

James The Sommelier - Dessert and Digestif Wines - Port

'Wine honors the soul, so honor it with yours.'

Port needs no introduction to the savvy. If Cabernet Sauvignon can be compared to a prize fighter, tough but brilliant, Pinot Noir to a seductress, sexy and intoxicating, Chardonnay to a chameleon, always changing, then Port assumes the guise of something far humbler- a merchant. The word Port comes from 'Porto', the port where it was traded by merchants. Its name then certainly has a sense of place. Yes, a merchant- from an established family whose fame precedes them. Like any member of an influential family, it has an impressive family history and, like any merchant traveler, it has left its traditions as a mark of its presence. A portly (excuse the pun) merchant traveler, interesting and humble as to its historic origins.

Believe me when I say that it is humble. Not often is there something in the world that carries such a privileged status without the comparative fame; Port, or the Duero region in Portugal that Port is from, is the third oldest protected wine region in the world dating back to 1756. This is a tall order considering that the most famous regional protection system in the world, the French AOC, was first introduced a full hundred years later. The French authority over wine continues to dwindle.

But Port isn't a wine, really. Oh yes it is. It is made from wine grapes. The only thing that changes its taste so drastically is that it is 'fortified,' meaning that a neutral grape spirit, aguardente, is added to stop the fermentation process and give it longer life while ageing. It also boosts the residual sugar and the alcohol content giving Port its sweeter and stronger taste.

As with all of the wine-based beverages, the question arises as to how and why it was produced. Champagne was discovered by accident by the jolly and eccentric Dom Perignon, the Bordeaux blend was a precautionary measure for the French and Port also has its own little story. During the early 1700s, while England was at war with France, the French stopped exporting French wines to England (nobody ever plays fair in war!). Rather than be beaten, the English made an agreement to import Portuguese wines instead and at low duty (the Brits always did like the Portuguese). Problems ensued over the transport, as the journey was considerably longer than that to France, and when the wines arrived they were often spoiled. Eureka! The wine was fortified to prolong its life and Port was invented. Ever since then it became a prominent drink in the British army, air force and navy and was used as the drink to toast the monarch at formal dinners.

So its status in the wine community is definitely high. But what does that mean when serving it. Well, if it is a vintage port, which most are, the general trend is that the older it is the quicker it must be drunk after opening (no complaints there then). Also, the older the port the more likely it has 'crusted' (or produced sediment in the bottle) and therefore must be decanted. Due to its strong and sweet taste, Port must be drunk out of a Port glass, something akin to a sherry glass, a mini-me version of a wine glass.

Lastly, there are traditions to drinking it. The general rule to drinking it is that once the bottle is decanted the Port must be passed to the left and poured from the right, continuing in the clockwise motion until the decanter is finished. At no point must the decanter stay rested on the table or be held up by one person. If it is, a coded prompt is recited regarding the voracious nature of a certain Bishop of Norwich. Don't ask!

Tips: Pour slowly into the decanter to avoid any sediment escaping. A typical vintage Port must be finished within two days.

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George Town, Penang

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