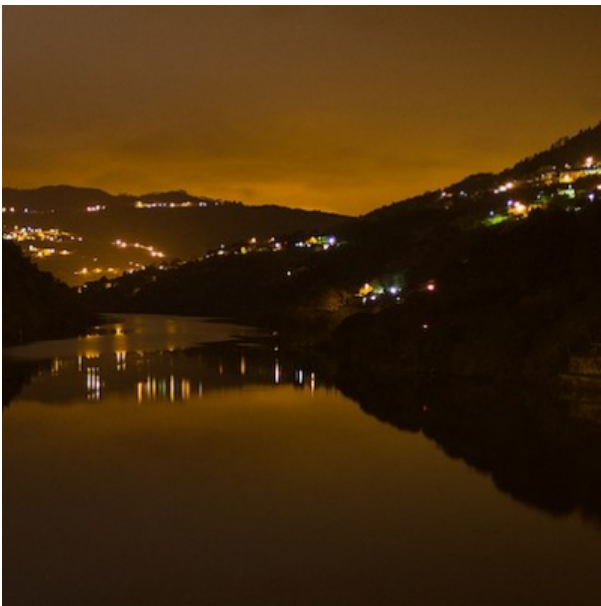




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Port - the perfect nightcap



A shorter version of this article is published by the Financial Times, in an issue of the magazine whose theme this week is sleep.

Wine and sleep – perfect bedfellows, so to speak. There is a small handful of types of wine that seem to me to act as a stimulant (pedantic medics and scientists, stop reading here). Champagne seems subjectively to wake me up rather than send me to sleep, but I have to admit that most wines, if drunk in sufficient quantity, have a soporific effect.

Port might be said to be literally the ultimate sleeping draught. In northern Portugal there are presumably some people who drink port in the middle of the day, but for most of us, if we drink port at all, it is a post-prandial treat, the last thing to pass our lips before late-night toothpaste. Yet the sad thing is that too many wine drinkers – even wine drinkers open to every sort of exotic combination of provenance and grape variety – see port as too strong and/or too sweet

for them.

This is such a shame because the quality of port being made today is higher than it has ever been, and the range of different styles of port that are reasonably easy to find outside Portugal is so much wider than it was.

Tawny ports – aged in wood, nut-coloured and nutty-tasting – are much more important and interesting than they used to be. As well as the cheapest, youngest examples, and blends labelled with an average age (10, 20, 30 or 40+ years, with 20-year-olds often offering the best value), we can now choose from the newish Reserve Tawny category that's aged for at least seven years in wood and an increasing array of Colheita ports, ports also long aged in cask but from the single year stated on the label.

Even white port is getting a bit more interesting. It used to be a simple wine drunk almost exclusively by the port trade as an aperitif, with or without tonic water. But Portuguese-owned port companies such as Kopke are releasing half bottles of seriously interesting cask-aged white ports as well as old Colheita reds from fully mature years.

But the most famous sort of port is aged in cask for a much shorter time than a tawny and, in the case of the finest examples, long aged in bottle so that, as all the elements combine over several decades to create a much more nuanced and ethereal whole, it creates a sediment of the by-products of all these magical combinations.

This is vintage port, the flagship of the traditional port trade, a wine that demands so long in bottle that the 1977s are only just coming round now. A new vintage, 2016, has just been 'declared', as they say in the business. The convention is that port shippers should not announce their intention to bottle a vintage port until the wine has had two winters in cask, and of course they have had a chance to see whether the subsequent vintage was better quality, and to suss out the readiness of the market to absorb a new vintage. (Although AXA's Quinta do Noval seems happy to release a vintage very much more frequently than the usual three times a decade.)

The vintage port market has been in the doldrums. What was a fine wine of interest to investors in the 1960s and 1970s lost its financial shine in the 1980s and 1990s as gentlemen's clubs and Oxbridge colleges offloaded stocks bought in an era when port drinking was much more common. But there are signs that a healthy secondary market may emerge once more – at least that is the hopeful prediction of the port shippers currently presenting the new vintage on a tour of the US, UK and, not to be overlooked nowadays, Hong Kong.

They have done their own bit of market-making by dramatically reducing the amount of vintage port produced. Even as recently as the 1980s a tiptop shipper such as Taylor's would make about 26,000 cases of each vintage port, whereas volumes of the 2016s are closer to 6,500 cases. Admittedly in 2016 the flowering in the Douro Valley (pictured above by night) was affected by the cold wet spring that followed a warm, wet winter. And the summer was as hot and dry as usual, which did nothing to hasten ripening or swell grapes. Some September rain meant that the harvest was unusually late, the cool nights seeming to have left their mark in a streak of freshness in most of these 2016 vintage ports. (For more details, see Paul Symington's [Managing the 2016 vintage in the Douro](#).)

Those selling vintage port have a problem. They know that to enjoy them at their apogee, the best examples deserve half a lifetime in a cellar. But they also know that, thanks to the skill and precision of modern winemaking methods, the life-preserving tannins that are vital to any

decent vintage port are so much more skilfully masked by intense fruit nowadays that the wines could certainly be enjoyed relatively young. And, it is rumoured, American vintage port enthusiasts are much more impatient than traditional British port connoisseurs. Perhaps as a consequence of this, a serious world shortage of 2016 vintage port may be on the horizon.



Most of the 2016 vintage ports, shown in London last week at the professional tasting at Trinity House above, where John Stimpfig of *Decanter* can be seen quizzing Paul Symington, James Tanner talking to Paul's son Rob in the background, are certainly impressive. And even the finest at around £80 a bottle seem wildly better value than most of the red bordeaux from the much less exciting 2017 vintage currently being released at such optimistic prices.

Some of the best value wines in the style of vintage port are the single quinta ports, wines made just like vintage port from some of the best individual quintas, or wine farms, in years that were not declared as a vintage. They are chock full of local personality and are ready to drink at about 10 to 20 years. They are not generally released until they are broachable.

Tanners, Davy's and Berry Bros & Rudd have particularly varied selections of port. Berrys starts with its own-label LBV, a so-called 'late bottled vintage', a sort of superior ruby port that spends four or five years in wood, in this case a well-priced, vigorous and spicy young ruby from Quinta de la Rosa.

There is only one bad thing about the recent dramatic improvement in the quality of Portuguese table wine. In port country, the Douro Valley, it used to be the case that virtually the only wine worth drinking was the port served at the end of the meal. Nowadays the wine served en route to the port is uniformly delicious - which means that beds in the Douro tend to beckon even earlier than they used to.

RECOMMENDED SLEEPING DRAUGHTS

Most 2016 vintage ports, if you have good storage (see our [tasting notes](#) on 23 of them).

Niepoort 2012 LBV Port

£11.50 a half Uncorked and elsewhere

Berry Bros & Rudd, St James's Finest Reserve Port (made at Quinta de la Rosa)

£15.45 Berry Bros & Rudd

Quinta do Noval 20 year old Tawny Port

£25.30 a half Halfwine.com, £53 a bottle Tanners

Taylor's 20 Year Old Tawny Port

£19.95 a half www.vintageportshop.co.uk

Kopke 10 Year Old White Port

£18.95 a half Hennings Wine, £23.90 a half Hedonism Wines

Kopke 2003 Colheita Port

£16.99 a half Majestic

Quarles Harris 1977 Vintage Port (an affordable mature vintage port that scored very well when tasted blind in 2002)

£70 Berry Bros & Rudd

Graham's, Quinta dos Malvedos 2001 Single Quinta Port

£14.75 a half, £29.50 Four Walls Wine and elsewhere

Taylor's, Quinta da Vargellas 2001 Single Quinta Port

£29.99 Waitrose Cellar