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A PORT IN THE STORM

BY TAMARA MULDOON

MY INTRODUCTION TO PORT-STYLE WINES began years ago when my husband—a bargain hunter with an adventurous palate—purchased several bottles of wine from a clearance rack, one of which was a port. It languished unheeded until one stormy winter evening when we dusted it off and popped the cork. Our first impression of port? Pure bliss in a bottle.

By statute, wines labelled “Port” or “Porto” are fortified wines made in Portugal. However, port-style wines are produced elsewhere, including the Pacific Northwest. Port starts out like other wines. Then, winemakers add distilled grape spirits (brandy) during fermentation, stopping the process at the ideal balance of alcohol and sugar. Intensely flavored, sweeter and higher in alcohol than most wines, port is usually served as a dessert wine or aperitif.

While there are white and rosé ports, the most common styles are ruby and tawny. Ruby ports are deep red with notes of berries, cherries, plums, figs, raisins, cinnamon or chocolate. Those labelled as “Reserve” are premium ruby ports. Both are meant to be drunk young.

Late Bottled Vintage (LBV) ports are barrel-aged 4-6 years before bottling. Vintage ports are made from a single vintage, barrel-aged 2-3 years, then bottled and aged further, reaching perfection after 20 to 40 years.

Tawny ports are called such because they are aged in wooden barrels where oxidation slowly turns the wine golden brown and introduces hints of spice, caramel or nuts. Bottled in ten-year increments, you’ll see them labelled as 10-year, 20-year, 30-year, etc. A colheita is a vintage tawny port, aged at least ten years.

Port pairs beautifully with food, especially strong-flavored cheeses, nuts, barbequed meats, and caramel or chocolate desserts. I like to alternate sips of port with nibbles of rich, dark chocolate.

Serve ruby and tawny ports slightly below room temperature. White and rosé ports are best served chilled. Because port’s alcohol content is 17 to 20 percent (nearly twice that of other wines), serving sizes are only one to three ounces. Even young ports last longer than other wines after opening, and aged ports keep up to a month if vacuum sealed and kept in the refrigerator.

Try the following Northwest ports for an excellent introduction to this classic beverage.

Foris Vineyards (foriswine.com) produces two outstanding ports from 100 percent cabernet sauvignon grapes grown in Oregon's Rogue Valley Appellation. I visited Foris Vineyards last year and bought one bottle of each: a 2006 Port (barrel aged 19 months) and their 2006 Tawny Port (aged ten years before bottling). Driving off, I hadn't gone far before wishing I'd bought an entire case of these delightful, affordable wines.

Eola Hills Wine Cellars (eolahillswinery.com) is located in Oregon's Willamette Valley Eola-Amity Hills American Viticultural Area (AVA). Respected worldwide for award-winning red and white wines, Eola Hills also makes dessert wines, including 1996 and 1997 Colheita Port and 2014 LBV Oregon Cabernet Sauvignon Port-Style Wine.

Located in the Columbia River Gorge near Goldendale, WA, **Maryhill Winery** (maryhillwinery.com) produces a broad spectrum of wines with grapes sourced from 14 Washington AVAs. Among their Proprietor's Reserve collection is a luscious, well-priced Vintage Port made with four estate-grown Portuguese varietals from the Columbia Valley AVA.

M.W. Whidbey's (owned by Chateau Ste. Michelle) produces Whidbey's Washington Port, a lovely everyday-priced port

available in supermarkets. Made in Patterson, Washington, from Columbia Valley AVA-sourced grapes and barrel-aged for 18 months, this fruity, complex wine pairs well with chocolate, desserts, and cheese.

Port warms from within, spreading to chilled extremities and infusing mellow relaxation. It's the ideal winter drink for cozying up before a fire or as dessert after a meal. 🍷



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