

Now that cold weather is here with more on the way, family and friends will be together more often than any other time of the year. It's time for port – sweet, fruity, delicious port.

Tradition has it that Port was invented by English sailors who added brandy to red wine they were shipping from Portugal to keep it from spoiling or fermenting too rapidly. Remember, there was no refrigeration and the bottling many times was done in England.

Port is made by separating red wine that is partially fermented, while it still contains most (over 50%) of its grape sugar. It hasn't completed fermentation. This red wine is then mixed with brandy. The brandy is often chilled. This mixing stops the fermentation process. The wine gives the port its color and the wine's tannins help preserve the new mixture known as port.

As a curiosity, most port producers still use treading as a way to maximize the flavors from the grapes and their skins. Treading is done barefoot, thigh deep in wine in a huge stone trough called a "lagar." If you go to Portugal, they'll let you do this. The grape stains (on your feet) last about 1 month.

The best ports are matured in blackened barrels called pipes. These barrels hold as much as 200 gallons of port and will age port for up to 50 years. Three years out of 10 the grapes are good enough to require no blending with other vintages. These years create a "vintage port." Vintage ports are bottled after 2 years in the barrel and then bottle aged for as long as you'd like.

Twenty years would be normal. I've had ports from the 1800's that were still delicious. This is special and unique. It's made in small amounts using the best grapes from the best years. This is also the most expensive port. The rarest form of vintage port is a single Quinta (vineyard) port. This is made from grapes from one single vineyard in one year. The most famous of these is Quinta de Noval National. These are expensive and rare. Don't drink these without 20 years of aging. A Quinta de Noval National 1931 bottle of port sold recently for \$3,000.

Sometimes you'll hear or see the term "tawny." Tawny port can be very interesting, but comes from different vintages that are blended together. This port ages in wood, not the bottle, and is traditionally smoother, more pale and mellower. Aged tawnies are 10, 20, 30 or 40-year tawnies. Tawny slightly chilled is the standard drink of port shippers in Portugal. Try Taylor, Fonseca, or Graham's.

Ports with the label "colheita" (Portuguese for harvest) are wood aged ports from a specific year. They're like tawnies, but from a single year. These were designed to be drunk as soon as they are bottled. The age will be on the bottle. Remember, it's been aged in wood since that date.

If you see the term "ruby" or "branded" ports you have the simplest and least expensive port. It's aged a few years in wood barrels. They're designed to taste fruity, sweet, and simple. Some examples of this port are Fonseca Bin No. 27, Taylor's 4xx, and Cockburn's Special Reserve.

One other term you may see is "late bottled vintage" port. This is port from a single vintage that stays in the barrel for 5-7 years vs. traditional vintage port that stays in the barrel for only 2 years. This additional time in wood makes the wine mellower and reduces the sediment in the wine. These are ready to drink when released.

Vintage ports can be the greatest of all ports, but are problematic. They require lots of age and they throw off a crust or sediment that must be removed prior to drinking. Great vintages are 1963, 1977, 1983, 1985, and 1955, if you can find it. If you can't wait try a late bottled vintage port or a 10, 20, 30 or 40-year old tawny. They're less expensive and ready to drink.

Port matches best with chocolate. They were made to go together. Avoid port with fruits. The acid in the fruit just doesn't work with the sweetness of port. Adjectives that describe port are jammy, blackberry fruit, orange marmalade, cassis fruit, walnuts, almonds, pepper, flowers, tar, and of course, chocolate. Serve port in glasses that offer a wide body and a narrow mouth. The smell of port is half the fun. You must decant your port. It just does so much for the flavors and in vintage port's case, gets rids of the sediment. Port can last in a closed decanter for weeks, but why wait that long to finish it?

Port is designed to be the finish for the night, the last flavor you take to bed. The finish to a wonderful meal. John Milton said in 1670, "Wine...one sip of this will bathe the drooping spirits in delight beyond the bliss of dreams. Be wise and taste" or make a memory.