

The Story of Port

by Paul Dunseath © 2000,2001

Port is a fortified wine and by law in the European Community may only be so identified if it is made in a closely delimited area in Portugal, the remote Alto Douro area (although Port-style wines are made with varied success in Canada, Australia, the United States and South Africa).

True Port today averages a production of about 55 million litres annually from an area of 62,000 acres. The soil in the region is poor quality, primarily granite and schist, and the area receives little rain and experiences very hot summers.

Port came into being at the time of the trade wars between England and France in the 17th century. Seeking a replacement for French wines, which were heavily taxed, English wine merchants went to Portugal, an old ally of the British. (Most of the major Port houses indicate this history by their English names, such as Cockburn, Croft, Sandeman, Taylor, Graham and Warre). The wines grown on the relatively cool coast were thin and uninteresting, but pushing up the River Douro they discovered heavy bodied, dry and tannic wines in the hot interior of the country. In order to ensure that they survived the sea journey to England the shippers added brandy to stabilize them. Subsequently a shipper discovered that in a monastery in the Alto Douro the abbot added brandy before fermentation was finished, resulting in a sweet alcoholic red wine, the forerunner of Port as we know it today.

By about 1730 the Port growers were hit by scandal when it turned out that some were adulterating cheap wine with sugar and elderberry juice. Shippers began to shun the wine, and in order to prevent the collapse of the industry the growers banded together and petitioned the Portuguese Prime Minister to impose regulations on the growing and sale of Port; this resulted in the delimitation of the authorized geographic area, the first such control anywhere in the world.

The grapes grow on terraced hillsides above the river, many of them dating back some 300 years. The climate is dry so irrigation is commonly used, and the vines are trained on wires supported by stone stakes. Over 80 varieties of grape are approved for use in Port, but the most common varieties in use are Touriga Nacional, Tinta Barroca, Touriga Francesa, Tempranillo, Barroca and Tinta Cao. Interestingly, Touriga Nacional and Tempranillo are also used in the production of Dao dry red wine. White Ports, for their part, are usually made from varieties such as Verdelho, Malvasia Fina and Viosinho. The particular grapes in the blend are chosen for their individual contribution to the finished quality: for example, in the classic Red Ports Touriga Nacional produces a spicy wine but is low in tannin; Touriga Francesca adds fruit flavours and good acidity; Barocca adds tannins and firmness; and the Tintas provide depth of colour.

The grape skins provide both colour and tannin; in normal wines these as you know are extracted during the course of fermentation; however given the fact that the fermentation is short, under two days in fact, other methods are resorted to in order to obtain the maximum extract while avoiding crushing the seeds. In many areas this means the traditional approach of "treading" the grapes -

pressing them with bare human feet - for several hours to extract colour and flavour. In some of the newer "quintas" this has been replaced by fermenting in a closed container, using the pressure of the built-up carbon dioxide to cause the must to circulate continuously up a tube reaching almost to the bottom and over the cap. This constant circulation accelerates the extraction of tannins and colour and is claimed to have virtually the same effect as manual treading, and without the labour cost. As noted earlier, the young must is transferred to barrels containing brandy (overproof brandy, in fact, at 77% alcohol by volume) in the ratio of 1 part brandy to 4 parts of wine, the wine at that point being between 6 and 8 Brix, a point that is reached usually between 24 and 36 hours of the start of fermentation. The resulting wine retains the sweetness and has an alcohol content of 19% or 20%. The hot climate in the Douro, with summer temperatures frequently exceeding 35 Celsius, can result in the wine taking on a faintly caramelized character if it is kept there for long, and so it is the practice to ship it down river to the ocean port of Oporto in the suburb of Vila Nova de Gaia where the processing takes place, originally by specially-designed river boats, but now usually by rail. The lodges, as they are known, are also used to store the young wine in 115-gallon barrels, known as pipes, and aged for anything from 2 to 40 years.

Vintage Port. A few times in each decade the climatic conditions are virtually perfect. The wines produced at such times will not be improved by blending with wine from other years, and so the shipper may seek the approval of the Port Wine Institute (IVP) to "declare a vintage". The IVP is empowered to inspect and analyze the wine, and to determine the amount of wine that may be "declared", and the quantity that can be released for sale in any given year. Only the best grapes are used, from the best vineyards, and picked at optimum condition. Vintage Ports are bottled at two years of age and marked with the shipper's name and the year. These will almost invariably throw a sediment in the bottle as they age, and are marked to indicate which side should stay uppermost in the cellar - traditionally with a spot of paint - to avoid disturbing the sediment, and are decanted off the sediment prior to serving. It is not unusual for these wines to be laid down for 20 years or more, and to improve constantly during this time. This style is, understandably, also expensive, and should be served after the meal with Stilton cheese. The LCBO suggests using sediment from decanted Port to enrich sauces. Vintage Port requires lengthy cellaring, proper handling and decanting. It is a great gift for a newborn or a christening or as a wedding gift; historically in Victorian England it was the practice in wealthy families to lay down a pipe (equal to 690 bottles) when a son was baptised, with the intention of not consuming it until his marriage or 21st birthday.

Tawny Port. Other Port, from near vintage standard to average quality, goes through a blending process, to produce a wine of predictable and uniform character. This wine, aged in wood, matures much faster than Vintage Port and loses some of its sugar in the process. A very old wood port is comparatively pale and dry, but particularly smooth. This is called Tawny from its colour (amber to tawny). Expensive tawnies cost as much as vintage port and some people prefer them as they are not as heavy-bodied and fragrant as a good vintage Port. Some tawnies however are made from lower quality grapes without the same depth of flavour and body as other styles, and a few are left in the Upper Douro for a lengthier period in order to pick up what is known as "Douro Bake" from the higher temperatures.

Tawny Ports are of two types: a blend aged two years in wood and a mixture of red and white Port. These are often of considerable age, up to 40 years in the case of the most complex and expensive; the best ones will show date of bottling, which is important as aged tawnies suffer a loss of quality if they spend too long in the bottle. While they can be served as an aperitif, they are more often used at the end of a meal.

Ruby Port. Ruby Ports are not cellared as long and will not show the same improvement with age. These are best consumed relatively young, within perhaps five years of production. Ruby Port is a blend of young Port from different harvests, matured for 2 to 3 years in wood, stainless steel and/or concrete vats, and possessing a deep colour and considerable body. While suitable for drinking with cheese at the end of a meal, it may also be used as aperitif at room temperature, chilled or on the rocks. It is ready to drink when purchased and will keep for 3 or 4 weeks once opened.

Late Bottled Vintage. Vintage Port has some drawbacks. It requires lengthy cellaring and careful handling to prevent disturbing the sediment, or "crust". This has led to a sort of compromise, which is termed "Late Bottled Vintage" (LBV). These are from single years, although not always the very best, and are unblended. The "Late Bottled" term indicates that rather than being bottled at two years as is done with a Vintage Port, it is kept in barrel for as much as eight years, during which time it throws a crust which remains behind when it is bottled. It does not require lengthy cellaring and the delicate handling of a Vintage, and has become popular among those who are not prepared to wait many years to enjoy a glass, or who are unable or unwilling to give the wine the delicate handling required by a Vintage Port. Most Late Bottled Vintage Ports do not require decanting prior to serving, although "traditional" LBVs are not stabilized before bottling and may throw some sediment. LBVs are served at the end of the meal, with or instead of dessert and will show well against a strong cheese such as a Stilton. The label will show both the year of harvest and the year of bottling.

Crusted Port. Crusted Port can be cellared but will throw a sediment, and thus requires decanting. These will not show a specific year as they are blends, but they are bottled without filtration and will continue to improve in bottle. Although in some respects a creation of marketing departments, they appear to offer a less expensive alternative to vintage Ports with many of the same qualities. Single Quinta Ports are the best of a given year and are identified with specific shippers (for example, Quinta da Vargellas is owned by Taylor). These are usually ready to drink sooner than Vintage Port but are treated in a similar fashion, i.e. aged in wood for two to three years and bottled without filtration, so that a crust is usually formed. Some of these in fact may be wines which were part of a Vintage blend of grapes, and which are surplus to the amount which the shipper is permitted to "declare".

White Port. As mentioned earlier White Ports are made from different grapes, with limited or no skin contact. Usually grape spirit is added to halt fermentation, as with red Ports, but not as much, resulting in some residual sweetness and fresh grape overtones in a wine of 16% to 17% alcohol. The wines are aged for no more than 18 months, usually in stainless steel or concrete, although some use wood, which results in a wine with a golden colour and nutty flavours.

Typical examples of the varieties of Port available at the LCBO are the following:

Sandeman Ruby Port (LCBO 23366 \$13.75);

Paarl Ruby Port (South Africa) (LCBO 28951 \$ 8.95);

Churchill 1990 Vintage Port (LCBO 978031 \$55.00);

Taylor Fladgate Late Bottled Vintage 1994 [bottled in 1999] (LCBO 46846 \$15.55);

Offley Tawney Port Colheita 1985 [bottled in 1999] (LCBO 990630 \$24.30);

Dow's Fine White Port (LCBO 990275 \$12.60)