

SNOW ON WINE

New Port for Youth
New Old Port for the Mature
Any Old Port for Me



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September 2022

Port wine always seems to be confusing to understand. However, learning the five basic types of Port, what each is like, and how soon after purchase each one is drinkable solves the mystery.

Ruby, Tawny, Vintage, LBV (late bottled vintage) and **Colheita**. These are the five (although there are at least seven sub-classifications, which in my humble opinion add confusion not clarity) and in the U.S. market you rarely see anything other than those five. Throughout the world there are many wines made in a “Port like style”. But only that from the **Duoro River Valley in Portugal** is the true Port Wine that we are discussing now. Traditionally the Port houses were (and most still are) in Villa Gaia de Nova, across the port from the city of Porto. Back in the day the new wine rode in barrels through treacherous rapids on a one-way voyage in small boats to the Port houses where blending, ageing and bottling occurred. Today high dams with locks, better roads and railways mean a calmer transit.



Port is of course **Fortified**. By this we don’t mean big guns and embattlements defending a seaport. Fortified wines include Port, Sherry and Madeira, and have in common that “neutral wine spirits” or as I like to say, “cheap brandy” are added to the fermenting grape must to “murder” the yeast beasts, stopping the fermentation early. This results in a lot of residual sugar, and lots of alcohol - a whopping 20%. And the favored grapes of Port, **Touriga Nacional** and **Touriga Francesca**, have high levels of tannin. Acid is also abundant due to cool nights in many parts of the Duoro Valley.

In past “Snow on Wine’s” we have pointed out that sugar, acid, alcohol and tannin are the four natural preservatives in wine. White table wines can have sugar, acid, and alcohol in varying amounts. Reds have tannin and acid, but most are fermented dry so all sugar is converted to alcohol. But Port has all four and in large amount. This puts the OLD into Port. It can age beautifully for much longer than any other wine, and without age to soften all the tannin and acid can be quite harsh. Even today, Vintage Port from the 1880’s, 90’s, and early 1900’s drinks beautifully.



Throughout the wine world vintage is simply the year in which the grapes were harvested. In the Duoro, it takes on a new meaning. “Vintage Years” are declared when the crop is especially fine, typically 4 or 5 years in a decade. Only grapes from a declared Vintage may go into Vintage Port, LBV, or Colheita. Wine from non-Vintage years go into Ruby Port and Tawny Port. Port houses will blend several non-Vintage years, to produce a consistent flavor typical for their own Ruby and Tawny.

Vintage Port is fermented, fortified and then aged in casks for only 12 to 18 months, then bottled. It usually requires at least two decades before it starts to become drinkable. Early on it is fruity and quite ruby red. Over many decades the color fades to tawny and the flavors become more complex with tobacco, leather and nut like tones.

To enjoy Vintage Port, buying in your youth, or inheriting from a father who did so are ways to experience the whole spectrum of Vintage Port. But the simple way is to buy Ruby Port which is made to resemble a youthful Vintage Port, or Tawny Port which resembles one after many decades of age. The aging has already been done. Drinkable immediately after purchase, this is “New Old Port”. And with Tawny one can buy 10, 20, 30 and 40 year bottles. This means that although several vintages are blended in, the average age is that stated.

During those years the wine sits in port casks, and once a year the wine is racked into big cement vats, all the sediment washed out of the casks and the casks refilled. Neither Ruby or Tawny have the full wonderful complexity and depth of a Vintage Port, but they are quite delicious, especially with various cheeses or fruits as a desert. *Or cigars, as the case has been made. If you can get your hands on a 20 or 30 year old port, that should pair well with a cigar. The complexities of those ports and the oak influence will complement a fuller bodied cigar [EDITORS NOTE].*



Now what about **LBV**. It is made like Ruby port, but only from a specific declared Vintage. It's beginning is just like the Vintage Port, but it is kept in casks for longer - three to five years. When released it is quite ready to drink but will continue to evolve and age in the bottle for a decade. This is ritzy Ruby.



And finally **Colheita**. All the grapes are from a declared Vintage but made just like a Tawny. So ready to drink on release, already aged in wood, so no reason to age further. Just a more complex and interesting Tawny that anyone can enjoy immediately, without inheriting a cellar.



For me, any “ole” Port in a storm. Yes, I put away some Vintage Port in my 40's and 50's. It is all still quite Ruby like but so good, and I hope to live to see some of it become a little Tawny. Some LBV has graced my cellar and I found it will improve in the bottle for several years. But you can just go to a specialty wine store and get started with a Ruby and a 10 year Tawny. If you find it pleasing, try some different Port Houses (Grahams, Taylor's, Ferreira, Croft and Kopke are good ones).

And a storm isn't necessary, but when that wind is howling, a good Port and some Stilton cheese are a comfort.

