

Port, the Other Red Wine

As the days shorten and the air begins to chill, a subtle change occurs in my wine preferences.

You know how a well chilled glass of Pinot Grigio suits a hot summer afternoon? Port is that to a roaring fireplace on a cold night and so much more. Try it with a wedge of Stilton-Cheddar. The sharp flavor cheeses pair perfectly with the mellowness of a good Port.



Being half Portuguese, the love of Porto, as it is known in Portugal – comes naturally. To others, it is an acquired taste. Once you are hooked, you'll never look back. Known as a dessert wine, it is worshipped by some, shunned by others largely due to ignorance of the pleasure that awaits them.

Port is fortified wine, simple as that. It was named after the seaport city of Porto in the late 1600s. Up the river in the Douro Valley of Portugal, five grapes are traditionally used for the majority of Port produced. They have names you probably won't recognize: Touriga Nacional, Touriga Franca, Tinta Roriz, Tinta Barroca and Tinto Cão.

And while these five are a mouthful, there are nearly 80 red and white varietals on the specific list created by the Portuguese Government in 1940 that may be used to create their Porto wines.

In California, many winemakers are drawn to single varietal Ports. Port style wines can be created from a multitude of grape varieties, from Chardonnay and Sauvignon Blanc to Petite Sirah and Cinsault. White Ports are increasingly popular.

Port retains its color by spending all or most of its life in stainless steel. Tawny Port is made when the wine oxidizes in the barrel aging a minimum of two years. The finished product is a rich honey brown that bears no resemblance to either red or white grapes. Vintage Port spends years with the winemaker. It is a delicate balance of stainless and oak with the goal being a rich, dense ruby color and smooth mellow flavors.

Port style wines are made by adding a distilled grape spirit to fortify the wine and halt fermentation before all sugar is converted to alcohol. The resulting wine is rich and sweet, generally with 19-20% alcohol.

For many years, Marshall Stuart has crafted a Vintage Port from the highest quality Zinfandel and the release of the 2008 is no exception. It is single vintage and bottled after three years in French Oak. The aromas of dark chocolate, blackberry and caramel meld with a hint of hazelnut and as usual with Stuart Cellars' Vintage Ports, can be aged for many years.

If you are like me, you have a cache of Stuart Cellars Port. Mine goes back to 1998. Ports take on a rich raisin-date flavor as they age. While I like this style, I also adore it when newly released. It goes well with the holiday season and is the perfect finish to any night. Do what I do and buy a case. Of course you'll give a few of them away as Christmas presents... wink!