
COCKTAIL CORNER

THIS WEEK: PORT WINE

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Everyone is a wine expert these days. With terms like "pinot" and "sauvignon" becoming more commonplace in our vineyard vernacular, we aren't just limited to merlot or chardonnay with our meals anymore.

Wine bars are popping up all over the place, and movies like "Sideways" have opened our eyes to the wide world of wine. But not entirely. There's still one overlooked type that can be had as an aperitif or with dessert: Port.

This week we'll school our palates on the fortified drink that, although primarily an acquired taste, has been complementing meals and serving as a nightcap for centuries.

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WHAT EXACTLY IS PORT?

Purists will say that, unless it comes from the region of Champagne in France, it's just sparkling wine. The Portuguese also feel the same way about their Port, referring to all others simply as "port wine."

Although we're not purists (we're simple drinkers at Spark), we must give Portugal, in particular the city of Oporto, the props for making this beverage since the 15th century.

The wine itself typically has a thicker, richer and sweeter flavor than other wines, due to the addition of distilled grape spirits to fortify the wine and halt fermentation before all the sugar is converted to alcohol.

Huh? I'm drunk on definitions.

In layman terms, the alcohol is added to the wine in the form of a grape spirit (cognac and brandy in particular) to fortify, or preserve, the wine, killing the yeast and leaving residual sugars. Hence, the higher alcohol content and sweet flavor.

Enough of the chemistry lesson. Let's get to sipping.

OUR EXPERT

We met with Tom Hudson, owner of Domaine Hudson Wine Bar in Wilmington, who recently visited Portugal with his wife in order to get the hands-on experience and learn more about the origins of the beverage.

"We traveled up the Duoro River, just north of the town of Oporto where port was first made, and later discovered by Eastern Europeans," Tom said. "And we found that by adding the likes of brandy and other spirits, the table wine could be



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Tom Hudson of Domaine Hudson.

transported from place to place without spoiling. The alcohol basically stabilizes the wine."

This addition of alcohol lends to the richer and sweeter taste of port, almost giving it twice the flavor of a generic red wine. And although the process was originally set in motion simply as a preservative, it has become an acquired taste the world over.

"Most people are first drawn to port because of the social aspect," Tom said. "You have a small taste of a concentrated flavor and it's almost like having two glasses of wine in one."

We asked Tom, because of its complexity, what foods would he recommend to complement a glass of port?

"Something that's rich and can stand up to the wine. Anything chocolate, or hearty cheeses, like bleu, work really well."

PORTS OF CALL

For what's available on the liquor store shelf, we spoke with Pete Missimer of Total Wines & More on Limestone Road, who gave us an idea of some of the better ports to go with, depending on style, price and, as he put it, "to keep you away from the jug wine."

Ruby: The most basic and least expensive style, it's a blend of several harvests that spends two to three years in steel or wood before bottling. It can be used in cooking or to make cocktails.

Pete's pick: Sandeman's, \$11.99. "It's a very comfortable entry level port to get you started."

Aged Tawny: Aged roughly 10 to 20 years, the best tawnys acquire a pale amber color from the wood aging and their flavor is drier and nuttier.

Pete's pick: Quinta de Ventozelo, \$27.99. "An excellent quinta (from one vineyard) that's aged 10 years."

Late Bottled Vintage (LBV): The product of a single vintage left in wood four to six years and then filtered before bottling.

Pete's pick: Offley, \$17.99. "A nice 2000 LBV that drinks really well."

Vintage Port: The finest and most expensive of port styles, accounting for about 2 percent of the world's production, this wine may take 15 to 50 years before reaching drinking maturity.

Pete's pick: 1994 Osborne, \$59.99, "From one of the best vintages in recent history. It's young, but ready to drink now."