

Because It's There
By Thomas Levenson

There's always Everest if you are looking for a peak human experience - but even with the available package tours very few of us will or should ever go there. For a soprano brave enough to risk the Queen of the Night's arias in the Magic Flute, the cheers after the last notes fade must thrill the soul -- but most of us can't muster the combination of talent and effort required. Albert Einstein trembled with joy when he first glimpsed one of his great discoveries - but he was Albert Einstein, and I am not.

So what? Even though I, now past forty, have long since relinquished my dream of crushing a seventh-game winning home run, I have just had my own personal experience of the best there is. I have now drunk my first glass of Chateau d'Yquem - and that, my friends, is a taste of the sublime that no one can take away from me.

Chateau d'Yquem is a wine, of course, one not to everyone's taste. It is a heavy, sweet, white drink, of the sort usually called dessert wine. Sweet wines have a mostly justifiably horrible reputation - by far the great bulk of them are grotesque, sickly things sold in screw-top jugs to the paper-bag trade. But what gets lost in that ocean of bad stuff are the much rarer fine wines purposely designed to be complicated, powerful, thick, almost syrup-like - and very sweet. A handful of these wines have been made for centuries, most famously in the Sauternes district of the Bordeaux region in Southwestern France. Chateau d'Yquem is a Sauternes, and with remarkable near-unanimity, most competent authorities write that the chateau produces the very best sweet wine (some say the best white wine) in the world.

That's *the* best, mind you - not very good, not consistently great, but the best, the top, the ultimate. I have been pursuing this one wine since the first time I was given a glass of decent dessert wine, only to be told that what I was drinking couldn't hold a candle to the mythical, incredibly costly nectar of Yquem. It has taken me over a decade to get there, but I cannot claim that the expedition involved much hardship.

Before I could persuade myself to try Yquem, though, I had to overcome some basic hurdles. The first, certainly, was simply overcoming my own share of that broadly held prejudice against the whole idea of sweet wine. The only way to get over such block is to accept the risk and buy a bottle of the good stuff. (It's a risk because even dessert wines with much less grand pedigrees than Yquem still cost a noticeable amount - twenty dollars or so for a half bottle for the least expensive ones of any quality.)

I was lucky. I had a good friend, one that made me sit down and drink a bottle I told him I wouldn't like, because I hated all the sweet stuff. He served me a true Sauternes from a good second growth property (at least a forty or fifty dollar bottle in today's market). I took one sip and I was hooked. I did not even notice the extraordinary sweetness at first. Instead what struck me was the scent, almost a perfume, and then the complexity of the flavor that hit my tongue. The total effect forced me to notice that this was something really good, and unlike anything but other wines like itself.

The secret behind that richness of flavor - the combination of everything from rich honey tastes to something almost musty - is what accounts in large part for Sauternes' historic dominance of the sweet wine stakes. Most simply: Sauternes' grapes rot beautifully.

The culprit is an organism called *Botrytis cinerea*, a mold that is highly destructive to most of the plants it affects, including grapes. In its malign form, *Botrytis* causes gray rot, a disease that destroys the grapes it affects. But in the years when wet spells alternate with dry ones in just the right proportion, *Botrytis* infection produces what has been dubbed "noble rot." In the damp, the mold sprouts millions of microtubules that penetrate individual grape skins. If dry days follow, those holes allow water from within infected grapes to evaporate, concentrating the sugar in the fruit.

The juice from such grapes is about twelve percent sugar by weight - enough to support fermentation up to seventeen percent alcohol, which would yield too much fire for a great wine. But *Botrytis*, with suspiciously happy effect, produces a compound that prevents yeast from continuing to ferment past a comfortable thirteen or fourteen percent alcohol levels.

Lastly, crucially, the nobly rotten grapes do not merely make Sauternes sweet. Chemical compounds produced by *Botrytis* enter the grapes and add distinct flavors to the wine to come. The hint of something old and involved I had tasted in my first glass of Sauternes was the signature - the tag that *Botrytis* had been there. There is no substitute for the taste of noble rot. Other sweet wines may taste fine, even wonderful, but they do not possess the extra complexity and delicacy that comes from just the right kind and amount of mold.

Sauternes is not the only place to produce *Botrytis*- affected wines - the technique probably originated in Germany, where some are still produced, and the technique has spread throughout the winemaking world. But the lay of its land in Sauternes, with its misty river bottom, along with its helpful climate, create the conditions for noble rot far more reliably there than in most other wine growing areas. By the mid nineteenth century, the district had clearly mastered the techniques of producing premium sweet wines, and in 1855, the principal producers in the region were graded for quality. There were three classes --- nine originally listed as *deuxiemes crus*, second growths, nine more as first growths, and one alone in its own class: Chateau d'Yquem, the only *Premiere Cru Supérieur*.

Yquem still stands alone as the only wine in the top classification, and in tasting after tasting, bottles of Yquem still win the prize as the best Sauternes of the year. The critical factor in Yquem's persistent dominance is the pure fanaticism brought to bear on the production of the wine. For example: picking grapes for a top dessert wine is a precision, highly skilled, by-hand operation. In rare years, the *Botrytis* infection occurs so quickly and uniformly that pickers can glean the vines bunch by bunch. Most years the mold spreads unevenly, erratically, and workers have to return to vines again and again, picking only those grapes that have reached just the right stage of noble rot. At Yquem, a crew of up to 160 pickers, working a total area of just 260 acres, will revisit individual

vines as many as ten - once eleven - times, harvesting grapes one by one, if necessary. Any day's crop that fails to meet Yquem standards is sold off, to be incorporated into anonymous Sauternes with lower standards. In a few disastrous years, so little of the crop makes the grade, that no Yquem is made and the chateau simply skips that vintage.

But in good years, the results are legend. Most strikingly, Yquem in particular and to a lesser extent Sauternes in general, keep for ages. In a recent bravura tasting, bottles of Yquem from vintages a century apart were compared. That's not a typo, and in fact wines as much as 160 years old came out well ahead of their merely 60 year old challengers. One bottle from 1834 scored a perfect 100 points on the *Wine Spectator* magazine scale, and a bottle from the 1784 vintage allegedly once owned by Thomas Jefferson was rated outstanding at 93 points.

Don't even think about trying either of those two out for yourself. They cannot be had on the open market at any price. If you are so moved, however, some of the very old wines are available. The *Wine Spectator* lists another "perfect" vintage, the 1811, as available for over \$30,000, while even the least expensive Yquems from any decent year go for hundreds of dollars.

Numbers like those, as much as anything, are what barred me from trying Yquem for almost fifteen years. A flip side to the fact that Yquem can age and improve for decades (or centuries) is that the wine takes a long time, a minimum of ten years and actually significantly more, before it begins to approach its peak. I couldn't afford, or bring myself to afford a bottle of wine that would cost what was, at the beginning of my quest, more than a week's income.

But age and desire finally caught up with me. I have drunk plenty of good sweet wines in the intervening years, decent Sauternes; one magnificent German *Trockenbeerenauslese*, thought by some to come close to Yquem's standards; a beautiful, dirt cheap *Vin Santo* bought on a side street in Orvieto, and so on. But never Yquem. I had thought to find an occasion, some special moment to hallow in liquid gold. But my wedding slipped past, and now a couple of anniversaries, doused in decent champagne - pleasant enough, of course, but not Yquem. Finally I gave up, and decided that the bottle would be its own occasion. A local liquor store had a little of the 1988 vintage - a good year. It was by Yquem standards still much a very young wine - but I was told it was tasting well, and would give me the idea.

And it was a mere \$220. For half a bottle.

Still, I had to do it sometime.

I must admit that the little bottle, once safely ensconced in my refrigerator, brought out the worst in me. Good dessert wines are so rich and concentrated that a relatively small amount at any one sitting will do. A half bottle among six at the end of a meal is plenty. But not this one. I decided to share it with my wife (no dummy, me), and just one friend.

So on a recent Wednesday, after a fine dinner (but before dessert - I didn't want any competition to distract from the wine) the star of the evening took its turn alone on center stage. The cork popped with just the right satisfying sound. I poured the wine slowly, agonizingly - a reverent trickle into each glass.

We toasted ourselves, and feasts given for no reason. I lifted my glass. I smelled the perfume rising up. Then the liquid hit my tongue. I was amazed.

And this despite all the hype, the ecstasy of others who had had their chance before me. After waiting so long, I both expected perfection and, cynically, feared an outbreak of the Rolex disease, that syndrome where the fame of the brand obscures the fact that what you end up with is in the end just a good watch, a nice glass of wine, or what have you. But my first taste of Yquem was one of the few times in my life when the experience exceeded the expectation. (The other one that sticks in memory is my first sight of the Grand Canyon, so much more wonderful than any number of photographs had prepared me for.)

But how to convey the moment? It is almost impossible to describe meaningfully someone else's taste sensation, but I can say that my first brush with Yquem seemed to tell me what all the other dessert wines I had tasted were trying to be. It was rich, just sweet enough, with the *Botrytis* strains perfectly blended in with the lighter, more flowery flavors. It stayed on the tongue for a long time, more flavors coming out all the while. It was for all three of us, unique, simply the best wine of its type we had ever tasted.

Which, of course, still leaves one question. Was it worth it? Was my glass of Yquem eight or ten times better than some other well made, lesser wine? I can't tell you yes, for a certainty - but I don't think the question matters. There is no way to justify any glass of wine as being "worth" thirty or fifty bucks or whatever - and I am not so wealthy that I can ignore such numbers altogether. But once, to have the experience of encountering something that is as good as human skill and passion can make it? I have no doubts.

I don't have to climb Mt. Everest. Yquem has come to me.