

Drifting into Port

PHOTO: THOMAS BALSAMO

As winter settles in for the long haul, my attention turns to Port, which seems to ease the harshness of the season. Port is one of the easiest categories of wine to understand. Essentially, there are Tawny Ports and Vintage Ports, as well as minor subcategories such as Ruby, Late Bottled Vintage, and Single Vineyard Ports.

Port has been produced for centuries but surged in popularity during and after the British and Dutch declared war on France in the 17th century; they turned to Port and away from Bordeaux to punish the French economically. For two centuries, the British were the major consumers of Port, but Americans have caught up with them (particularly Vintage Port).

Port comes from the Douro River Valley, which starts in Spain (known there as the Duero) and runs westward across the northern part of Portugal. If you are visiting this region, which I highly recommend, it's wise to start in Lisboa. This is a great city and still relatively inexpensive compared to other European capitals. The people are friendly, the food is good, and the city is beautiful.

I use to think that Lisboa seemed to be the oldest city in Europe until I visited Oporto. Think ancient — some of the streets are paved only in the loosest sense of the word. Due to the proximity of the Atlantic Ocean as well as the Duoro, Oporto is a seafood haven.

Tawny Port is produced by all the Port houses, but the top four are W. & J. Graham, Dow's, Fonseca and Taylor, Fladgate & Yeatman. The Ports produced are 10-year, 20-year, 30-year, and 40-year Tawnies. All are worthy, but many Port experts believe that regardless of producer, the 20-year is the best. Prices go up exponentially, so if the 10-year costs \$X, the 20-year costs \$2X, the 30-year costs 4X, and the 40-year costs \$8X. So if the 20-year is best, it is most certainly the best deal.

These wines are bottled after lying in casks for their designated number of years and then pumped directly into bottles. As a result, the bottles contain no sediment and therefore do not need to be decanted. Also, because they have had a small

exposure to air during their maturation, once opened they retain their initial impact without being quickly oxidized. In general, they suffer little deterioration over a 30-day period. I prefer these wines by themselves, sipped from a Port glass.

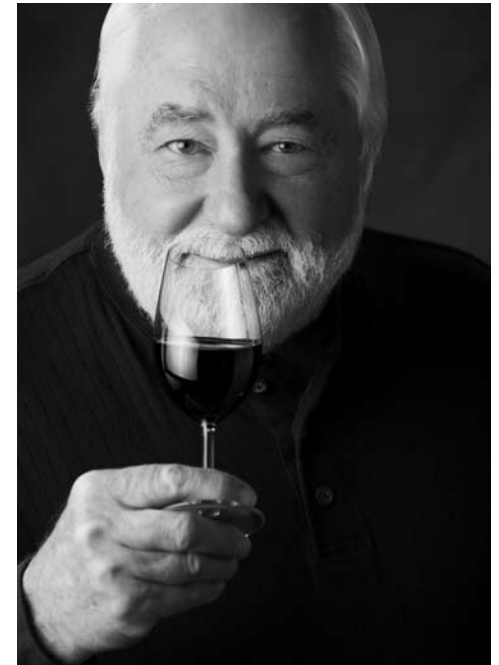
Although I appreciate and love Tawny Ports, I generally drink Vintage Port. These wines (the best are from the same producers as above) are made in a different style: they are produced only two to three times per decade as a result of the best vintage, and the producers "declare" the vintage.

Essentially, the grapes are fermented until five to six degrees of alcohol is achieved, and then grape alcohol is added to arrest the fermentation. The wine is raked into large wooden casks, where it sits until one and a half years after harvest. The Port is then trucked to the Port lodges, put into new barrels, aged for another year, then blended and bottled after receiving government approval.

As a result of maturing in bottles, Vintage Port "throws" a sediment, which must be separated by decanting and then discarded. The best vintages of these wines will age for many decades, improving most of them. This led to the practice of wealthy Britons giving a "pipe" (about 700 bottles) of Port to their sons born in vintage years. In essence, the young men would have a young Port ready to drink when they came of age, which would improve throughout most or all of their lives.

For the rest of us, it's wise to buy your great Vintage Port now, as you probably won't outlive it, and it will get much better as it matures. Unfortunately, more Vintage Port is consumed by Americans than by others, and it is believed that most of it is consumed in its youth, long before it reaches its potential. The most important decision you'll encounter with Port is which year to buy. The best years available are 1955, 1963, 1970, 1977, 1983, 1985, 1992, 1994, 1997, 2000, and 2004.

The only negatives to Vintage Port are that it requires decanting, its quality will deteriorate soon after exposure to air (three days maximum unless preserved with an inert gas blanket or vacuum pumping), and it has high alcohol content (20 percent plus).



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On the other hand, Vintage Port is a gift beyond belief. My favorite way to enjoy Vintage is as follows: Crack several whole walnuts, discard the shells, slice several pieces of high-quality Stilton or other blue cheese, and slice a crisp, sweet apple (such as a Gala). Then place the cheese on a transport medium such as a high-quality water cracker and begin biting this along with some of the walnuts and a slice of the apple. Once the food is partially chewed, take a sip of the Port and let it drift over the mixture. This is truly one of the greatest tastes you will experience, and it's a spectacular way to end a winter meal.

While Vintage Port is more expensive than many normally spend on a bottle of wine, keep in mind that just three to four ounces is all that's required to reach the state of nirvana described above — making this experience affordable and amazing. Santé! 🍷