

Wine Australia fact sheet

Fortified and Dessert Wine



Fortified wines hold a proud place in Australian wine history and continue to hold a special place in the hearts of aficionados of fine dessert-style wines.

These wines are sometimes described as “liquid sunshine”, as the grapes are generally left on the vine much longer than usual. This allows the berries to store more natural sugar while drying out slightly in the warmth of Australia’s autumn days.

Wine fortification, which generally involves the addition of a small amount of brandy spirit to the partly fermented red wine, ensures that colours and flavours are retained, regardless of the wines’ storage or treatment.

After fortification, the wine is generally left to mature in small oak barrels, sometimes for decades, maturing into complex, aromatic wines, with immense depth and concentration of flavour.

In the 1800s, the infant Australian wine industry adopted the wine fortification process within a few years of settlement as it overcame the tyranny of distance from the UK markets and the challenge of getting wines safely across the equator. The technique also suited Australia’s relatively warm climate and the red grape varieties, which were brought by the pioneers –

Shiraz, Grenache and Mourvedre.

One of Australia’s most celebrated fortified wines is the renowned liqueur Muscat. Muscat Blanc and Petits Grains grapes are left to ripen and even shrivel well beyond normal maturity before being harvested to produce Muscat.

The Rutherglen region in north-east Victoria is best known for these Muscat and Tokay fortified styles of wine and has an international reputation for the rich, mellow flavours it captures.

One of Australia’s best known fortified wines traces its genesis back to a barrel of fine fortified wine set aside by the Seppelt wine making family in the Barossa in 1878. Patriarch Benno Seppelt decreed that this barrel, the finest of that vintage, should remain untouched for one hundred years. In 1978 the family released the first of the precious Para Liqueurs. In succeeding years, the family and subsequent corporate owners have continued the tradition, releasing limited bottles of Para Liqueur Vintage Tawny wines on their 100th birthdays.

Wine critic Huon Hooke from the Sydney Morning Herald newspaper summed up Para’s importance to Australia’s wine community in a few succinct words: “Like the ’51 Grange, like a Streeton painting, a Melba recording, a Bradman

bat, or a Lawson short story, it’s part of the Australian ethos. A true icon.”

Many Australian wineries also produce fine white fortified styles. These wines are fine lighter textured, aromatic fortifieds with varying levels of sweetness. They can be appreciated as either aperitif or dessert wines.

The massive influx of European migrants after World War II spurred domestic demand for quality table wines and, since the 1960s, fortified winemaking has declined to just a tiny percentage of Australia’s overall production.

However, some wineries still continue with the venerable styles – particularly in areas with strong traditional links such as South Australia’s Barossa Valley and McLaren Vale regions and Victoria’s Rutherglen. Their products continue to be enjoyed by a long-term and loyal customer base who may enjoy a palate cleanser before a meal as well as an adventurous younger market looking for something “new and exciting” in the tawny and muscat styles.

Dessert wine

In typically Australian larrikin fashion, the custom of assigning nicknames to favoured friends has been extended to these wines which are affectionately known as “stickies”: a reference that captures the luscious “sticky”

texture of these wines which slide like runny honey over the palate.

The majority of “stickies” in Australia are made using another traditional technique that takes advantage of a naturally occurring fungus, *botrytis cinerea*, commonly called “noble rot” which attacks the grape gradually drawing the moisture from the berry, intensifying the sugar concentration, acidity and fruit flavour. The Riverina region of NSW, where warm damp autumns encourage the development of noble rot, is particularly well known for these wines.

“Stickies” are intensely flavoured white wines, deeply gold in colour with bouquets of dried apricots, rich sweet flavour and a sharp acid finish. Their intensity of flavour means they are often sold in half bottles and drunk to accompany or even replace desserts.

These botrysed sweet wines contain a delicate, acidic balance which creates a sensational accompaniment to fruit desserts. They are also the perfect accompaniment to blue or soft cheeses.



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