

HERMON MOSCATO was the first Israeli wine made in the Moscato d'Asti style. (Golan Heights Winery)

# 'SWEET' IS NOT A DIRTY WORD



• ADAM MONTEFIORE



BARTENURA BY the beach: Bartenura Moscato represents quality and authenticity, being made in Italy's Asti region. (Royal Wine Corp)

**W**hen we have a wider family get-together, we number 23 adults, ranging in age from 18 to 86.

Of these, eight are serious dedicated wine drinkers, who will taste every wine I bring – and I bring a few. Five will take a glass of their favorite wine, and it will last the whole evening. Most won't finish it. Another will only drink white because red gives her headaches. The two octogenarians will look up hopefully when I arrive and ask: "Do you have a wine for us?"

They are referring to Moscato. By chance last time, I took a bottle of a wine made in the style of Asti Spumante (sweet fizz). A further four people became animated and exclaimed: "Finally you bring a wine we like!" The remaining three people won't touch wine.

Is this a typical random sample of the wine-drinking public? I don't know. However, as many as 39% either prefer sweet wines or do not like any wine at all. This matches the fascinating ground-breaking research by Tim Hanni, Master of Wine. He identified for us what is known as the "sweet vinotype."

These are people who have ultra-sensitive palates. They find dry white wines too sour, red wines too astringent and bitter, and alcohol gives them a burning sensation. They like sweet wines.

According to Hanni, this sector represents no less than 40% of Caucasians. The percentage is even higher among Asians (50-70%). You can spot them by the copious spoonfuls of sugar they add to coffee and the amount of salt they add to a meal.

In the wine trade, we like to talk among ourselves. We share views about forest fruits and astringency. We discuss with wine buffs the intricacies of aromas and palate, and stress the importance of terroir. All well and good, but think about it: We focus almost exclusively on dry wines.

The wine intelligentsia in Tel Aviv look on with mild disapproval at the person buying semi-dry to sweet wines, feeling that they are not real wine drinkers. A whole potential market of sweet vinotypes is ignored by wineries, the wine trade, wine educators, and the mavens who supposedly "understand" wine.

BUT HERE is the slap in the face: The largest-selling imported wine in Israel is Blue Nun. Moscato is booming again. People seem to vote with their feet and buy what they want. We ignore them at our peril.

Now we know that some of the great wines of the world (and



some of the rarest) are sweet dessert wines. Sauternes, Eiswein, and Tokay come to mind, but these wines are in the stratosphere of wine experts and connoisseurs. Regular sweet wines were cast off as an embarrassment.

The problem appeared to be more with the word “sweet” than with the sweetness of the wines. In the last few generations, “sweet” became a word with connotations of being cheap, unhealthy, and unauthentic. It was particularly reviled in the Jewish world brought up on *Kiddush* wines like Konditon, Manischewitz, and Palwin.

However, the sweet vinotypes know what they want, and they are not cowed by the so-called experts. Look at the success of Blue Nun. This was one of the largest brands in the world when I was in the English wine trade in the 1980s.

In those days, Liebfraumilch ruled in Britain, White Zinfandel and Lambrusco conquered America, and Israelis who had been drinking semi-dry wines like Adom Atik, Carmel Hock, and Grenache Rose fell in love with Emerald Riesling and Fantasia.

Blue Nun had been on a steady decline and relaunched. But in Israel, it took off and became a phenomenon. A wine retailer once sneered to me, saying, “Well, Blue Nun, it’s not wine.” More fool him. It is, and he probably sells barrels of the stuff. It is wise not to take 40% of the potential wine-drinking public as idiots.

There is a Jewish connection. The creator of Blue Nun was a German Jewish wine company called Sichel, founded by Herman Sichel in 1857. The nuns on the label originally wore brown habits, but a printing error turned them blue. It was the legendary Peter Max Sichel, whom I had the privilege of meeting, who turned Blue Nun into the most recognizable brand in the world.

The authentic Blue Nun is made from Muller Thurgau grown in the Rheinhessen region of Germany. There is also a Gewurztraminer and a Riesling. All the wines may be recognized by the iconic blue bottle, and the new labels have a blue diamond shape.

The main success in the kosher market is a Gewurztraminer Riesling blend. The kosher expressions use the traditional label of nuns in blue habits. The wines are marketed as semi-dry but are really semi-sweet.

Herzog Wine Cellars, the leading kosher powerhouse in California, had its own response to the sweet vinotype. They created Jeunesse in 2005. The basic range is varietal wines without oak influence. They are meant to be drunk young. They look like authentic normal varietal wines, but with one caveat – they are semi sweet.

The winemaker is the very talented Alicia Wilbur. She says her objective is “to make approachable, fun, perceptively sweet wines that taste like the variety on the label. They don’t pretend to be something other than exactly what they are.” Jeunesse is a fun wine with a huge dedicated fan base in America, and the wines also have a following in Israel.

The best example of a wine for the sweet vinotype is Moscato. One of the first Moscatos to gain international acceptance was the Bartenura Moscato. It is the real McCoy, made in the home of Moscato d’Asti. Bartenura preceded the Moscato boom, before what became known as “Moscato madness” took over America.

The brand was created by Royal Wine Corp, the world’s largest importer and distributor of kosher wines. It was named after a 15th-century Italian rabbi. The Muscat grapes are grown on the beautiful hills of Asti in the Piedmont region of northern Italy, and the wines are made by a large winery called Araldica Castelveto.

Royal decided to put their Moscato into a blue bottle in 1992, preceding Blue Nun, which began using blue glass in 1997. The blue bottle of both became iconic. Bartenura was initially produced to satisfy the kosher



THE TEPERBERG Moscato comes in a fancy bottle. (Teperberg Winery)

FIZZARO BY Zion Winery. (Zion Winery)

BARKAN MOSCATO. (Barkan Winery)

markets’ desire for imports, low alcohol, and sweetness.

When the Moscato revolution took off, Bartenura was well placed to ride on the crest of the wave because of its authenticity and quality. It became the largest-selling brand in the kosher world and the number one imported Moscato in America. It became a phenomenon in the United States, like Blue Nun in Israel.

Moscato is a wine that follows the Moscato d’Asti style. It is low alcohol (5-6%), slightly sparkling (frizzante), and frothy with grapey aromas and flavors of peach, pear, and orange blossom. It is a wine style suitable for people who hate wine. The great-aunt at your family Seder will love it.

It is suitable for any time between breakfast and dinner, where it will be excellent with fresh fruit desserts. The Moscato lover will drink it with a meal without a second thought. And why not? It is considered all right to drink Coca-Cola with a meal and use ketchup, both of which are sweet, so why should a sweet wine be prohibited? For me, it is a wine that makes me smile and reminds me not to take wine too seriously.

I always say, tongue in cheek, that Moscato is a Jewish wine. Its low alcohol, spritzy sparkle, and sweetness make it a perfect family *Kiddush* wine. It is better than mixing grape juice and *Kiddush* wine, the Shabbat tradition in some households.

There are red and rosé Moscatos for those who demand red wines for Jewish rituals. Funnily enough, Moscato is also a popular Italian Jewish surname.

THE FIRST Moscato in Israel was produced by the Golan Heights Winery in 1999. Today, their Hermon Moscato is the finest expression of Moscato on the local market. They use the same grape variety used in Italy, the Muscat Canelli. The other Israeli Moscatos use the Muscat of Alexandria grape. This is one of the oldest of all grape varieties and is indigenous to North Africa and the Eastern Mediterranean. Muscat Hamburg (there are numerous variations of Muscat) is the variety used for red Moscatos.

The Moscato powerhouse is Carmel, the historic winery of Israel, whose Sparkling Buzz brand is the best seller. The Buzz Moscato and Carignano (red) tend to be the least expensive in the market and represent “best buys.”

Buzz also has a range of innovative add-ons. There are fruit-flavored Moscatos (apple, mango, and peach) and also cocktail-inspired Moscatos (with a likeness to the Pina Cola and Cosmopolitan). Of these, I prefer

the Peach and Cosmopolitan, but the basic Moscato is better than both.

The Private Collection White Moscato and Pink Moscato are better, fresher than Buzz. Firstly, they are vintage wines, so you can select the youngest wine possible. Buzz are non-vintage wines; and, by the color and taste, some are clearly older wines. Secondly, the bubbles in the Private Collection are naturally preserved from the fermentation.

Of the others, Barkan, one of our two largest wineries, is the latest to bring out a Moscato. Theirs is aromatic, fresh, and flavorful. Teperberg, the country’s largest family winery, produce their Moscatos in fancy bottles, which raises their profile and makes them stand out. In my opinion, the best of the Israeli Moscatos are the Hermon Moscato, Barkan Moscato, Teperberg Red Moscato, and Private Collection Pink Moscato.

Zion Winery, our oldest existing winery founded in 1848, goes to sparkling wine specialists in the La Mancha region of Spain to produce their red and white Moscato. They also produce Fizzaro there. This was the Asti Spumante-like product that members of my family so enjoyed. It is slightly higher alcohol than Moscato (9%) and slightly less sweet.

Hanni writes: “It is time to end the ‘tyranny of the minority’ of wine gatekeepers and turn the power of choice to wine consumers.” These wines are a message in a bottle to regular wine drinkers. Their manifesto goes something like: “We drink sweet. We drink what we like. We drink wines for enjoyment.”

They are simply drinkers wanting to enjoy something they find tasty. Perceptions of quality, tastings, and discussions are of no interest to them. They do not want a symposium on each wine they drink.

So whether you like Blue Nun, Moscato, or Lambrusco, feel empowered to drink what you like. I believe wine is inclusive, not exclusive. What I have learned from Hanni and my large family get-togethers is to have a case of Moscato on hand. These days, I always take a bottle to those large family events. Let’s make sure everyone is catered to and happy.

The wine world is not a closed society but open for all. ■

*The writer is a wine trade veteran and winery insider turned wine writer, who has advanced Israeli wines for 38 years. He is referred to as the “English voice of Israeli wine.”*  
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