

IN PORTUGAL, TABLE WINES ARE IMPROVED BUT PORT STILL RULES

by Rich Mauro

It is a testament to the determination of the Portuguese that grapes have been grown in the Douro River valley in northern Portugal at least since Roman times. How else to explain 2,000 years of viticulture on such steep, rocky slopes in the face of extreme temperatures and extremely poor soils?

Port, of course, is the best known Portuguese wine but Portugal's table wine has really been coming on lately. Forget the sweet, fizzy rosés of the past or even the simple, rustic red wines that occasionally provided good value. Those are so 40 years ago.

Quality has improved dramatically and Portugal now appears poised to join the ranks of world class table wine producers. Most in the industry attribute the beginning of the change to 1986, when Portugal joined the European Community, triggering alterations in centuries-old practices in grape growing, winemaking and grower/winery relations. Actually, it is sort of a "back to the future" scenario, as producers learn to respect the best of traditional practices, while employing modern techniques.

Although the quality revolution is occurring in all of the major wine regions, it is the Douro Valley that is receiving the most attention for now. It probably shouldn't be a surprise that the region known for making the great Port wines should emerge as the leader in quality table wines. These wines are especially interesting because they deliver quality using indigenous varieties, a welcome respite from the Cabernets and Merlots of the world.

Four new Douro reds I tasted recently gave testament to the region's promise.

- 2003 Quinta do Roriz Prazo de Roriz. A level of quality — concentrated red and black fruits, balanced with mineral and

spice notes — uncommon at this price.

- 2001 Quinta do Roriz Reserva. More developed qualities, like coffee and earth, and softer but still a solid structure and tasty dark berry fruit.

- 2003 Ramos-Pinto Adriano. Nice cherry fruit and an herbal touch, with a firmness that begs for food.

- 2002 Prats & Symington Post Scriptum Chryseia. The second

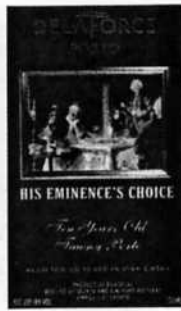
wine from the Bruno Prats /Symington family collaboration is quite full flavored and ready to drink now.

As good as the new table wines are, Port still dominates the Portuguese wine market. Basically, there are two types of Port. First are the Tawny Ports, aged in wood a significant amount of time before bottling and ready to drink upon release.

The typical Tawny Port evolves aromas and flavors of dried red and black fruits, honey, almond and spice. As the wine matures, flavors and aromas mellow and develop admirable complexity and the texture becomes supple.

A Tawny Port is blended from several vintages, so any indication of age is an average. The most common is 10-years old. The 20-Year Old and the 40-Year Old tawnies are rare and naturally more expensive but amazingly sublime.

In my recent tastings, 10-Year Old Tawnies from Graham's (\$29), Dow's,



Cockburn's and Delaforce "His Eminence's Choice" were favorites. The 20 Year-Old Tawnies from Taylor

Fladgate and Cockburn's were even more highly recommended.

Another delight was a rare type of Tawny Port, the 1986 Smith Woodhouse Colheita, a type of vintage dated tawny as prized as Vintage Port. The extended cask aging allows wines like to evolve intense, pure aromas, complex flavors and enticing finesse.

The second type of Port, generally categorized as "Ruby Port," includes those that are aged mostly in bottle. Vintage Port is the epitome of this type. It is similar to vintage Champagne in that it is made only in the best years of the finest grapes from the top vineyards. The wines



usually are aged in wood only two years and develop in bottle for at least 10 years and often for decades. They start out with intense fruit, depth, and tannic grip, then develop great complexity and nuance. The 2003 Croft I tasted looks to be a classic in that style.

A special type of Vintage Port is the Single Quinta Vintage, which is a designation similar to that of a single vineyard table wine, often produced in a good year when quantities cannot quite support a vintage declaration. The 1998 Quinta do Vesuvio and 2002 Quinta de Roriz are good examples of this type.

Late Bottled Vintage Port is made from good wines of a single year that didn't quite make the cut for Vintage Port. Aged four to six years before bottling and ready to drink upon release, LBV can supply your thirst for Vintage Port at a lower price. Good examples in this category include 2000 Dow's, 2000 Fonseca, 1998 Cockburn's, 1998 Ramos Pinto and 1992 Smith Woodhouse (a really late bottled vintage Port, having been aged an additional five years before release).



Basic Ruby Port is the youngest and least expensive of the bottled-aged Ports. Aged generally three years in large vats to retain freshness, expect vibrant, straightforward, grapey fruit. You may also see "Vintage Character Port," "Reserva" or "Special Reserve" on a label but the wine is basically a Ruby Port. I especially liked Cockburn's Special Reserve, Croft Distinction, Graham's Six Grapes and Ramos Pinto Collector.



So whether you are looking for sweet or dry red wine, consider looking to Portugal. Your palate and your customers will thank you.

