

THE WINE GUY

Thank the Portuguese for port — and world-class table wines

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 horrid soil?

Although port, the sweet, fortified wine, is "only" 300 years old, it has been the most significant type of Portuguese wine since English merchants began importing it in the 17th century.

There are basically two types of port, most of which is a blend of several years: wood-aged (usually labeled tawny) and bottle-aged (several styles.) Wood-aged port tends to be mature, silky and ready to drink, while bottle-aged is exuberant and fresh when released and capable of further development in bottle.

The best tawny ports indicate an average age of the blend, usually 10 years. Expect aromas and flavors of red and black fruits, almond, honey and spice, with enticing purity, complexity and a supple texture.

Less common are 20- and 40-year-old tawnies and, even more rare, a vintage-dated tawny called Colheita. These are naturally more expensive but truly sublime.

In my recent tastings, 10-year-old tawnies from Graham's (\$29), Delaforce "His Eminence's Choice" (\$23), Dow's (\$29) and Cockburn's (\$30) were the favorites, while 20-year-old tawnies from Taylor Fladgate (\$53) and Cockburn's (\$50) and the 1986 Smith Woodhouse Colheita (\$41) easily justified the price.

Of the bottle-aged varieties, Ruby Port (you may also see "Vintage Character Port," "Reserva" or "Special Reserve" on a label) is the youngest and least expensive. Expect vibrant, straightforward, grapey fruit. I especially liked Cockburn's Special Reserve (\$16), Croft Distinction (\$17), Graham's Six Grapes (\$21) and Ramos Pinto Collector (\$21).



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Next up the ladder of quality for bottled-aged ruby ports is the Late Bottled Vintage Port, made from good wines of a single year that didn't quite make the cut for the top-of-the-line vintage ports. Aged four to six years before bottling, it can supply your thirst for vintage port at a lower price. Good examples in this category include 2000 Dow's (\$20), 2000 Fonseca (\$23), 1998 Cockburn's (\$20) and 1998 Ramos Pinto (\$23). The 1992 Smith Woodhouse (\$27) could be called a really late bottled vintage port, having been aged for an additional five years before release.

Vintage port is the epitome of bottle-aged port. Similar to vintage Champagne, many consider it the greatest of all port because 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 can develop in bottle for at least 10 years and often for decades. They begin with intense fruit and tannic grip, then develop great complexity and nuance. In my tasting, the 2003 Croft (\$71) looks to be a classic in that style.

I also tasted two impressive Single Quinta ports, 1998 Quinta do Vesuvio (\$58) and 2002 Quinta de Roriz (\$52). These are basically single-vineyard vintage ports, which often are produced in a good year when quantities cannot quite support a vintage declaration.

As wonderful as port is, it is Portugal's table wines that are creating the most excitement these days. 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 has now joined the ranks of world-class table wine producers. Although the quality revolution is occurring in all of the major wine regions, the Douro Valley is receiving the most attention for now. It 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 four Douro reds from my tastings gave special testament to the region's promise: 2003 Quinta do Roriz "Prado de Roriz" (\$13); 2003 Ramos-Pinto "Adriano" (\$15); 2001 Quinta do Roriz "Reserva Douro" (\$24); and 2002 Prats & Symington Post Scriptum Chryseia (\$25).

Although most port houses still use their best grapes for port, more and more are beginning to reserve top-quality grapes for their table wines. Look for more on these in future columns.

MARK YOUR CALENDARS

The 15th annual Wine Festival of Colorado Springs is coming up March 10-11, with an emphasis on another lesser-known wine region that is emerging on the world stage: the Walla Walla Valley of southeastern Washington state. Winemakers from several top Walla Walla wineries will show off some of the finest cabernet sauvignon, merlot and syrah around.

The festival includes a Grand Tasting Friday night, seminars on Friday and Saturday and a Winemaker Dinner Saturday night. The lineup looks to continue the string of outstanding festivals benefiting Colorado Springs cultural institutions. This year, it's the Fine Arts Center.

Prices vary by event, and package prices are available. For more information, call 477-4371 or go to www.cs.fineartscenter.org/event.htm.

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