

BC GUILD OF WINE JUDGES

2007

Class G – After Dinner

Notes by Bill Pearson as Mentor to Bill Greaves and Jack Miller (Victoria Chapter)

AFTER COMPLETING THIS SESSION, YOU SHOULD KNOW:

- how Port is made,
- where Port comes from,
- the characteristics of a bottle aged Port vs a cask aged Port,
- which Ports are meant to be bought and enjoyed quickly – and which Ports are meant to be aged, and
- who the bishop of Gloucester is.

WHAT IS PORT?

Port is a fortified wine. This means it is wine that has been fortified with the addition of brandy. The effect of this is to kill the yeast in the part-fermented wine, to produce a rich, strong, sweet flavour. Because the wine isn't fully fermented, there are still natural sugars present which result in retained sweetness. After fermentation is complete, the wines are transported to "lodges" where they rest in large oak casks called "pipes."

Unlike distilled spirits, where some of the subtle wine flavours are lost, the fortification process allows the wine flavours to be retained, and the extra alcohol content provided by the brandy means that port can safely be kept for many years without fear of degradation.

DESCRIPTION FROM THE BCAWA COMPETITION HANDBOOK:

Class G - After Dinner Wines

Wines in this class are for use after dinner, perhaps with nuts and cheese, or in place of a liqueur. Wines such as ports, sweet sherries, malmsey Madeira, or other wines that are fortified, baked or otherwise made using port, sherry etc. type processes belong in this class. This does not, however, prevent a competitor from entering an appropriate completely naturally fermented wine such as fig or raisin in this class.

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Technical Characteristics:

Ingredients: No restrictions

Alcohol: 15% – 20%

Colour: No restrictions

Sugar: 15% – 20%

Specific Gravity: 1.017 – 1.040

Acid: 3.9 g/l – 5.5 g/l

pH: 3.2 – 3.9

GEOGRAPHY

Port comes from Portugal, surprisingly enough! More specifically, it is produced in the Demarcated Region of the Douro under very specific conditions. The grapes are grown in the Douro Valley (in the northeast of the country) on steep terraces along the path of the river.

There is a specified area (of just over 1000 square miles) in which the port vineyards must be situated. The valley stretches east from the city of Oporto to the border with Spain.

Port's birthplace was the first great wine region in the world to be demarcated (1756). The term "port" can only refer to wines from this region, much like French regions lay claim to certain titles.

The climate is harsh, and the countryside barren, which means that the vine must be very hardy. Despite this, the grapes produced result in a very rich and complex wine.

HISTORY:

Port takes its name from the city of Oporto that is situated at the mouth of the 560-mile-long Rio Douro or River of Gold.

Port was first developed during the 17th century. In 1698 Britain declared war on France, and blockaded French ports. This obviously resulted in a shortage of wine, and so British wine merchants approached the Portuguese, with whom the British had signed a pledge of "perpetual friendship" a while back and who were well known for producing wine.

Unfortunately, the Portuguese wines weren't of the same quality as the French, and so the British decided to oversee production of the product themselves. Many of the wines they tried were dark and astringent, so the British merchants added a bucket or two of brandy to "stabilize" the wine on its journey back to Britain.

At first this technique didn't meet with much appreciation, but when an Englishman from Liverpool came up with the bright idea of adding brandy before fermentation had finished (thus retaining the full and sweet flavour of the wine) port, as we know it today, was born.

WHICH WAY SHOULD YOU PASS THE PORT?

The most widely known tradition is that of passing the port. British naval officers meticulously passed the port from "port to port", i.e. clockwise. Traditionally, the decanter of port is placed in front of the host who then serves the guest to his right and then passes the decanter to the guest on his left. The port is then passed to the left all the way back to the host.

If the port becomes forestalled at some point, it is considered poor form to ask for the decanter directly. Instead, the person seeking a refill would ask of the person who has the bottle: "do you know the bishop of Gloucester?" (or some other English town). If the person being thus queried does not know the ritual (and so replies in the negative), the querent will remark "He's an awfully nice fellow, but he never remembers to pass the port".

THE WINE:

Port Wine stands out from ordinary wines due to its unique characteristics:

1. an enormous variety of types that surprise us with the wealth and intensity of their incomparable aromas;
2. a highly persistent aroma and flavour,
3. a high alcohol content (usually between 19 and 22% vol.),
4. a vast range of degrees of sweetness, and
5. an assortment of colours.

In terms of sweetness, Port can be very sweet, sweet, semi-dry or extra dry. Just how sweet a wine will be is a choice made during production; it depends on when the brandy is added to stop the fermentation of the wine.

How do you distinguish between the different types of Ports? The first criterion to bear in mind is whether the port has been bottle-aged or cask-aged. Bottle aged port retains its colour and fruitiness whilst maturing. Cask aged ports lose some of their colour as they are filtered before bottling. Cask aged ports are better drunk straight away, whilst bottle aged versions mature well with age.

HERE IS A SET OF CATEGORIES THAT IDENTIFY THE DIFFERENT TYPES OF PORT WINE:

<p>Ruby Port is a blend from several harvests, different years and different quintas. It spends a minimum of two years in very large vats before being bottled. The large vats minimize the amount of air that comes in contact with the wine, which reduces oxidization, so the wine retains its bright red hue. Ruby is ready to drink when it is bottled and has a rich red colour and a full fruity taste. It should not be aged, and tends to taste of berries, with light tannins. “A good ruby has rich mulberry fruit flavours.”</p>	<p>Tawny Port is also a blend from several harvests but is aged for two to seven years in casks. The smaller storage vessels allow more oxidization than the vats used for Ruby ports. It is ready to drink as soon as it is bottled. As its name implies, Tawny port has a deep mahogany colour and is usually sweet. They may have a drier and nuttier taste, as well as a buttery, nutty caramel flavor.</p>
<p>Crusted Port is a type of Ruby and spends three years in a cask but most of its ageing is in a bottle. It is a blend of wines from several different years and gets its name from the sediment that appears in the bottle as the wine ages, since the wine is not filtered.</p>	<p>Aged Tawny is the best Tawny port. It can have an age of 10, 20, 30 or more than 40 years. The age will be indicated on the label and describes the average age of the wines in the blend. In a twenty-year-old aged Tawny, there may be some ports 100 years old to add a complexity to the wine. Aged Tawny port has a refined, subtle taste. It should have a silky mouthfeel and a mellow nutty flavour.</p>
<p>Vintage Character port is a higher-quality Ruby blend of port wines that ages four to six years in the cask – “in wood”. This blend of cask-aged ports is designed to replicate (to a certain extent) the characteristics of proper Vintage ports. It is filtered to remove any sediment then bottled. Vintage Character is a full-bodied, fruity wine.</p>	<p>Colheita (pronounced “call yay ta” which means “harvest”) is a Tawny port made with grapes from a single harvest (and are therefore very rare). It is aged at least seven years in casks – or “in wood” – but is usually aged much longer. The label indicates the year of the harvest.</p>
<p>Vintage Port comes from a single harvest of exceptional quality and is bottled after two years in wood. The wine then spends many years aging in the bottle (in glass) and the label will show the year of the Vintage and the year the wine was bottled. This is one of the most sought-after wines in the world. From 1901 to 1999, only fourteen port Vintages have been declared.</p>	<p>Late-Bottled Vintage port (LBV) is made from grapes grown in a single year, but because the vintage is deemed to be of a lesser quality, they are cask aged four to six years before being bottled with some sediment to add character. The label will indicate the Vintage and bottling date. The LBV port is ready to drink earlier than Vintage port and when labeled “Traditional”, it may have some sediment. For this reason, L.B.V “Traditional” ports, like Vintage ports, need decanting.</p>
<p>Single Quinta Ports are made with wine from one vineyard. They may be Tawny or Vintage styles. After aging two years in wood, they are bottled and spend from 5 to 50 years maturing. The label will indicate the Vintage year and bottling date. Single quinta port has a complex, and refined taste.</p>	

ENJOYING PORT

Ports should be stored differently depending on their type. The Standard port, including Late Bottled Vintage (LBV) ports, have a stopper-with-plastic-top seal. These are not meant to be aged, and should be stored upright, so the cork does not have any contact with the liquid within. The plastic seal is not meant to hold in the liquid on its side. Vintage ports, on the other hand, are meant to be aged and have a traditional, “normal” wine -type cork. These should be stored on their sides like any other wine.

The standard port is meant to be bought and enjoyed quickly – that’s why it doesn’t have a full cork. It is not meant to be aged. Once opened, if the bottle is kept corked (stopped), it can last between one (Ruby) and four (Tawny) months before its flavor is lost. A vintage port, once opened, loses its flavor quickly (again, like wine). It should be drunk within 24 hours of decanting if possible.

Port should be served around 65 degrees, in a narrow wine glass, and the glass should only be half filled. This keeps the alcoholic content from overwhelming the flavors. It often needs to be decanted and is traditionally served with Stilton or cheddar cheese. Port also goes very well with chocolate. Port aromas include pepper, smoke, truffles and black currant. “Standard” port should be drunk within a year or two of purchase. Vintage Port peaks at around 20 years for good quality port.

TODAY’S FLIGHT:

This is a relatively small flight, so take your time. Savour the bouquets – a good port should have an inviting nose that gives as much enjoyment as actually sipping the wine.

The flight is composed of bottled aged and cask aged ports; so, you should notice two distinct styles:

- T1 is a 10-year-old tawny – so it may have a deep mahogany colour, a drier and nuttier taste, and/or a buttery, nutty caramel flavour.
- T2 is a vintage character port – so it may have a rich red colour, be full bodied, and have fuller fruity taste

Our thanks to Bill Pearson for these tasting notes.