

Oh-so-sweet deals

Geoff Last, For the Calgary Herald

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The technical term for sweetness in a wine is residual sugar. Any wine that is not fermented fully dry has some -- it's just a matter of how much.

While winemakers can tell you how much sugar their wine contains, it's interesting how our palates perceive that

sweetness. Many so-called dry wines actually contain some residual sugar, a fact that is rarely made public because there's a tendency to perceive sweetness in a wine as a bad thing.

That notion in itself is odd, because sugar, after all, is delicious. We love it in all its various forms, much to the dismay of our waistlines and teeth, yet we distrust it in wines that do not fall into the dessert wine category.

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Ice wine, Sauternes or port, for example, are cherished for their sweetness, but off-dry Rieslings from Germany or Alsace are often shunned simply because they possess a slight amount of natural sugar.

Most Champagne contains roughly the same amount of sugar as an off-dry Riesling, as do a number of very popular red wines (the ones with cute little marsupials on the label), yet these wines don't suffer in popularity because they are perceived as being dry.

My point is that many excellent wines are overlooked simply because they possess a small amount of sweetness, Riesling being the obvious example. So, to correct that, this week we'll take a look at a few of these oh-so-sweet treasures.

Chenin Blanc is a grape that is grown in numerous wine regions, but most famously in France's Loire Valley, where it is fashioned into wines that range from fully dry to very sweet, not unlike Riesling.

Producers such as Huet, Pierre Bise, Philippe Delesvaux and Clos Naudin produce brilliant examples of this grape. All are available in our market and most are quite reasonably priced. These wines are versatile food mates, capable of aging for many years when properly cellared.

One of the more affordable examples is the 2007 Domaine de Vaufruges Vouvray (\$22), an off-dry style that would go well with curries and Thai food.

Cave Spring is one of Canada's best white wine producers and the winery's Rieslings are world-class efforts that seem to get progressively better each year. The Niagara region had a banner year in 2007 (Cave Spring is located on the Niagara Bench in the town of Jordan), a welcome relief after a string of difficult vintages.

The Cave Spring 2007 Estate Riesling (\$24) is a beauty, possessing great acidity in a core of citrus/white orchard fruits with a touch of minerality. The slight amount of sweetness is almost imperceptible thanks to the wine's bright acidity. It's a great match with pork tenderloin, Chinese and Thai food and seafood curries. Cheers!

Geoff last is a longtime Calgary wine merchant and writer and a regular contributor to city palate and other publications. He instructs on food and wine at the cookbook company cooks.

Best cellars

Wine: Domaine du Tariquet Les Premieres Grives 2006

Country: France, from the Cotes de Gascogne

Suggested retail price: \$18, GST included

Availability: Select wine and liquor stores Tasting notes: This semi-sweet wine is produced from Gros Manseng - a varietal native to the southwest of France -- and it offers notes of tropical fruits backed by lively acidity. It is a terrific bargain for such a versatile sweet wine, an ideal match with things like pate, blue cheese and tarte tatin, or as an aperitif wine.

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