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Underappreciated port is a delightful wine

By GERALD D. BOYD, 12/21/2016 - Page D01

In northern Portugal, there is a wild river valley where it seems time stands still. Over the millennium, the River Douro raced westward out of Spain, downhill on its course to the Atlantic Ocean, carving a steep-sided valley in the rural landscape dotted with quintas or wine farms.

In the 18th century, after years of subsistence farming, the Douro River Valley introduced the world to port, today one of the world's greatest and most under-appreciated wines.

The English wine trade was very active at that time, and it moved quickly to capture a new and promising market, helping to develop the remote port wine region along the northern Douro River while expanding into other continental wine regions like the Cognac region of France and the Sherry region of Spain. Wine merchants spread the word about the pleasures of port, and the fortified wine soon became a fixture in stately drawing rooms throughout the British Empire.

And while the English enjoyed a glass or two of port to finish a meal or as a nightcap, especially with a wedge of English Stilton cheese, the popularity of port in the American colonies lagged behind Madeira (another fortified Portuguese wine). Eventually, interest in Madeira waned, but port never picked up the slack and remains today as a wine footnote.

Fact is, dessert wines struggle for attention as wine drinkers devote all (or most) of their time and money to a handful of varietal table wines that dominate the world market. Wine drinkers tend to shy away from higher alcohol wines (20% by volume) like port and sherry, preferring the lower 13% to 14.5% for table wine.

Port is also sweeter than table wine, and it is made from an assortment of grapes with unfamiliar names like Touriga Nacional and Tinta Roriz.

Still, with the holidays upon us, there is no better time to get acquainted with the pleasures of port. An aged Tawny or Vintage Port is sublime and one of the great sipping wines that can be enjoyed on its own as dessert or with a simple sweet or fresh fruit.

Port starts out like any wine with a standard fermentation. Mechanical processing of the grapes is pretty much standard today, but

some wineries continue to crush the grapes in lagars, stone troughs with low sides where the grapes are trod by foot. Used mostly for the best ports, the lagar is now mostly a curiosity, although a few houses employ robotic lagars.

At a stage determined by the winemaker, based on house style and type, fermentation is stopped by adding grape spirits, fortifying the new port and leaving some residual sweetness.

Early in the process the winemaker decides whether the new port becomes a cask-aged or "wood port" like Ruby and Tawny, or a bottle-aged port. Ruby is held in wood for two to three years, while tawny ports are aged longer in oak barrels causing it to lose its color, taking on an amber or tawny hue.

Carlos Silva, a master blender for the House of Sandeman, had this to say about nurturing wood ports: "Imagine these wines as twin infants: I must assess the characteristics of each and then decide how best they should be brought up. One I send to live by the sea to have a physical, outdoor life. The other I keep in the city, spending much of his time indoors. Tawnies and Rubies are like this."

At the higher end, in terms of quality, aging potential and cost are Vintage and Late-Bottled Vintage (LBV) ports. These ports spend a minimum time in wood and get their aging from long-periods in bottle. Vintage port is a wine of a single year and is the most expensive style. LBV port is also a wine from a single year, but is usually bottled between the fourth and sixth year after harvest.

In recent years a few other styles have been added, including: Reserva for a premium Ruby; Aged Tawny, a port that has been aged in wood for a minimum of six and a maximum of 40 years, producing a smooth creamy port; Single Quinta Vintage, similar to Vintage but from just one quinta, or estate. Other styles, more popular at home than in export are Crusted Port, a wine that forms a "crust" or deposits in the bottle, requiring decanting, and White Port, a wine made from white grapes with more sweetness than a Ruby port.

Vintage Port accounts for about 1 percent of the port sold worldwide, LBV slightly more. The bulk of port production is Ruby and Tawny. The choice can be bewildering, especially when wine shopping for the holidays. Ruby is a good port to serve as an aperitif (as the

French do), but stay with a standard port house like Dow, Sandeman or Ramos-Pinto. A standard Tawny will also work, but save the Aged Tawny for after dinner.

Opening a bottle of Vintage (or LBV) port is like saving your best aged red wine or brandy to top off the meal. All ports have some sweetness, so observe the rule: No dessert sweeter than the wine. For fans of red wine with chocolate, a Premium Ruby or Aged Tawny are good bets. Portuguese port is priced at \$16 for a ruby like Graham's Six Grapes to \$70 for a Vintage Port like Warre's 2003 Vintage Port.

The history of California port dates only to the late 19th century, although there were likely fortified wines made before that time that resembled port in name only. The main difference between Portuguese port and California port-style wines is the grapes used.

More wineries today are using Portuguese grapes like Touriga Nacional and Tinta Cao, but some are making port-style wines from zinfandel, petite sirah and other red grapes. There are approximately two dozen California port producers, from Ficklin and Quady in the Central Valley, to Windsor Vineyards, Pedroncelli and Valley of the Moon in Sonoma County. Expect to pay between \$15 and \$33 for a California port.

The English have long had a love affair with port, even when a little too much caused Charles Dickens to call port "liquid gout." Even so, Dickens remarked that Mr. Pickwick had "finished his second pint of particular port and that benign old gentleman seems not to have suffered as a result."

But don't let the Dickensian travails put you off this holiday. With a "Christmas Carol" opened to the first page, pour yourself a glass of port, maybe with a small wedge of Stilton, and enjoy.

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