

The Dawn of Tawny

AMONG A PROFUSION OF STYLES, THE ROBUST GROWTH OF AGED TAWNIES KEEPS THE PORT CATEGORY THRIVING

by Timothy Moriarty

“You do hear people say, ‘Oh I don’t drink as much port as I used to’, but that’s in contradiction to what is actually happening. Overall, the market is very healthy, particularly in the U.S.” That’s how Rupert Symington, the joint Managing Director of Symington Family Estates, sums up the situation with port and the American consumer.

Port-style wines are being produced in California, Australia, South Africa and elsewhere; they take up a good portion of sales in the category due to their low price point. This report is concerned solely with the fortified wines from Portugal’s Douro Valley.

The region has undergone dramatic changes in the past decades. After Portugal joined the European Union in 1986, a host of new regulations—from health and safety to minimum wage—drove up the cost of wine production in the Douro. Then, the economic slowdown worldwide has drastically affected sales, particularly of pricey vintage ports in its traditional markets, such as France and Great Britain. “The overall port market worldwide peaked at 10.5 million nine-litre cases, seven years or so ago,” says Symington. “Since then we have lost about a million cases. It’s a serious loss, but it’s completely accountable by the increasing cost of producing grapes in the Douro.”

Volume of production has been steady, however, and there has been a conscious drive to increase quality through improved methods in the vineyard as well as a marked increase in the quality of the neutral spirit that fortifies the wines. “There is an overall shift from quantity to quality, says Adrian Bridge, Managing Director of Taylor Fladgate and CEO of the Fladgate Partnership, also representing the wines of Croft and Fonseca.



PHOTO: DOUG YOUNG

Chris Adams, the CEO of New York-based Sherry-Lehmann Wine & Spirits. “With port you have to be patient. [Now] there’s less need to put it down in your cellar, because there’s approachability at a younger age.”



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In 2012, shipments of premium ports declined slightly, while shipments to the U.S. of “standard” port wines increased by 7.6%.

These numbers suit the producers just fine. “We can’t always meet demand due to the long storage. We want smooth, steady growth, not huge jumps,” says Robert Bower.

While vintage sales have been static or declining, the fastest growing port style in the U.S. market is aged tawny. The U.S. is the top aged tawny market in the world.

It is fortunate for the Douro that, at least in the U.S., port lovers have discovered tawnies at a time when the region’s traditional customer—collectors with the patience and financial means to age bottles in cool cellars—ebbs. “The future is bright,” sums up Chris Adams, “but there’s some heavy lifting to do.”

Rupert Symington, joint Managing Director of Symington Family Estates.

The improvement in the neutral spirit, in particular, has made the wines more drinkable earlier, at a time when the number of collectors—who have the patience and facility to store wines for decades—is declining.

Vintage ports remain “the primary stamp of identity for port houses,” says Robert Bower, Sales and Export Manager for the Fladgate Partnership. But, he adds, “There is now less emphasis on vintage port.”

“There’s less of an appetite among younger drinkers to be collectors,” agrees Chris Adams, CEO of New York-based Sherry-Lehmann Wine & Spirits. “With port you have to be patient. [Now] there’s less need to put it down in your cellar, because there’s approachability at a younger age.”

In 2011, according to the IVDP (Instituto dos Vinhos do Douro e Porto), total exports to the U.S., in terms of sales, increased by 8% over the previous year. The premium port category (reserves, LBV, vintage and aged tawnies) increased 15%.



Adrian Bridge, Managing Director of Taylor Fladgate and CEO of the Fladgate Partnership.

Here's a look at the major types of port and examples of each.

VINTAGE

Produced only in exceptional years (traditionally, three times a decade, maximum), using only the finest fruit from that year and bottled as a single vintage, not a blend across several years, as is common in the Douro. Aged in casks for two years, then bottled and aged for another five to 50 years. Simple or unrewarding when young, growing in complexity and mellowing as they age.

"What have we sold the most of, we've had the most success with '83 and '03," says Chris Adams of Sherry-Lehmann. "They're not all that expensive relative to what you would typically expect to pay for a great bottle of wine."

As to the most recently declared vintage: "Vintage '09 was a warm year," says Robert Bower. Despite the narrow harvest window, the '09s are showing "great acidity and balance. Not flabby at all."

Best-selling vintage wines at Sherry-Lehmann:

PHOTO: DOUG YOUNG



Warre's 1983 Vintage Port Assertive violet and berry aromatics. Full-bodied. Sweet berry fruit and herbal notes on the palate. Medium finish.

Croft 2009 Vintage Port Blueberry and plum on the nose, a touch of eucalyptus and tobacco. Medium-bodied, silky tannins and moderate acidity framing cassis, berries and spice. Acidity lifts the jammy finish. Best 2020 through 2050.

Fonseca 2009 Vintage Port On the nose, fig, plum, spice and a touch of smoke. Full-bodied in the mouth. Grippy tannins around dark fruit, chocolate and fig. Tannins persist on the long, jammy finish. Best 2016 to 2038.

LATE BOTTLED VINTAGE (LBV)

Single-vintage, often from a single vineyard. Aged in casks for about four years before being bottled. More mellow from the cask aging but retaining the youthful vibrancy, fruit and color of a young vintage port. The less expensive alternative to vintage.

Robert Bower of the Fladgate Partnership tries to simplify styles, as even professionals in retail and on premise can have trouble untangling the complexities of this category.

He likes to say, "LBV for complexity, reserves for intensity. If you want something with a bit more breadth of flavor, you drink late bottled vintage."

Best-selling LBVs at Sherry-Lehmann:

Taylor 2007 Late Bottled Vintage Port Black currant and plum on the nose is followed on the palate. Tannins are silky and help frame the chocolate and fig notes.

Dow's 2007 Late Bottled Vintage Port Cassis, dark fruits and spice on the nose. The currant note continues on the full-bodied palate, joining berry fruits and chocolate. Long finish, medium dry.



RUBY

A blend of relatively lighter wines from several recent vintages; less dense, less intense, simpler, fruity wines.

Best-selling Ruby at Sherry-Lehmann:

Fonseca Bin No. 27 Vintage Character Cherry, smoke and a hint of spice on the nose. The wine is rich, powerful, lush, earthy and fruity on the palate, with spice and mocha accents. A streak of acidity enlivens the fruit, and there is heat on the finish.



PHOTO: DOUG YOUNG



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TAWNY

Aged in oak barrels and subjected to slow, controlled oxidation, which imparts the characteristic color and also a distinctly nutty-dried fruit-fig flavor. Named for the average age of the vintage-blended wines: 10-, 20-, 30- and 40-year. "Ten- and 20-year tawnies are our fastest-moving items," says Chris Adams. "They operate at a different price point and different style."

Best-selling tawnies at Sherry-Lehmann:

Fonseca 20 Year Old Tawny Port Plums, toffee, spice and coffee on the nose are echoed on the palate. Medium-bodied and silky in the mouth.

Sandeman 20 Year Old Tawny Port Honey, nut, maple and citrus on the nose and in the mouth, with lively citrus and spice accents and a vanilla undertone in a soft tannic embrace. ■■

OTHER CATEGORIES

Single quinta vintage port is made in undeclared years, but from fruit from a single estate—the very best estates. Less expensive and less complex than vintage ports and generally needing less aging to show their best.

Colheita port is a hybrid of vintage and tawny: wines from a single vintage are aged in wood for a minimum seven years, offering a range of colors and flavors.

White port is classified in three levels, but even seco (dry) is sweet on the palate. Meio seco (medium dry) and doce are very sweet.

Vintage character ports are blends of young wines—aged four to six years, maximum, then filtered and bottled.

Crusted port is not filtered before bottling, and there is considerable sediment in each bottle. Must be decanted.

Tips on Selling More Port

At the retail level, it's straightforward. Says Chris Adams: "Our success in selling it is in having educated sales people. We have them taste the wines. With new vintages there's always something to talk about and address."

In restaurants, it's trickier because once a bottle is opened, a good ten pours need to be sold in a few days or there is a loss. Plus, there is the perceived hassle of decanting. But Rupert Symington has some ideas: "I claim authorship of this. We call it 'vintage port for the weekend.' During the staff meeting, encourage servers when they're announcing specials to offer guests a chance to reserve a glass of this very special vintage port. It just works so well, you wouldn't believe it. They get through the bottle in two days.

"In terms of tawnies, what we've done," continues Symington. "We recommend a simple pairing of Grahams 20 Year Old and dessert. Offer a complimentary half-ounce pour with, say, the chocolate cake. Without exception the guest who gets the pour will share it, and more glasses will be sold. They wouldn't order it, but if it comes and they like it, they will order more. It's more effective than just listing the ports on the dessert menu.

