CONDITION NEEDED TO PRODUCE ONE OF THE WORLD'S MOST REMARKABLE WINES.

Words **Chris Barnes** Illustration **Fuzz**

Any respectable wine writer will have spent at least a small part of their lives working in a bottle shop, it's the only way they can make a quid while waiting for invitations to Grange tastings. It was during one of these stints some years ago that I was introduced to a ghost, and a very expensive one at that.

A well-heeled gent came into the shop and wanted something special to celebrate his 40th wedding anniversary; a bottle of Château d'Yquem from the nuptial year no less. "Of course sir! I can get one in by the end of the week," I replied with cash registers ker-chinging in my head. I may not have known much about that famed golden wine, but I knew it was one of the most costly wines in the world. But it was 1992 and what I hadn't realised was he'd asked for the impossible – I'd spend days chasing a spectre. My wealthy customer wanted a 1952 d'Yquem and it simply didn't exist. By the time I finally realised this a sale worth hundreds had been lost, but my appreciation of one of the world's most amazing wines had begun.

HISTORY LESSON

Château d'Yquem physically and emotionally dominates Sauterne in the South West of France in the larger and equally famous region of Bordeaux. The site has been home to a great chateau and vineyard since the late 15th Century. In 1711 the estate became fully owned by Léon de Sauvage d'Yquem whose family had been tenants for generations. In 1785 it passed to the Lur-Saluces family when Françoise-Joséphine de Sauvage d'Yquem married Count Louis-Amédée de Lur-Saluces, whose descendants ran the property for over 200 years. Today the name Lur-Saluces still appears on the label. The late 18th century is very important to d'Yquem because although the estate had been producing wine for some hundreds of years prior and had achieved some fame, it needed a technological advance of the time to bring out the wine's true brilliance.

That breakthrough was the ‘claret’ shaped bottle and the use of cork as a seal. We sometimes forget that for millennia before this wine had been stored in bottle only to bring it to the table or for very short-term keeping. The idea of a wine aging wasn’t new, but till then it meant in barrel or even an earthenware jar in the days of the ancients. But by the time of the Industrial Revolution mass production techniques in glass making allowed a consistent cylindrical shape for each bottle. And this shape allowed the bottles to be stacked one upon another in vast piles between brick or stone walls in a cellar. Each stack became known as a bin, so wines could then sometimes be identified by the ‘Bin Number’ and labelled later at leisure. The cork imported from Portugal and France was a much better seal than a turned piece of wood wrapped in oilskin. It prevented leakage, and therefore air, entering the bottle. And hey

only experienced but patient. They choose only the grapes that are shrivelled and looking at their ‘worst’. The ‘clean’ fruit is left for another wave of picking. Some vintages can have as many as 10 harvests in one season. In some years the variable weather of Sauterne means a bumper crop and in others it’s so small it only produces a couple of dozen barrels; and in some so bad that there is no wine produced at all. These are the so-called ‘ghost years’ and happen about once a decade, such as the wedding anniversary ’52.

When harvested these grapes are shrivelled little beads that contain gold. They are gently pressed to produce a sticky juice that is so sweet, were it to be fermented dry, the wine would be a staggering 20 per cent alcohol per volume, stronger than a Vintage Port. The wine is given up to six weeks to ferment in new barrels till the yeasts are no longer active and some sugar still remains. The

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presto cellaring, i.e. long-term aging in bottle, was born. But why was this so important to the white wines from the small district of Sauterne? The answer is a load of rot, well mould actually. Of the family that inhabits your shower recess, but thankfully one with some amazing attributes when in harmony with the right grapes.

NOBLE ROT

The ability to produce magnificent wine such as d’Yquem from ‘rotten’ grapes means that this fungus, called *Botrytis Cinerea* is also known as Noble Rot. It occurs when the spores of this fungus are present in the atmosphere and the conditions for their growth are right. The conditions needed are over high humidity (but not too much rain), and a temperature somewhere between 15–20°C. If that’s the case, the spores of the fungus will pierce the skin of the ripe grape and start to feed on the sugar in the grape itself. Thus, the grape will collapse, split and become dehydrated, causing the remaining sugar concentration of the individual grape to rise. The resulting wine will not only be sweeter but also have the extraordinary flavour of the Noble Rot. This flavour is often described as bittersweet and reminiscent of orange marmalade or even dried apricots. There are limitations, though, as *Botrytis* is only good news in certain circumstances. *Botrytis* in red grapes is a disaster, and in white grapes it only works with the varieties Semillon, Sauvignon Blanc, Riesling and Muscadelle. In the case of pierce d’Yquem their 113 hectares of vineyards are about 80 per cent Semillon and 20 per cent Sauvignon Blanc, although due to larger yields the Sauvignon Blanc exerts more than a 20 per cent influence in most years.

As the Gods would have it the right amount of warmth exists in Sauterne, as does the moisture rolling in as a mist from the coast or as afternoon showers. The *Botrytis* doesn’t hit the vineyard like a blanket, it picks its time and selects where to infect grape by grape, bunch by bunch. This is why when harvesting the pickers are not

maturation in oak continues for about six months when a selection of the best wine is made for further barrel aging of about three years. This is very long by white wine standards. The finished wine is then bottled.

THE TURBO BENTLEY DRINKERS

Over half of Château D’Yquem’s production ends up in 375ml bottles, an exceedingly high proportion, perhaps due to the concentrated nature of the wine or more prosaically because of the price. A half bottle of a vintage in the early 2000s can easily set you back \$300–400 with full bottles of the current release 2003 at easily \$500 each. That’s of course if you can get any; only 200–300 hundred cases of each vintage reach these shores each year from a total production of about 5,000 cases. And these 2001s and 2003s are only pups, most learned d’Yquem drinkers (you’ll recognise them as they drive by in their Turbo Bentley) will tell you that 10 years cellaring is what they need to show their golden bittersweet brilliance – the halves will age a bit quicker, which is perhaps another reason for their popularity. Oh, and if you think I’m joking about the Bentleys, consider that in 2006 a 135-year ‘vertical’ (containing every vintage from 1860 to 2003) was sold at auction in London for a staggering US\$1.5 million.

In Australia there are a number of *Botrytis* wines from Semillon, the most famous being the De Bortoli Noble One. There are also plenty of wines produced using the other classic variety of Riesling made famous by the Auslese and Beerenauslese wines of Germany. Out of fashion in the 1970s and 80s, the Noble Rot style of wines seems to be making a comeback here and rightly so. These sweet wines can be the perfect accompaniment to not just desserts, but foods as varied as pate, blue cheeses and fresh oysters. Just make sure not to drink a bottle all on your own, or else the ‘ghost Sauternes’ you see might be poured by pink elephants! ■