

The Call of Port

Written by Terry Connor

Tuesday, 15 February 2011 13:24

Just a few hours drive south from where we were last issue, we cross the Douro River (remember this river as we will see it again) and we arrive in Oporto, a city on the west coast of Portugal. Port Wine is named after Oporto and to this day the city remains central to Port Wine.

As the story evolves about the beginning of Port Wine, we must go back in time to around the 1670's. We find that English merchants were traveling thru Portugal (and Spain) in search of wine that could be sold on the British market. Why Portugal and Spain? The answer lies in the fact that relations between France and Britain had deteriorated so badly that the British were imposing serious duties on French wine. So the search began for replacement producers of acceptable wine. Legend tells us that two of the enterprising English merchants found themselves in a monastery near the town of Lamego. The abbot served our two merchants a wine that was very smooth and somewhat sweet. When the merchants questioned the abbot about the unique taste, he confided that he had added brandy as the wine fermented. Was this the beginning of FORTIFIED wine? I have no idea however, it is a fun way of telling about a very necessary combination that had to occur. The wine purchased in Portugal had to travel to England. Adding brandy to the wine stopped fermentation thus enabling the wine to be more stable while in transit to the British port of entry. The rest is History. Port wine was so successful that British investors literally poured money into the development of Port wine, and so today we see most of the famous Port wines bearing British names such as Dow, Croft, Graham, Cockburn, and Warre.

Suffice it to say Port wine was, and remains so today, an enormous commercial success. Looking back over 350 years, we can see trial and error and a boatload of hard work. The end result is a sophistication of blend and style. Let's look at both. Since there is no such grape as a port grape, Port wine is a blend of many grapes, and there are at least 55 varieties from which to choose. The five that have evolved as the leading grapes are touriga nacional, tinta barroca, tinta cao, touriga francesa, and tinta roriz. All of these grapes are blended together for color, flavor, aroma, and body.

Looking at style, there are ten. However, for us here in the US, the three most popular are Ruby, Tawny, and Vintage. Ruby Port is the least complex and the least expensive. It is a blend of young wines from different years, all of which have been in tanks or barrels for two to three years. It is then bottled and shipped – \$8 to \$20 range and available at all retailers. Enjoy after you make out your income tax or a hard day at work.

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Tawny Port is more complex. The best reference is the label, where we find designations of ten year, twenty year, and so forth. Aged Tawnys are blends of Ports that are left in the barrel for several years until the juice takes on the rich, nutty, brown sugar and vanilla flavor. (The terms “ten year,” “twenty year,” etc. are the subject of a lifetime of experience tasting – not real time years). The range is \$25 to \$60 and beyond. Enjoy after dinner or with a few hands of bridge. Give it to a Port lover as a gift.

Vintage Port is the most sought after and the most expensive. I mention it here because the US is the largest market for Vintage Ports and most retailers are able to procure it for their customers. In simple terms, a shipper (a Port Merchant) declares that his vintage for a particular year is good enough to be declared a Vintage Year. He submits a sample to the Port Wine Institute. The sample is either approved or not. If approved, the shipper is allowed to say on the label the wine is a Vintage Port. After that, it requires special handling, storage, aging and distribution. All this leads to higher pricing, so Vintage Port is very expensive – starting in the 80 – 90 dollar range. This is definitely a ‘special occasion’ wine. Give as a gift or enjoy with the classic match of Stilton Cheese.

Winespeak. What is a LAGAR? A lagar is a shallow cement or stone trough in which grapes are trodden by foot, usually for several hours. Tredding grapes by foot is still practiced in Portugal and thus many wineries have lagares.

Some of the information for this article came from the book by Karen MacNeil called “The Wine Bible.” Karen is presently at the Culinary Institute Of America In Napa Valley.

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