

The Port Side of Wine



I am hunkered down, trying to stay warm during these constant visits from the Polar Vortex. I don't know about you, but I am definitely ready for winter to be over.

But as long as it insists on hanging around, I guess there is only one thing I can look forward to: warming up with a glass of Port – that delicious Portuguese elixir that has warmed other countless souls for centuries.

It all began in the 17th century when Great Britain declared war on France, thus cutting off their supply of fine wine. The British promptly turned to Portugal, where they decided to add brandy to barrels of wine during fermentation in order to keep it fresh for its long journey down the Douro River to the port town of Oporto and then back to England and Scotland. This “fortification” created a sweet wine - thanks to the abundant residual sugars - whose noticeable fruit was kept in check by the high alcohol levels – perfect for a chilly day. It is important to note that ‘Port’ wine actually denotes a place of origin and a type of designation, not a specific varietal. The Douro region, where the Port grape varietals are grown, hugs the formidable Serra do Marao mountain range, which begins forty miles from the shore and races up to the Spanish boarder, almost 100 miles away. Its widest point is no more than 16 miles across. The rocky terrain provides plenty of stress for the three major grape varietals; Tinto Roriz, Touriga Nacional and Touriga Franca.

As for the types of port, there are several different styles, including a white port that is gaining popularity here in the states. All Port wines are a blend of several varietals and are crafted by each “house” to achieve a particular style, similar to the practice in Champagne. Here are four of the most popular types of red Port wines.

TAWNY Ports – these are non-vintage wines that are aged in wooded casks and are the product of several blends (to maintain a consistent ‘house’ style) – a type of “solera”. They are generally older and more elegant than their younger Ruby sibling. This style provides the perfect foil as either a dessert wine or an aperitif. The **Non-Vintage Taylor Fladgate Special Tawny** is wonderfully versatile. I like it served slightly chilled with an apple tart. **\$15**

PORT WINES WITH INDICATION OF AGE - These are usually Tawny wines that are better-than-average as approved by the Port Wine Institute. They will denote a bottling date along with an indication of their character by the age on the label: 10 years old, 20 years old, 30 years old and 40 years old. They have a tendency to possess more mellow fruit characteristics and have a smoother mouthfeel to them than the aforementioned Tawny. **Dow's 10 Year Old Tawny** is dry and structured, with mature flavors of dark chocolate and almond-toffee notes. The finish has refreshing acidity. **\$35**

Or **Graham's 20 Year Old Tawny** is a finely balanced, elegant wine, featuring dark caramel flavor, ripe black and red fruit, and a delicious fresh finish. **\$55** Both wines are delicious and easy to find and would pair well with pecan pie.

L.B.V. (LATE BOTTLED VINTAGE) Port - This is also the Port of one single harvest. It is produced in a good quality year from a single harvest, they are bottled approximately between the fourth and sixth year of age. The label will show not only the year of the harvest but also the date of bottling and the designation L.B.V. Try the **2008 Dow's Late Bottled Vintage Port** – it's loaded with flavors of spiced red cherry and plum, seasoned with a good twist of black cassis. This is an excellent introduction for new port drinkers and would work magic with a wedge of Stilton blue cheese. **\$20**

VINTAGE - Vintage Ports account for only two percent of all Port wine produced. They are highly regulated, including the obscure law that they must be bottled between “July 1st of the second year following the harvest and June 30th June of the third year, counting from the year of the harvest.” Port houses do not declare a vintage every year but only in the best vintages. The Label will simply say “Vintage.” They usually possess a deep rich red color and are full-bodied. There is no better way to spend time after a big meal that with a glass of vintage Port, a roaring fire and a good book. Since Vintage Ports develop House style, most people have a favorite. In the officially declared **2011** vintage, I prefer the **2011 Fonseca** and the **2011 Dow's** – both **\$80**.