

WHEN IT COMES TO FORTIFIED WINE,
RICHARD CARLETON HACKER IS OUR

Port

Authority

photos by Richard Carleton Hacker

Without a doubt, port is one of our industry's most misunderstood wines, which is rather ironic, considering it has been a defined appellation since 1756. Although Europeans—most notably the British and French—embraced port early on, America has lagged behind, except when it comes to vintage ports, where we are the world's second biggest buyers, right after

England. Vintage port, however, only accounts for two percent of port's total production, which leaves a lot of room for increased sales. But trying to sell an on-premise glass or off-premise bottle is often a challenge. The fact that port is a fortified wine loses its relevancy when your customers may not know what a fortified wine is.

Ports of Call

"It's unfortunate that there's not that much of a call for port, because the wines are incredible," says Jason Smith, MS, Director of Wine for Bellagio, Las Vegas. "At Bellagio we have older vintages going back to 1955, plus we pour the 1985 Dow's by the glass for \$30. And the LBVs (Late Bottle Vintages) are excellent values because for a lower price point you can enjoy a glass of port with dinner. For example, seared foie gras with cherry chutney would be excellent with a ruby-styled port. Personally, I lean towards the 20 year old tawnies as my 'go-to' ports; I like the softer complexity and the nuttiness they offer."

Unfortunately, many customers have an unfavorably biased concept of port based upon misguided experiences with the cheap, sugary varieties of yesteryear, or clandestine

Like any fine wine, this Taylor's 20 Year Old Tawny, has developed deep color and fine legs.



Three different takes of Symington vintage ports (left to right): Graham's 1977 vintage was universally declared and is ready to drink, although it will continue aging; Warre's 1983 is an excellent wine but was not universally declared, so it may sometimes be obtained at better prices than more widely-known vintages; Dow's 1900 was an exceptional year, but has already peaked, which is why the bottle is empty. The trick in storing vintage ports is knowing when to open them.



youthful encounters with their mother's cooking wines. These prejudices are difficult for sommeliers and off-premise sales people to overcome, and aren't helped by the fact some menus still refer to ports as "stickies." To help dispel these misconceptions, Noah Dranow, Lead Sommelier at Michael Mina's Bourbon Steak in San Francisco, offers his customers these simple but effective descriptions of the two basic port categories:

"I start out by telling guests that a tawny port is a wine that spends most of its life in a barrel and is bottled when it's ready to drink. It has caramelized,

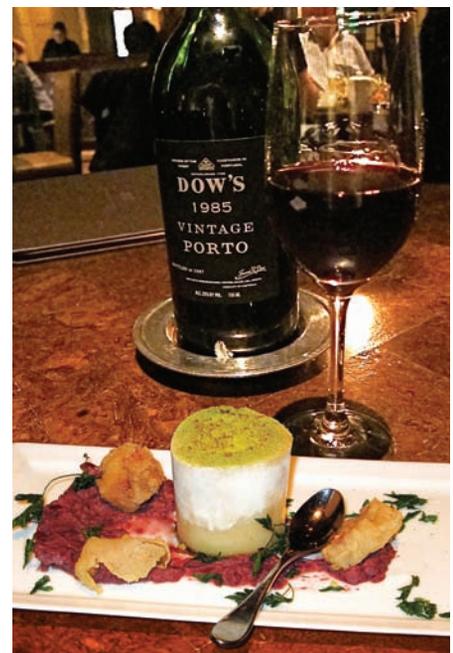
nutty, and dried fruit notes," he says. "Rubies, on the other hand, spend most of their lives in the bottle, are primary in fruit characteristics and tend to have a bit more structure. I currently have three ports I pour by the glass, a **Taylor's 20 Year Old Tawny**, a **2005 Quinta do Crasto LBV** that Mishi Grogan from Epic Wines brought to my attention and a **1985 Dow's**. I also have a handful of older vintages that I sell by the bottle. Normally a bottle of vintage port only makes sense for a larger party, but I had this '85 Dow's opened one evening when three gentlemen came in and asked me about vintage

port. I hadn't put this on the list, but I sold them each a glass. They loved it so much they each ordered another glass."

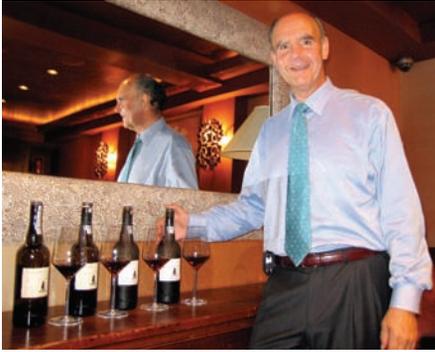
Portly Pairings

Indeed, although vintage ports and single-quinta vintages (a vintage port from just one quinta or vineyard, similar to a single-estate vintage wine) can age in bottles for decades, once opened their lifespans are dramatically shortened to 24 hours—which translates into a maximum of two nights behind the bar—assuming techniques such as argon gas or a vacuum pump are used to keep these fragile wines from oxidizing. LBVs, tawnies and vintage character or proprietary ruby ports such as **Graham's Six Grapes**, **Cockburn's Special Reserve**, **Fonseca Bin No. 27**, and **Sandeman's Founder's Reserve** are much more forgiving, and can be kept up to three weeks after opening, again assuming they are sealed each night to keep air out.

"One way I'm able to keep a variety of different port styles on the menu is to utilize them in our three, five, or nine port and wine pairings, where it's basically my choice as to what wines go with



Pairing port with food at Michael Mina's Bourbon Steak in San Francisco, the author matched a Dow's 1985 Vintage with Chef Omri Aflalo's succulent Bone Marrow Custard. The creamy richness of the baked bone marrow dovetailed perfectly with the '85 Dow's thick carpet of blackberries, cherries, and chocolate.



George Sandeman is the seventh generation of the House of Sandeman, which was founded in 1790 and was the first to vintage-date ports. Their Vau Vintage is meant to be drunk younger than most vintages, and George is a big fan of his Founder's Reserve vintage-style port.



Rupert Symington, fourth generation and joint CEO of the founding Symington Family Estates, with a bottle of vintage character Graham's Six Grapes. "It's a massive, overextracted fruit bomb," he says, "a ruby port on steroids!"

which course," says Cameron Russell, Director of Wines for Gordon Ramsay at The London, West Hollywood. "That means I can have these ports open and not worry about them going bad, especially the vintage ports. In fact, on a busy night where I might do as many as 15 wine pairings I might even suggest a vintage port for a table of two, because we do so many wine pairings here. And on a high-end wine pairing, I can package in a port with a cheese plate or with certain desserts."

As one of the most elegant, full-bodied and flavorful wines, vintage-style ports can easily serve as a before dinner cocktail, as well as an accompaniment to a full-flavored main such as short ribs or osso buco, in which case I've always felt it should be served in a red wine glass. After all, it is a big, heavy red. But typically port is

Declaring Warre's

Founded in 1670, Warre's is truly unique. Not only is it the oldest British port shipper in Portugal, it was the first to build lodges for aging ports at Vila Nova de Gaia. Warre's is also one of the few port houses that maintains the traditional art of foot-treading grapes in stone lagars. But while preserving its 342-year heritage, Warre's is not mired in the past. In 1996, to offset a growing lack of manpower, they pioneered robotic treading machines.

In addition, unlike other ports in the Symington Family Estates (handled by Premium Port Wines in San Francisco), Warre's is distributed by Vineyard Brands, headquartered in Birmingham, Alabama. This represents a relationship that began with the founding of Vineyard Brands in 1971 by Robert Haas, and James Symington (father of Rupert Symington, current joint CEO of this port dynasty).

Of their four quintas on the Upper Douro, plus two others owned by the Symington family, Warre's state-of-the-art Quinta da Cavadinha includes a vineyard dedicated to viticultural research. The result is a portfolio of wines rich in color, texture and taste.

"All of the major Symington Port Brands fall into the same general price, taste profile and demographic positioning," says Jerry Neff, President of Vineyard Brands since 1990. "The difference among them is subtle stylistic characteristics and some of the individual offerings of non-vintage ports identified with each brand. Warre's is a traditional style. Of course, the iconic **Warre's Warrior**, as well as the more recent **Otima 10 Year Old** and **Otima 20 Year Old** tawnies, are highly regarded and widely known for quality and value."

Indeed, the luxuriously rich Warre's Warrior was once the favorite of the Duke of Wellington and remains the brand's best-selling port. On the other hand, sleekly packaged Otima 10 and 20 Year Old tawnies are lighter in style than traditional tawnies. And **Warre's Late Bottle Vintages** are one of the few "traditional-style" LBVs that will continue to age in the bottle—uncorking the 2001 vintage unleashes volumes of tart cherries and spicy cedar. On the other hand, the current **Warre's 2007 Vintage** port, while thick with plums, is still young, but holds an enticing promise of what another ten to 15 years will bring. —R.C.H.



thought of as a digestif, or is suggested to complement a dessert.

"Our vanilla budino dessert," says Darius Allyn, MS, Sommelier at Scarpetta at the Montage, Beverly Hills, "has a caramelized, toffee undertone, which really associates itself with the tawny styles of port that we pour, such as **Grahams 20 Year Old**, as well as their 30 and 40 Year Old. Likewise, when it comes to our chocolate-based desserts, it's one of those classic things to easily sell one of the more vintage-

based or ruby-style ports."

While port—specifically with cigars, chocolate or cheeses—is traditional, sometimes it is the tradition of port itself that is intimidating to the uninitiated, getting in the way of port's wider acceptance and greater potential sales before and during dinner, in addition to after the meal.

Demystifying Port: The Symington Approach

"Port shippers in the past have



The terraced vineyards along the Upper Douro.



Natasha Bridge, Chief Blender for The Fladgate Partnership (Taylor Fladgate, Fonseca and Croft), and her husband Adrian Bridge, The Fladgate Partnership's Managing Director. The city of Vila Nova de Gaia is in the background.

told the story of port in terms of its history, and the traditions of serving," says Rupert Symington, fourth generation of the founding Symington family, port shippers since 1882. With cousins Johnny and Paul, he is joint CEO and responsible for Symington Family Estates sales in North America. Their premium port brands include Graham's, Warre's, Dow's and Cockburn's, among others, and together account for more than a third of all the premium port sold in the world.

"For example, these traditions hold that you've always got to pass the port

decanter to the left, and should open old vintage bottles with port tongs. It's great folklore, but it doesn't lend itself to the modern consumer," says Symington. "I mean, you can't expect the modern consumer to go around with red hot port tongs or to always pass a bottle of port to the left. So what I'm trying to do is talk to people about how to enjoy port, and when. My message is that, whereas champagne is for celebration, port is the ultimate relaxation wine."

Towards this goal, Symington enthusiastically extols the virtues of two of his family's most popular vintage-

character, or reserve, ports: Graham's Six Grapes and Cockburn's Special Reserve. Six Grapes was named for the six distinctive "grape bunch" stampings on casks that held superior wines made from the same varieties used in Graham's vintage ports, specifically Touriga Nacional, Touriga Franca, Tinta Roriz, Tinta Barroca, Tinta Amarela and Tinto Cão. Cockburn's (pronounced *KOH-burnz*) was purchased from Beam Global Spirits & Wine by the Symington family in 2010 and the Special Reserve has now been brought back in its fuller, meatier style and in a sleeker embossed bottle reminiscent of the original design.

Interestingly, Cockburn's started the reserve port category in 1969, which made vintage-style port affordable for the first time. In 1977—a vintage year that was widely declared by the majority of port houses—Cockburn's raised eyebrows by not releasing a 1977 vintage port, opting to use their vintage-quality grapes for their Special Reserve instead. Today, special reserve ports—which also include **Dow's Trademark**, **Warre's Warrior** and **Smith Woodhouse Lodge Reserve**—represent some of the best bargains in port, as they are affordably priced (typically in the \$20 range), offer the deep plum and cherry-grape flavors of vintage ports (although without the same degree of depth), and like LBVs are ready to drink, require no decanting, and can be kept for weeks after opening.

"Port is actually the only wine that you can open on a Wednesday and enjoy on a Wednesday night weeks later, without any spoilage," says Symington. "And that's a huge plus."

Tasting the young, almost brash fruitiness of best-selling Graham's Six Grapes and the soft velvet sophistication of Cockburn's Special Reserve side-by-side brings out their notable differences. "Cockburn's Special Reserve spends four to five years in wood, whereas Six Grapes spends two to three years in wood," says Symington. "Six Grapes is all about young, big extracted blueberry fruit and blackberries. It's the Zinfandel of port. But Special Reserve is all about cask finish, with a little drier woodiness, more like an aged Pinot Noir. And it's made with a little riper, more mature fruit."

As for the future of port, Symington



Cameron Russell, Director of Wines for Gordon Ramsay at The London, West Hollywood, pours a Ramos Pinto 10 Year Old Tawny from Quinta de Ervamoira.

has these observations: “Today, we’re out-marketed in dollars by almost every other wine and spirits category. I’m constantly bombarded on my various trips with people saying, ‘Oh you must be worried because people aren’t drinking as much port as they used to.’ But the reality is, port was up around 12 percent last year in the U.S., where it was over 400,000 cases. Within that, our fastest growing category is tawny ports. In 1991, one bottle in ten was a tawny. Now it’s one bottle in four.

“Our second fastest growing category is reserve rubies. As for vintage ports, there will be no 2010 vintage, but so far, 2011 is looking fantastic. In fact, we’ve managed to maintain our high-end vintages while perfecting our middle tier of ports and keeping them affordable. So, if we’re selling over 400,000 cases compared with 350,000 cases three years ago and it’s going up, do I worry that people aren’t drinking enough? No. In fact, I don’t mind if people don’t buy any more port, because we can only produce so much. What I don’t want is for them to buy *less*.”

When and Where Is **Port** Port?

If imitation is the sincerest form of flattery, Portugal should be flattered indeed. Even though “port” is a European Union Protected Designation of Origin, no fewer than six other countries, including South Africa, Australia, Canada, India, Argentina and the United States, produce “port”—or, in the interest of accuracy, port-style wines. Of course, just as cognac can only be made in the Cognac region of France, true port can only be made in Portugal.

Few non-port ports possess the same weighty mouthfeel of true port, but they do have a distinctive style and depth not found in other red wines. Being brandy-enhanced, the alcohol content is higher than even the meatiest Napa Cabs—usually around 19%, still under the standard 20% of ports. Even when Portuguese grapes are used, the wines are not identical, due to differences in soil. Outside of Portuguese varieties, grapes of choice are often Syrah, Petite Sirah or Zinfandel.

Cabernet and Syrah are blended for the **Halter Ranch 2005 El Pecado** (“sin” in Spanish, because, says winemaker Kevin Sass, “It’s sinfully good”), but the 2006 release, which they label a “dessert wine,” is all Syrah. Like many domestic ports, the **Charles Krug Lot XV Zinfandel Port**, a blend of fifteen vintages that includes six percent Petite Sirah, is



offered in practical 375-ml. bottles. In Alexander Valley, John and Katrina Staten make the estate bottled **Field Stone Staten Family Reserve Port** from 100-year-old Petite Sirah vines.

The spicy chocolate-cherry **Frank Family Vineyards Zinfandel Port** has spent 40 months in barrels. In the heart of California’s Gold Rush country, Trinchero Family Estates produces the raisin- and coffee-coated **Terra d’Oro Zinfandel Port**, which owes its complexity to a solera system and aging in French, American and Hungarian oak. And when Tony Terlato and family purchased Rutherford Hill winery in 1992, they acquired red wines that age exceptionally well and continue that tradition with their current **Rutherford Hill 2006 Zinfandel Port**.

All of which prompted Rupert Symington to observe, “It’s not coincidental that many major California winemakers are now making port-style wines.”
—R.C.H. ■■