

Unusual Wines

Red and White wines are too vintage bound to make general recommendations. Instead, this list focuses only on fortified and unusual wines. Although what is listed here is obviously not all the offbeat wines that are available, they do represent those commonly found on grocery store shelves.

After drinking these wines Neat at room temperature, I made comments as to how they tasted, their texture, and etceteras. Those that I especially liked have been given an expanded summary.

CAUTION: Opened Ports and Sherries go bad after only a handful of days, while Vermouths last only for a few weeks. For this reason, it is often better to purchase these items in smaller bottles. Bottles with only a little liquid remaining should be finished-off first, because of the larger oxygen-filled space that was created through emptying.

Fortified Vermouth Wine

Vermouth is a fortified wine like Port, Sherry, and Madeira. Vermouth differs in that it is an aromatized Brandy fortified white-wine flavored with various botanicals. In Europe, one of the ingredients is Wormwood. Most vermouth is made either Dry (typified by the French Marseilles style) or Sweet (also called Red/Rosso/Rouge, typified by the Italian Torino style). Sweet vermouth should have a mildly bitter and slightly sweet taste. In Europe vermouth is a popular Neat aperitif (before-meal drink), while in the US vermouth is primarily used in cocktails, with Sweet in a whiskey Manhattan and Dry in a gin Martini. Dry vermouth is also a recommended alternative to white-wine in cooking. Although fortified with alcohol, it is still a wine, so it will begin to oxidize and lose aroma as soon as it is exposed to air. If refrigerated after opening, it can stay useable for at least 3 months.

Dry Vermouth =

Di Padrino Classico Dry (sicilian) =
Concord grape taste. Slightly tart.

Gambarelli & Davitto Extra Dry =
Sweeter green table grape taste, with a slight oregano-like infusion.

Gallo Extra Dry =
Green grape taste. Very "cheap white wine"-like, without any herbal infusion taste.

Martini & Rossi Extra Dry (italian) =
Green grape taste. Strong and skunky. Yucky aftertaste.

Noilly Prat Extra Dry (french) =
Chambery. Moderate green grape and mild herbal infusion. A bit "Italian" tasting.

Tribuno Tradizione Autentica Extra Dry =
Red grape taste. Mild herbal infusion. Slightly bitter aftertaste.

Vya Extra Dry =
Strong and funky herbal infusion taste. Headache inducing, like bad cooking wine.

===== *Dry Vermouth Winners* =====

Dolin Vermouth de Chambéry Dry: \$14

This is a true Chambéry. Has a very mild grape flavor overlaid with a mild herbal infusion. Made from wines and botanicals grown in the Alps. The very mild flavor and lack of sweetness makes it perfect for light cocktails, such as those made with a mild vodka. Also satisfactory Neat, and as a white-wine substitute in lighter foods, such as in shellfish cooking. If you had to limit yourself to just one Dry, this would be the most versatile.

Noilly Prat Original Dry: \$12

This is a true Marseilles. Full-bodied wine flavor overlaid with a balanced herbal infusion. Excellent as a chilled Aperitif. Correct heavy texture for historical mixed drinks. This vermouth is new to America, and should not be confused with Noilly Prat Extra Dry.

Rivata Dry: \$5

This dry has an "off-dry" sweetness similar to what you might find in a Bianco. Although it would be acceptable for use in many dry (or some sweet) mixed drinks, and it can be drunk Neat, it shines best in the kitchen. The light forest glade aroma, mild sweeter grape taste, and the slight flavor of citrus and berries, makes this a good white-wine substitute in white-meat cooking.

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Sweet Vermouth =

Cinzano Rosso (italian) =

Torino. Muscular, very sweet grape taste, with a mildly bitter fruit-candy infusion.

Gambarelli & Davitto Sweet =

Tart, sweet concord grape taste, overlaid with a mildly bitter herbal infusion.

Rivata Sweet (italian) =

Tastes like fortified sweet yellow raisins.

Stock Sweet Rosso (check republican) =

Only slightly sweet. Lighter flavor. Tastes like fermented figs. Odd aftertaste.

Tribuno Tradizione Autentica Sweet =

Tastes like a light concord grape juice, with only a hint of fortification and infusion.

===== *Sweet Vermouth Winners* =====

Di Padrino Classico Rosso Aperitivo: \$4

This is a lighter Sweet, where the fruit flavors are much stronger than the bitter infusion. Although it would be acceptable for use in sweet mixed drinks, and is a decent Aperitif on the rocks, it shines best in the kitchen. The light herb garden aroma, distinctive flavor of plum, mild sweeter grape taste, and a slight bitterness of prune, makes this a good white-wine substitute in dark-meat cooking.

Martini & Rossi Rosso: \$7

This is a true Torino, and the standard of comparison for a Sweet. Many drinks, such as the classic Negroni, were developed specifically for use with the Martini & Rossi Rosso vermouth. It has a full-bodied, sweet red grape taste and herb infusion. Aftertaste is bitter. Due to the fact that so many of the sweet mixed drinks are based upon this brand, if you had to limit yourself to just one Sweet, this would be the most versatile. It is however a vermouth you would want to avoid drinking Neat.

Honey (mead) Wine

===== *Honey Wine Winners* =====

Chaucer's Mead =

Many honey wines sold as "mead" are actually white wines with honey flavoring. This mead is made from 100% pure California central-coast honey (orange, sage, and others), without any added artificial flavorings. It is a medium-sweet mead, with a very mild honey taste and an overflavor that brings to mind a white wine, or even a vermouth. Recommended Neat as a room temperature desert wine. Works well as a marinade for fowl. Suitable for mulling (adding cinnamon, orange peel, clove, and other spices to make a Christmas punch). Consume within a few days after opening, as the flavor quickly fades.

Rice (sake) Wine

===== *Rice Wine Winners* =====

Gekkeikan Traditional Junmai-shu Sake =

Connoisseurs have developed a scale to rate sake flavor based upon dryness to sweetness, and lightness to richness. This is probably the most common heatable sake brand you can find, in both supermarkets and restaurants. Yes, just like apples, you can taste the subtle differences between brands and styles of sake. However, unless you drink sake regularly and wish to tweak the flavor a bit more to your liking, this brand is more than suitable. Sake, like beer, is a perishable brewed product, and should be consumed within six months of its bottling date. Store in a cool (under 68 degrees F), light filtered place. Once opened, keep it refrigerated, and drink the remainder within a few days. Drunk at room temperature sake tastes quite watery, with a hint of apple-like flavor. If chilled, the flavor strengthens slightly, but you also get a bitter alcohol taste. Heated is the recommended way to drink sake, as the alcohol vaporizes and the apple-like flavor comes forth along with it, much like a broth. Traditionally, hot is considered (130 degrees F) and warm (87 degrees F). You can heat sake in a microwave, but it is preferred to heat it in a container that is immersed in a hot water bath. Very alcoholic, so serve in a demitasse (ceramic shot glass).

Sparkling (champagne) Wine

===== *Sparkling Wine Winners* =====

Freixenet Cordon Negro Brut (spain) =

A brut (extremely-dry) sparkling wine (champagne). Mild grape taste with a strong undercurrent of alcohol flavor. Good, long lasting fizz. Does not give me a headache. Drinkable Neat at room temperature, but better served Neat chilled in a dry-champagne flute (stem glass with a tall, narrow bowl). Makes an outstanding Mimosa cocktail, best served in a sweet-champagne coupe (stem glass with a shallow, broad bowl). Once opened, reseal quickly, store refrigerated, and consume the remainder before it goes flat.