

AT THE BAR port at dinner and beyond

# PORT AT DINNER AND BEYOND

HERITAGE AND CHANGE  
FOR A CLASSIC BEVERAGE

BY DEBORAH GROSSMAN



**V**intage in design, port is a stalwart denizen of the wine cellar. Like Champagne, port deserves attention as a special occasion drink and much more.

To make port more relevant for today's beverage list, says Allison Gadbois, wine director at the Triple Creek Ranch in Darby, Montana, "We need to educate customers on style differences to find the right fit for their preferences and palate — many guests perceive port as one style."

As Rupert Symington, CEO of port producer Symington Family Estates, says, "As with Mark Twain, reports of the death of port tend to be greatly exaggerated."

Port isn't lost to younger generations. Interest in styles of port from rubies to tawnies and vintage is steady. Vintners are focused on quality while sommeliers are offering creative ways to present a broad spectrum of ports in a variety of restaurant settings.

"Port appeals to guests at our steakhouses. Indeed all restaurants should serve port," says Luciano Ingrao, co-owner and beverage director of two Char steakhouse locations in New Jersey. Ingrao has observed strong interest in their "Heaven's Port" seasonal cocktail and aged tawnies paired with dessert.

## A DISTINGUISHED HISTORY

Thank heavens for the British, says Jeffrey Perisho, wine director of the one-star Michelin-awarded Plumed Horse in Saratoga, Calif. "The British loved their drink but were always at war with the French. In the 18th century, they collaborated with Portuguese growers, encouraging them to adopt French viticulture techniques."

The Romans enjoyed the juicy red wines of the Douro Valley of northern Portugal. Later, monks built stone terraces along the steep hills cut by the Douro River. The rocky, fragmented



schist soil is suited for the drought-conditions of the area with the grape roots adapting to the terrain to find water.

The Douro Valley is now a 70-mile wide UNESCO Heritage site. Unlike many countries that followed trends for international grapes, Portugal nurtured their indigenous varietals. The five main port grapes all possess small berries and thick skins, ideal attributes for the hot, dry climate: Touriga Nacional, low-yielding, complex and tannic; Touriga Francesa, (or Touriga Franca), lighter than Nacional and more aromatic; Tinta Roriz or tempranillo, Tinta Barroca, and Tinta Cão. After fermentation, grape spirit is added to fortify the wine, initiated to preserve the wine during the long voyage to market.

The two main styles of port, tawnies and rubies, have evolved over the years. Tawnies are aged in large wooden barrels which lead to oxidation of the wine resulting in less intense and lighter colored ports. Sweeter than many ruby ports, the flavor profile of tawnies range from toasted nuts and vanilla to silky crème brûlée. Young tawnies are aged for about three years, pale in color and



**OPPOSITE:** The Symington family declare 2016 as a Vintage Port year. Above: Graham's Quinta Dos Malvedos terraced vineyards above Douro River. Right: Graham's 20-year tawny.

### INNOVATIONS IN PORT PRODUCTION

Symington Family Estates has served as a leader in changing several aspects of traditional winegrowing techniques. Foot stomping of grapes was traditional for centuries in the Duoro Valley. But Symington introduced an automated foot trodding machine. Solving the dual issues of long hours of physical labor and labor shortages, the results from automated pressing are very positive and many producers have adopted them.

Symington studies the ripening sequence of the port grapes to identify optimal harvesting. Winemakers concentrate production in locations where small-batch fermentations are carried out in temperature controlled, bacteria-free conditions.

A new project is Vinescout, a self-propelled, electrically powered vineyard monitoring robot under development by a four-nation pan-European consortium of which Symington Family Estates is one of the partners. The three-year project with the automated robot will help producers in measuring key viticulture parameters such as vine temperature and water levels and overall plant health.

usually drunk straight up. Aged tawnies are blended from wines with a minimum of 10 years aging in barrels and are labeled by the decade.

Ruby ports are often labeled reserve or fine port. With less time in smaller barrels, the wines show bright, red berry flavors. Examples include Graham's Six Grapes and Dow's AJS, Warre's Warrior, and Sandeman Founder's Reserve. Late Bottled Vintages or LBV's are moderately

priced single vintage wines aged in barrel for four to six years and then stored in bottle before selling.

Vintage ports are rare, lush, complex and sophisticated expressions of the wine. Presented only after exceptional harvests, most producers recently declared 2016 as a vintage year. Aged two years in barrel, vintage ports are long-aged in bottle and commonly decanted. Declared vintage port is a tiny fraction of total wine from Douro Valley producers. Symington Family Estates, the largest producer of premium port, sells highly regarded vintage port which represents only one percent of their total production.

In the past twenty years, single-quinta vintage ports have become more popular. Produced from grapes on one quinta, a vineyard farm, the port is produced at outstanding vintages. Quinta do Vesuvio in the Douro Superior, the top vineyard region in the eastern valley near Spain, is an example of a single-quinta port. With great variations in elevation, the grapes are grown in environmentally diverse farm. Owned by the Symington family with roots in Britain and Portugal, the company saw the importance of owning vineyards to optimize growing conditions and harvesting. Many small growers are now producing excellent single-quinta ports under their own labels.

### GAUGING PORT INTEREST

Fine restaurants have historically stocked vintage ports. At the Plumed Horse, Perisho menus Graham's Vintage from 1977, 2000 and 2011. "We sell bottles mostly to larger groups of 12 or more. Some guests know that eventually I may place vintage selections on the by-the-glass menu — but open bottles don't last long." Ingrao sells bottles mostly for large business gatherings and holiday parties. The Dow's 1985 sold well, he says, and he currently menus Ramos Pinto 1994 on the menu and holds older Graham's Vintages in reserve.

Who orders port? Perisho finds that port continues to appeal to a wide-range of ages — millennials to retirees — and appeals to people from many cultures. In New Jersey, Ingrao educates his sommeliers and encourages them to talk about port. "We want more millennials to be interested in port," he says.

Gareth Tootell, wine director at the Forbes Five Star, AAA Five Diamond Penrose Room at the Broadmoor resort in Colorado Springs, has a particular bond with port. "I'm English, so it's practically written on to my birth certificate that most meals will end with a port of some description. I found more guests in N.Y. open to port than the restaurants where I worked in Calif or here in Colo."

Many guests who know port, adds Tootell, often call for some type of tawny. "Tawnies are the style that holds up best when open, and across the board, it's understood and received better than the rest of the pack."

Perisho agreed with tawnies' role in defining port to many guests. "Demand for tawnies is on the rise. They are more accessible to guests who prefer a sweeter flavor profile."



ABOVE: The "It's a Keeper" cocktail at Sable Kitchen and Bar in Chicago. OPPOSITE, FROM LEFT: Quinta do Vesuvio vintage port; A port flight at Atlantis Reno.

The sommelier at the Atlantis Casino Resort in Reno, N.V., Christian O’Kuinghttons, also observes the shift towards tawnies. “We see a more inquisitive approach to port from Gen Xers and Millennials. Tawnies have become the most approachable of all because they offer a palate appreciation that is more lineal and less aggressive.”

O’Kuinghttons recently launched tawny flights. “As with everything new, our guests experience the sense of excitement that comes with discovering the sometimes subtle differences between the Graham’s 10, 20, 30 and 40-year flights. The response has been overwhelmingly positive to the flights and has served to open our guests’ minds to explore and understand their palates towards fortified wines in general.”

Rubies, a common entry point for port, are popular at Char, Ingrao says. He serves a reserve ruby, Graham’s Six Grapes, to guests ready to try the category. Tootell encourages guests to try LBV ruby ports. “These ports are rich and dark, complex with opulence.”

## PAIRING PORT WITH FOOD

Following traditional practice for dessert pairings, Perisho checks if the food has dark fruit, chocolate or espresso flavors, then recommends a LBV or vintage port. If the desserts highlight to maple or brown sugar flavors, then he suggests a tawny selection.

Tootell stands by traditional port pairings. “Ask the English guy and he’s always going to say cheese. It didn’t matter what type of cheese on the board came at dessert, my family would always order a glass of port.”

At Triple Creek Ranch, Gadbois recommends sharp Manchego or rich, smooth, chocolate balanced with cherry accents and lavender with ruby port. The fruits that come to Tootell’s mind include strawberries and raspberries. At Char, Ingrao looks to cheese-based desserts such a ricotta cheesecake with Graham’s Six Grapes.

With more complex ports such as Dow’s Late Bottled Vintage Port 2011, Gadbois suggests pairing with fragrant cheese, such as Point Reyes blue cheese or a classic gorgonzola. Tootell pairs LBV ports with chocolate desserts such as black forest gateaux.

Tawny ports require a different approach to pairings, says Gadbois. “Tawny port is a wine more suited for



bolder caramelized flavors. Due to its high oxidation levels, it pairs best with nuts, chocolate, honey, and caramel. The high acid of a goat cheese is also balanced better on the palate with a creamy, aged tawny port.” At Atlantis Reno, O’Kuinghttons offers lighter pastries or softer desserts like crème brûlée.

Gadbois sums up the secret of vintage port with food: “Here you want to let the wine be the main show, so an accompaniment of plain dark chocolate would be best.” O’Kuinghttons qualifies that by proposing darker and richer chocolate ganache desserts, while Tootell returns to a classic pairing with Stilton cheese.

Given the delicious way to end a meal or serve as an innovative cocktail, Ingrao says, “port may not be the most in vogue wine, but it will return.”

Rupert Symington is well aware of consumer response to port. “Vintage port remains one of the wines with the greatest ageing potential, something that is at odds with our lifestyle which demands instant gratification and promotes the consumption of wine at far too young an age.”

Yet, he added, “The future of vintage port is bright as there will always be a market for extremely well made, rare wines with heritage — the ultimate relaxation wine. Having a release only every three or four years only increases the excitement.” ■



DEBORAH GROSSMAN IS A SAN FRANCISCO BAY AREA JOURNALIST WHO WRITES ABOUT PEOPLE, PLACES AND PRODUCTS THAT IMPACT THE FOOD AND WINE WORLD.