

The Oregonian

Singing the praises of the seeded, subtle muscat grape

by Pete Petersen, special to The Oregonian
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IN SEASON: The complex sweetness of the unrivaled fruit can inspire a case of muscat love

While there are seedless muscat grapes available, the sweet, complex flavor of the seeded variety is superior. And what's a few seeds among friends?

The Old World seeded table grape, so-called because it is primarily eaten out of hand, is versatile enough to find its way onto our plates as well as our glasses, offering us many choices as we enter fresh muscat season.

The last few years have brought seedless muscat hybrids to produce stands, farmers markets and even some mainstream grocers. They're good, but I prefer the seeded varieties of this lovely amber grape, which have the complex sweetness of the true muscat. The flavor and scent of muscat grapes bring to mind spicy daphne with subtle, rich jasmine overtones. They are so unrivaled that I hesitate to find a taste comparison among edible subjects, which would do injustice to all.

Look for: Varieties with seeds may be labeled "early muscat," "muscat" or "Italia." They range from three-quarters of an inch to over an inch in diameter. Ripest fruits are deep yellow-green with amber tones. The thickly packed bunches weigh 3 to 6 pounds each with stems that require kitchen shears to cut.

Commonly, a bunch of muscats may contain a few decayed or desiccated single grapes. Early maturing grapes will ripen and rot ahead of the main-stem fruit. This is fine and will likely only spill juice onto adjacent grapes, leaving a residue to rinse off. As more grapes get past their prime, patches of gray mold may develop, but this, too, is no reason to reject the entire bunch unless over 30 percent of the grapes have gone by.

Seedless muscat hybrids have the convenience of no seeds, but the flavor, while interesting and distinct from common seedless grape varieties, misses the high benchmark of seeded muscats.

They often go by cute names that include "pink" or "rose" because the grapes have such tints to the skin. They may even seem a bit blotchy with some green, amber, pink and yellow colors mingling together. The grapes are much smaller than seeded muscats, but bunches are denser than regular seedless grapes.

"Alternative" consumption notes: Don't forget to try local muscat wines and liquors. Two in particular are wonderful examples of what can be done with the fruit, and both manage to preserve its wonderful flavor and scent.

- Sokol Blosser Winery's 2008 Willamette Valley Early Muscat (95 percent muscat and 5 percent gewurztraminer) is a lush end-of-summer treat. Serve it cool and enjoy it with good food during a languid evening at table.
- Another local delight comes from Clear Creek Distillery, which uses local muscats to flavor its Grappa Moscato.

When: Now through early October

To store: Keep muscats refrigerated. They hold up well, but pick off any grapes that start to decay. Try to consume a bunch within a week.

Basic preparation: Rinse and enjoy. And, please, don't be afraid of serving the variety with seeds. It is easy for guests to discretely discard of their seeds at any gathering. Help preserve this terrific grape in its heritage form.

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Antique seeded table grape variety first grown in Ancient Egypt. Oval berries on fairly loose clusters are russeted gold over green, medium skinned, juicy, sweet tart with strong muscat flavor.

Season: Mid to late August.

Size: Olive sized.

Shelf life: Will keep at 32 degrees for up to 2 weeks.