



## First Place - Sweet Wine



The St. Helena Star and Napa Valley Vintners Tasting Panel met at the Culinary Institute of America's Rudd Center in December to taste through sweet wines made in Napa Valley. It was not lost on the group that it was tasting a part of California winemaking history.

In the 1960s in particular, California became known for its sweet wines. The most popular were fortified wines, made in the style of Portugal's Port. It took a winemaking renaissance in the '60s to elevate dry wines in California, and this same renaissance brought about another positive effect: serious, high-quality sweet wines.

Sweet wines don't get enough attention for the fact that they are so painstakingly difficult to make. Late-harvest sweet wines (the grapes are picked long after the standard harvest) only extend the stress and worry of weather and rot issues, and acidity needs to be maintained or the sweetness will be too cloying. For botrytized sweet wines (those made with grapes affected with the "noble rot" that concentrates the flavors deliciously), the special rot has to naturally occur under a rare convergence of circumstances. If you don't get it naturally, you have to diligently create it, or you can't produce that wine at all. Wines made in the style of Port have numerous additional steps, the most important being the fortification or addition of brandy to stop fermentation. This makes the wines sweet and powerful.

Regardless of the method, it is not easy to make sweet wines of quality. So it was with reverence that the panelists tasted through 18 sweet wines, ranging from late-harvest to fortified, earlier this month.

In a discussion of the wines following the blind tasting, Krysta Scully of Solage pointed out that sweet wines in general are particularly food-friendly, and recommended blue cheese and foie gras as perfect pairings for some of the wines. Eric Carpenter of Dean & DeLuca agreed, saying he prefers sweet wines with food, but he also noted a trend he keeps hearing after people taste a sweet wine: They often exclaim "Man, I should drink more of this!"

**Truchard Vineyards 2007 Roussanne Carneros (\$35). The winery hails the vineyard spot where the grapes for this wine are grown as having "ideal conditions for botrytis." This causes the grapes to dehydrate and their sugars to concentrate. The resulting wine, as with this 2007, is full of rich ripe fruit, as well as nice buttered nuts and a warm toastiness.**