

Marisa D'Vari explores the contrasting signals for Bordeaux's historic sweet-wine region, which has been struggling to attract consumers, if not high-profile investors. The wines may be better than ever in their long and illustrious past, so why are they not more popular, and what can be done to win them the recognition and support they deserve?

REVITALIZING SAUTERNES:
**IS THERE STILL GOLD
IN THAT GLASS?**



Sauternes has been highly prized for centuries, a nectar savored by kings and princes, emperors and tsars, presidents and prime ministers, who were prepared to spend far more on it than on first-growth red Bordeaux. But the rich, sweet style has waned in popularity in recent years—so much so that several first-growth Sauternes producers are now making an increasing proportion of their crop into more saleable dry wines, following the lead of Château d'Yquem and its "Y."

Yet despite the challenge of selling Sauternes, the past couple of decades have seen some high-profile purchases in the region. After the acquisition of Château Suduiraut by AXA Millésimes in 1992 and of Château d'Yquem by LVMH in 1999, there was a bit of a lull. But in 2006, an enterprising group including industrialist Robert Peugeot, Olivier Bernard of Domaine de Chevalier, Stephan von Neipperg of Château Canon-la-Gaffelière, and Xavier Planty, manager of Château Guiraud, bought that property; and in 2012, Bernard Magrez added Clos Haut-Peyraguey to his portfolio. Then last year, Daniel and Florence Cathiard of Smith Haut Lafitte purchased Bastor-Lamontagne, and Silvio Denz of châteaux Faugères and Péby Faugères took on Lafaurie-Peyraguey. All of these are shrewd businesspeople who are prepared to invest, so presumably they still see a golden future for Sauternes.

"This is a long-term project," admits Denz. His declared intention to reduce the production of sweet wine (from only the best parcels) and to increase the production of dry wine made headlines, with many people taking this as a sign that the end of Sauternes was nigh. But he insists that "it makes sense to diversify and to offer both dry and sweet styles," explaining, from his point of view, brisk sales of lower-priced dry wines can offset any losses from potentially slower-selling Sauternes. Yet Denz still believes in the historic sweet style, too, and has tremendous respect for Lafaurie-Peyraguey's pedigree.

Just as Denz engaged Michel Rolland to improve Faugères and Péby Faugères (both since promoted from St-Emilion grand cru to St-Emilion grand cru classé), so he has joined forces with famed enologist Denis Dubourdieu to improve the vineyards

and winemaking at Lafaurie-Peyraguey. Since its vineyards are planted 93 percent to Semillon, this may involve replanting with more Sauvignon Blanc for the new dry wine, which is expected to be roughly a 50/50 blend.

Beyond respect for the classic sweet Sauternes style and its unique terroir, a motivating factor in Denz's acquisition was the value of the entire package, including historic first-growth vineyards, the newly renovated château, and the winery. He thinks that another way to help make Sauternes more profitable is to attract more visitors to the region, and to that end he is converting the 13-bedroom château into a boutique hotel.

Sauternes: why not more popular?

George P Sape, former *maître of the commanderie de Bordeaux de New York*, believes that Sauternes may be the best-known but also the most misunderstood French wine in the US. "Perhaps the greatest injustice to Sauternes was done by early wine writers who dubbed the wine a 'dessert wine.' That may have doomed it, since it is anything but a dessert wine," he said, explaining that sugar in food is a powerful enemy of any wine. According to Sape, the introduction of refined sugar on the palate negates its ability to taste anything other than sugar and immediately dulls the more complex sweetness and nuanced acidity of Sauternes.

Before the 1920s, indeed, Sauternes was rarely consumed as a dessert wine, that role being reserved for Champagne (which was sweeter than it is now). In the 19th century, a formal dinner menu might have Sauternes served with salmon, sole, brill, or turbot (typically the third course in a multicourse meal), followed by classed-growth red Bordeaux with the meats. Yet in the 20th century—whether due to misguided wine writers or the shorter, three-course menu—Sauternes became known as a dessert wine. At first, many producers tried to fight the Sauternes/dessert pairing. According to Bérénice Lurton, proprietor of Château Climens, in the 1980s Madame Janin

Below: Château Guiraud, which has benefited from new investment since 2006. Right: The essential botrytis that contributes complexity, as well as sweetness.



Photography (previous page and right): © Château Suduiraut / Vmexia.fr; (left): Jon Wyand

Part of the Sauternes story may be its higher residual sugar. According to Michael Schuster, in the past it was considerably lower. "Many of the wines today have a sugar concentration that is between 50 percent and 100 percent higher than what it was a generation ago"

(wife of the Climens estate manager) was notorious for refusing to sell bottles of Climens to people who let slip that they intended to have it with their dessert.

Another important part of the Sauternes story may be its higher levels of residual sugar. According to wine educator and writer Michael Schuster, in the past the level of residual sugar was considerably lower. "Many of the wines today have a sugar concentration that is between 50 percent and 100 percent higher than what it used to be a generation ago," Schuster says, explaining that the higher residual sugar is a result of better weather conditions, better viticulture, and a higher concentration of fully botrytized grapes in the must. "Sauternes prior to the late 1980s were regularly, and still deliciously, well under 100 grams of residual sugar per liter. Indeed, for a long time Château d'Yquem had a policy of not making a wine with more than 125 grams per liter—and it was then one of the sweetest. Today, if you taste a wine below 130 grams per liter, it is a relative rarity. Many wines are over 150 grams per liter, and this makes them increasingly difficult to situate at the table. While Tokaji 5 Puttonyos and above often has a similar sugar level, it has the 'beverage' advantage of noticeably lower alcohol and higher acidity."



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While sugar levels have risen, many wine drinkers' appetite for it has fallen, due to fashion or changing tastes or both. Steven Spurrier—wine consultant, wine judge, and wine writer—says that though Sauternes was on every table of quality from the 19th century through the 1950s, the time for sweet wines has passed. "I consult for Singapore Airlines, and 15 years ago it was decided to serve Sauternes on some routes, Tokaji 5 Puttonyos on others," he says. "It took years and years for the small stocks to be depleted. Then five years ago, Sauternes was tried again, with half-bottles of Château Filhot 2005, with the same lack of success. Since this wine would have been beautifully served, free of charge, to passengers with nothing better to do than enjoy it, the continuing lack of demand is pretty damning." Spurrier goes on to explain that 20 years ago, the German wines served were Auslese in first class, and Spätlese in business class, whereas now they are Spätlese in first, and Kabinett in business, reflecting the growing preference for drier wines.

Another brake slowing Sauternes sales is the perception that it is a "special-occasion wine." Yet another is the region's small production, averaging around half a million cases a year, which makes large marketing campaigns difficult. Akos Forczek, owner of London-based fine-wine distributor Top Selection and creator of the Botrytis Forum, feels that a disparity in quality among the wines may also be contributing to declining sales. "A great Sauternes is, in a way, an economic aberration, and some producers do not have the means—or sometimes do not have the courage—to put quality before quantity."

John Gilman of ViewFromTheCellar.com feels that the price of Sauternes could be another problem, since it has followed that of Bordeaux red wines upward, and the budgets of many consumers are getting "swallowed up" by their purchases of the reds. "In the '80s, one could buy a case of Climens or Rieussec or Coutet for around \$350 or \$400, even in a top vintage like '86 or '88. But today, just one bottle of 2007 Climens is going to cost anywhere from \$80 to \$110, so the very real difference in pricing level is certainly squeezing out a significant proportion of their former clientele."

Creative positioning of Sauternes

According to the Wine Market Council, wine sales are booming in the US, with the American millennial generation between 21 and 34 years of age expressing the most interest in trying new styles and wines from new regions. The cocktail culture in fashionable cities around the world is also increasing, with the younger generation once again quick to jump on cocktail-related trends, which increasingly feature wine-based cocktails.

With that growing market in mind, the Cathiards have big plans for Bastor-Lamontagne (where their co-investors include the Moulin family of the Galeries Lafayette Group). Although a drier style of wine has clearly become one option for increasing sales, they are taking a slightly different path. While the details are still confidential, they are working with other first-growth Sauternes producers to create a branded, sweet, Sauternes-based beverage supported by a large media campaign targeting the young cocktail-centered generation.

Education is the focus at Suduiraut, where technical director Pierre Montégut and his team have created an Aroma Gallery to engage visitors and explain the origin and development of a Sauternes bouquet using visual and sensory perception, such as the nine aromas (including pineapple, mango, apricot, candied lemon, and bitter orange) that best represent the complex scent of Château Suduiraut.

Most Sauternes producers, however, believe that Sauternes-and-food suggestions are the best marketing tool. "I was only 22 years old and a political-science student when my father divided his ten wine estates among his ten children," says Bérénice Lurton. "I got the idea for actively pairing our Sauternes wines with food after meeting famed Bordeaux chef Michel Gautier in 1996 and realizing that no one knew how to pair Sauternes. So, we started experimenting." Lurton says that during the Union des Grands Crus tastings, people go wild about Sauternes wines. So, she is convinced that one reason why they are not more popular is that people have not correctly "linked them" with the right food, which is therefore the trick.

Aline Baly of Château Coutet says she has had great success popularizing Sauternes by sending journalists and others recipe

Not all those who want to see a revitalized Sauternes think that food pairing is the best solution. Forczek says, "No one opens a bottle of 1961 Palmer because they have a roast leg of lamb. We must insist on one point: Sauternes are great wines and must be consumed as such

cards for international dishes (such as turkey) that can pair well with Sauternes. Many producers—especially Pierre Montégut and Fabrice Dubourdieu, enologist and technical manager of Denis Dubourdieu—focus on pairing Sauternes with Chinese food, careful to match the weight, age, and style of a particular Sauternes wine with a particular dish. Nicole Tari of Château Nairac likes to serve Sauternes with everyday home-cooked meals such as monkfish.

Ian D'Agata (overseeing Bordeaux for the International Wine Cellar website) agrees that showing consumers how Sauternes pairs with cuisine is crucial to its revival but stresses that the pairings must be realistic—something that most people could easily make at home. "It's not about cooking elaborate Chinese dishes at home (I know I certainly can't, and don't), but instead starting to think outside the box when it comes to wines that will go well with more normal dishes involving crustaceans, scallops, blue cheese, leeks, asparagus, squashes of all kinds, and so forth. If we don't, we will all run the risk of missing out on some really great food-and-wine memories."

Below: Philippe Montégut, *directeur technique* at Château Suduiraut. Right: Château Suduiraut, its ornate gardens, and vineyards, from the air.



Photography © Château Suduiraut / Photo Vineaïr

Yet not all those who want to see a revitalized Sauternes think that food pairing is the best solution. Forczek, for one, feels that its importance may be exaggerated. "The matter is important, but no one opens a bottle of 1961 Château Palmer because they have a roast leg of lamb on the menu. You drink the wine because you have such a bottle, because you want to enjoy drinking it, and sometimes because you deem your loved one or a few friends to be worthy of such a bottle. We must insist on one point: Sauternes are great wines and must be consumed as such. Not as dessert wines. Not as sticky wines. Not as sweet wines. But as great wines. If you insist on any general term for them, then gold wines—nothing less."

Graves AOC for dry wines?

Though none of the producers in the region plans to abandon Sauternes wine any time soon, the increasing production of the drier styles is worrying for some. Already, several Sauternes producers have supported a proposal to include the area's growing number of dry white wines in the AOC Graves appellation. Under current rules, the producers can bottle sweet wines made from botrytized grapes as AOC Sauternes, while dry whites must be labeled as AOC Bordeaux Blanc. If the rule were changed, many are concerned that economic imperatives would motivate more producers to produce more dry white wine rather than the traditional sweet style, and label the former as the more prestigious AOC Graves.

"If dry wines really take off and become commercially successful, more and more time and vineyards will be dedicated to the production of dry wine, to the exclusion of sweet wines," says Dr Chris Kissack, of TheWineDoctor.com. "This happened in Cérons, a region just to the north of Sauternes, which was once famed for its sweet wines but today is hardly known."

Other experts, however, are skeptical that consumers will rush to buy dry white wines from Sauternes, under whatever label. "I understand why Guiraud, Suduiraut, and other châteaux produce dry wine, as well as sweet," says author and journalist Stephen Brook. "But the dry wines don't have the same heft and complexity as those from the best of Pessac-Léognan."



Photography © Château Suduiraut / Patrick Viremont

Serving and talking it up

A few simple tactics on the part of producers, sommeliers, and wine lovers themselves may help assure a brighter future for Sauternes. Bordeaux-based author and journalist Jane Anson feels that increased production of half-bottles would be a positive step forward, while Coravin may encourage more restaurants to offer more of the top wines by the glass.

For Sauternes to regain its former glory, however, consumers need to start talking about it, too, and the best platforms may be the Internet and the social networks. SweetBordeaux.com—featuring event listings of international Sauternes-focused parties and tastings around the globe (especially Asia), along with photographs, music, interviews, recipes, and videos—is a good start. Once the topic of Sauternes was raised on a rather sleepy collectors' online discussion forum, contributors began to post enthusiastic commentary and take a renewed interest in their own Sauternes inventory. Mouthwatering suggestions of favorite pairings—such as grilled sweetbreads in a cream sauce served with 1975 Yquem—started flooding through the forum, along with comparisons of favorite producers and vintages.

Fabrice Dubourdieu is quite optimistic about Sauternes and what he sees as its glorious future. "When you drink a glass of Sauternes, it's not the same experience as drinking a glass of red," he says, rather philosophically. "It's much more emotional."

For those of us who love the beautiful Sauternes region and its classic sweet wines, action must be taken on a personal level to recreate interest in this style. When you entertain, why not follow the Bordelais and offer a glass of chilled golden Sauternes to guests as an apéritif? Or serve it with the meal, as they did in the 19th century. At its most simple, try sipping Sauternes, instead of Muscadet or Sancerre, with freshly shucked oysters. It can be equally wonderful with a wide variety of cheeses or with perfectly ripe fruit such as apricots, peaches, or mangoes. Yes, fine Sauternes may seem pricey. Yet given the costs, the risks, and the sacrifices the best producers bear to achieve such complexity and purity, lusciousness and opulence, it is still a very affordable and worthwhile indulgence—as well as one of the world's greatest wines. There should still be gold in that glass. ■