

Eau de Vie

a wine, spirits, and travel newsletter

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THE 1926 SAUTERNES



Two weeks ago Sara and I drove to Chicago to visit Sara's sister Siri and her mom Deborah. We were all mourning not being in France. Siri was supposed to be celebrating her 50th birthday with us on a canal boat trip in Cognac and Deborah, who owns and operates an [antiques importing business](#), routinely takes shopping expeditions to France and Italy. Of course...not this year, not for any of us.

We've visited Chicago many times over the years and we always stay with Deborah, enjoying her eclectic European furnishings and art. For our visit I brought with us a sampling of French wines which included a bottle of Sauternes.

Sauternes is a dessert wine. It is made in France's Bordeaux region in an area called Sauternes. The vineyards hug a low gravelly hillside close to the Garrone River. The river is important in the development of the wine because during the late summer, humidity

from the river fills the valley with morning fog and mist. In the afternoon the sun bakes away the fog leaving the grapes to soak in the warmth.

This process of morning mist and warm dry afternoons is perfect for the formation of the fungus known as botrytis or Noble Rot. The fungus, which is hairy and scary looking, like some of the finest cheeses in France, siphons off just a bit of water through the skins of the maturing grapes. This concentrates the sugars in the grape. These hairy, scary, shriveled grapes are then individually plucked, collected and gently squeezed to release their sugar laden golden nectar.

The juices from these grapes,



which are the varieties Semillon, Sauvignon Blanc, and Muscadelle, are then fermented, aged in oak barrels for 18-36 months and then blended.

The end result is pure ambrosia. A drink fit for the gods! Often Sauternes is described simply as a sweet dessert wine but this is a poor description. Inside a bottle of Sauternes you find the aromas of honey, apricot, perfectly ripe summer peaches, melon, tangy lime, orange, grape fruit and almond. The taste is sweet but it is also balanced with prickly acidity. The mouth-feel is full, the flavors linger on the tongue and fill all the recesses of your mouth. Your mind is pulsed with a shot of endorphins that linger just long enough until you unconsciously command your hand to raise the glass once more to your aching lips. If the gods ate, they would eat this.

The qualities that make Sauternes so tasty are also what make it so long lived. The wine's sugar, acidity and alcohol all conspire to make it very stable and exceedingly age worthy. In fact, it is one of the most age worthy wines in the world. A fine bottle of Sauternes can last 100 years or more.

When Thomas Jefferson was transiting the Canal du Midi as the American ambassador to France, he stopped at Château d'Yquem and tasted their Sauternes. It is said he ordered 30 dozen bottles

for George Washington. If one of those bottles were still around today, it could be drinkable, and it would be priceless. But I imagine Jefferson never let a good bottle go unopened.

All of this effort, planting, nurturing, hoping for the right conditions for Noble Rot, harvesting, fermenting, aging and finally blending makes Sauternes quite expensive. A half sized bottle (375ml) of average quality Sauternes sells for around \$35 and a 375ml of 2016 Château d'Yquem sells for \$250.

So you can imagine my complete shock when Deborah said to me, "Oh you brought a bottle of Sauternes. I have one too." What she pulled out of the cupboard was a full sized bottle (750ml) of *Premier Cru La Tour Blanche Sauternes* from 1926.

I was shocked! I may not recognize all the valuable art and furnishings in her Chicago condo but I immediately knew that this was a rare object and potentially, a very valuable wine. I wanted to know more. Where did you get this? Where has it been? And the most pressing...was it still good?

When assessing an old bottle of wine there are three things that the bottle will immediately tell you about the viability of its contents. They are: the color of the wine, the condition of the cork, and the amount of ullage. Ullage is the gap between the surface of the wine and the bottom of the cork in an upright bottle. When a wine is first released, there is usually no visible ullage. Any gap is hidden by the capsule.

As a bottle ages, the amount of ullage will increase. Under ideal conditions wine will slowly evaporate through the cork. After 20 or more years, ullage may be very noticeable. In collector circles it is not uncommon for fine aged wines to be re-corked sometime before consumption.

For this 94 year old bottle of Sauternes this initial inspection didn't hearken optimism.



The wine was dark brown almost black, the cork was visibly shriveled in the bottle, the bottle leaked when placed on its side and the amount of ullage was considerable, well below the shoulders of the bottle.

I gave Deborah my assessment.

I said the value of the wine was whatever someone would pay for it and if it was in pristine condition it would be quite valuable but her bottle had problems. Without missing a beat Deborah said, "Let's open it and do a taste test with the new bottle you brought." Music to my ears.

Deborah had an old cork screw that had a very narrow tip and that was the perfect tool for unsealing the wine. The cork came out easily without issue. We did a side by side taste test with the 2010 Sauternes I

had brought and unfortunately the old wine had completely oxidized.



It tasted like sour musty prunes. Deborah had acquired the bottle many years ago from a friend who did fine wine estate auctions in Chicago and she said that a few years ago the bottle had started to leak but she thought the color at that time was still coppery gold.

Opportunity lost? I don't think so. The 1926 Sauternes did exactly what it was meant to do - bring people together and create a memorable moment in time. It was a joy to partake in this agricultural time capsule and to share it with family and friends. This for me is the purpose of every bottle of wine. As they say in France, it is the *joie de vivre*, the joy of living.



Good news: Sara is offering a weekly Zoom Yin Yoga class with Yoga North through mid-November. [Sign up for the class here.](#)

