

BC GUILD OF WINE JUDGES

2008

Class G – After Dinner

Presented by Peggy Mitchell (Victoria Chapter)

Port is a fortified wine made by adding brandy to arrest a fermenting grape must. This results in a wine, more often red, but sometimes white, that is both sweet and high in alcohol (up to 20%)

Port wine takes its name from Oporto (Porto) in Portugal. The best ports originate in a strictly demarked area in the Douro Valley but are approximated by vintners in California, South Africa, the US, Canada, Australia and India.

DESCRIPTION FROM BCAWA HANDBOOK – March 2007 Edition

Class G - After Dinner:

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, Madeiras, 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 in this class an appropriate wine naturally fermented to high alcohol.

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

HISTORY

Everything is political. Port wine can be said to have been born out of English and French rivalries from the 17th century. When the British could no longer access their beloved clarets (those damn punitive taxes) they turned to Portugal for a substitute.

These wines were harsh and raw. There are many explanations and stories as to how port developed but the most reliable seems to be a practice that developed to stabilize the first wines shipped from Portugal to England with brandy added to casks.

Another version of port's beginnings suggests that an English merchant discovered that one monastery added brandy during fermentation to arrest the process to create a sweet and stable wine. This may or may not be true but by the 1800s it was standard practice resulting in wines with a sweet and fruity flavour and high alcohol.

In 1756 regulatory measures were introduced to control the production and sale of ports. The Port DOC is the second oldest appellation in the world and dates to this time. The regulatory body is the IVDP (Instituto dos vinhos do Douro do Porto) and still strictly relates who will produce what type of port and how much.

Production

Douro Valley in Northern Eastern Portugal is a hot, inhospitable valley where summer temperatures often soar above 35 C. Soils are poor and rainfall is scant. Yields are among the lowest in any wine region in the world.

More than eighty different grape varieties are authorized for the production of port. However, the bulk of port would be made from Touriga Nacional (Cab Franc), Tinta Barroca, Touriga Franca, Tinta Roriz and Tinta Cao.

Fermentation is rapid for maximum extraction of colour and tannins. After only 2 or 3 days, fermentation is halted. The wine is run off into vats where a carefully calculated amount of 77% grape alcohol is waiting. The mixture is allowed to rest and marry. Following vinification, the bulk of the new wine stays at the Quintas (wine farms) until the spring after the harvest when most of the wines are shipped from the Douro Valley across the river to the town of Vila Nova de Gaia where the wine is aged in Lodges. The cooler climate and higher humidity are thought to be beneficial for slow cask aging.

TYPES OF PORT

The way a port is aged and the producer's house style are the main influences which determine the final style of port. There are two broad categories of port:

Cask-aged wood-matured ports (often called wood ports) have been aged in wooden casks or, sometimes, cement tanks and are ready to drink right after fining, filtration and bottling. Cask-aged ports lose their flavour quickly.

Bottle-aged ports are designed to mature in the bottle. They are generally aged for a short time in wood and are bottled without filtration. It may then take up to 20 or 30 years before such wine is ready to drink. These ports keep their colour and their fruitiness well into maturity.

The many other styles of port fall within or between these two fundamental types. That being said, a number of authorities contend that there are four types of port: ruby, tawny, vintage and white. The others are subsets, variants or creations between the pillars.

THE FOLLOWING IS A SHORT DESCRIPTION OF THE TYPES PRODUCED:

- **RUBY*** – the base for all vintage, vintage character and LBV Ports. If just labeled 'ruby' then a very simple, inexpensive version of a vintage port. It is aged for 2 – 3 years in wood, concrete or stainless. They do not improve much in the bottle.
- **TAWNY*** – made from a blend of grapes from several different years; they can be aged in wood for as long as 40 years. They're tawny in colour and ready to drink when bottled. The labels on the best tawnies stipulate the time that they've matured (10 – 40 years). The older the tawny the deeper the colour and its nuances of caramel, raisin and nutty tones. Inexpensive tawny ports are created by blending white port and ruby port.

* Ruby and Tawny ports are sometimes called wood ports or wood-aged ports. Wood ports slowly oxidize and display aromas and flavours of roasted nuts, especially walnuts.

- **VINTAGE** – the ultimate in port, best of a producer and the most expensive. Accounts for less than 1% of total production. Only produced in exceptional years, usually 3 out of 10 with only the best grapes from the top vineyards and only after the IVDP has approved samples and declared the vintage. Bottled after 2 years in wood cask. Continue to age in the bottle. Made to age for at least 25 years. The accumulation of sediment in the bottle necessitates decanting before serving. The aging process in the bottle is in the absence of oxygen. This reductive process is much slower than in a cask, hence the long period needed to age these wines.
- **SINGLE QUINTA PORTS** – are basically vintage ports produced from a single high-quality wine estate. They're usually made in years when a port firm doesn't declare a traditional vintage port.
- **SECOND LABEL VINTAGE PORTS** – are produced when the vintage is quite good, but not quite good enough to be declared. They are typically made from better wines from various sites.
- **LATE BOTTLED VINTAGE PORTS (LBV)** – are made from grapes of a single vintage even though the quality of the grapes is not as high as that for vintage ports. LBVs are aged in wood from 4 – 6 years and are considered high quality ruby ports. Once released they are ready to drink and do not have to be decanted (unless the label refers to 'traditional' style).
- **COLHEITA** (also called single vintage or dated ports) –aged in wood for at least seven years. They fall into the tawny class. Made from a single vintage. Must have the date of bottling printed on the label.
- **CRUSTED PORTS** – are a blend of two or three wines from different vintages. They are aged for 3 or 4 years before being bottled. Like vintage ports, crusted port improves with age in the bottle. It derives its name from the deposit or crust that is thrown during this aging process. Crusted port is not often made today and has been replaced primarily by late-bottled vintage port
- **VINTAGE CHARACTER PORTS** – are essentially high-quality ruby ports. They're blended from several vintages and wood-aged, but not nearly as long as tawny port. They're the lightest and fruitiest in flavour and are ready to drink when bottled.
- **WHITE PORTS** – are those made from white grapes (dry versions undergo a longer fermentation). They are aged for 18 months in concrete or stainless tanks. Most white ports are not aged in wood since that would add undesirable flavours. Usually drier and fruitier than any of the red ports plus slightly lower in alcohol.

SERVING PORT

Only the Vintage and some Late Bottled Vintage ports need decanting. The rest can be opened and enjoyed as is though presenting port in a decanter has long been part of the serving ritual. To decant: if the bottle has been on its side, stand it upright for an hour or two (at a minimum 30 minutes) then taking care to leave the sediment in the bottle, slowly pour the port into a clean decanter, stopping as soon as any sediment is seen.

Serve at around 65 degrees in a narrow wine glass filled to the halfway mark.

Some classical accompaniments: rich Stilton cheese, almonds, cashews, roasted walnuts and pecans. Dried fruit, semi-sweet chocolate desserts, apple, mince pies and crème brûlées. Other cheeses that are very compatible are: Gruyere, Saint Agur, Manchego (for Tawnies), double cream Brie and aged Gouda. Gamey meats match well with a good Tawny.

PORT NOTES SPECIFIC TO BC

A number of commercial BC wineries are making ports – notably Sumac Ridge, Summerhill, Wildgoose, Alderlea, Calona, Gray Monk, Quail's Gate and Alderlea. The latter two use the continuous sugar addition method to boost alcohol. Many view this as an inferior method.

Historically, spirits have been notoriously difficult for a winery to acquire. To use other than a grape distilled spirit will not yield the optimal product so many port makers turned to the continuous sugar addition to achieve the desired alcohol percentage. Sugar is fed to the fermenting must for approximately three weeks. This is in stark contrast to the quick fermentation with the traditional fortification method.

Port makers in BC have variously used Marechal Foch, Gamay, Merlot, Zinfandel, Cabernet Sauvignon, Cabernet Franc and Pinot Noir. BC 'ports' are aged from 8-12 months in new oak at Wild Goose to 3 years at Sumac Ridge. The amateur port in the flight has been aged between 10 and 15 years.

Most BC commercial ports would probably be most akin to a ruby – more fruit driven. It is a significant investment to age ports so, whether BC ever sees many examples of old tawnies or vintage styles remains to be seen.

THE TASTING LINE-UP

The focus for this tasting is a British Columbia take on Port. The benchmark will be set by two tasters. One is a classic Portuguese late bottled vintage port and the other is a BC fortified red wine that spent three years in oak barrels before being bottled.

The flight consists of seven additional port styles – all from BC.

Port is not for the very young, the vain and the active. It is the comfort of age and the companion of the scholar and the philosopher. Evelyn Waugh