

Port wine and chocolate make Valentine's Day extra sweet

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Now that the December family celebrations are over, we turn to a more private and romantic moment - Valentine's Day. This month I will pair chocolate with port wine. While other wines are also enjoyed with chocolate, ports have an intriguing past and are gaining popularity.

History

Due to historical conflicts between France and England, French wines were banned at one point by the king of England. Portugal and Spain were only too happy to fill this void with their wine.



The Portuguese added a spirit to their wine to help stabilize their product during transport. Thus, "fortified" wines came into being. To improve the quality of Portuguese wine, Englishmen traveled to Portugal and worked with local wine makers. They discovered that monks in the Douro Valley were adding brandy to their wine early in the fermentation process. This created a sweeter product with a higher alcohol content. English traders quickly set up warehouses in the town of Oporto on the Atlantic Coast. This explains the name port and why they have British names, such as Dow's, Warre's and Graham's.

Types

Today, there are four basic categories of port: ruby, tawny, white and vintage.

Ruby ports are generally made from lower quality wine and are aged in casks for two years. The wine is young, sweet and has a deep red color. Late bottle vintage are higher quality ports that come from a single vintage, are barrel aged up to six years and are filtered. These LBV's are commonly served in restaurants, as there is no sediment.

Tawny ports are named for their amber color, a by-product of aging in casks. Tawnies are higher quality, tend to be lighter, more complex and have nutty and caramel notes. Tawnies from a single harvest that are barrel aged for at least seven years are called Colheitas. They are preferred by some over vintage port.

White ports are produced using white grapes.

To be declared a vintage port, the wine is from a single year and must pass a rigorous evaluation from the Port Wine Institute of Portugal. Vintage ports are aged in casks for two years, are not filtered and can be bottle-aged for decades. If 50 percent or greater of a crop's port meets the Institute's standards, then the year is declared a vintage year.

Pairings

The classic pairing of port wine is Stilton blue cheese and walnuts. This can be particularly appealing in front of the fireplace after a satisfying meal.

Chocolate is popular all year and is given as an expression of love in February. At my catering company, we offer ruby ports with dark chocolate flourless cake, chocolate mousse piped into dark chocolate dessert cups garnished with a fresh raspberry and decadent chocolate brownies served with a raspberry Coulis sauce. We recommend ruby ports, as they are more approachable for the general public in terms of sweetness and offer fuller fruit flavors. Tawnies are considered the classic pairing with chocolate and are equally enjoyable.

A recent trend by wineries is the addition of chocolate to port wine. This changes the character of the wine and offers a richer experience. Examples of this are Rosenblum's Desiree and Trentadue's Chocolate Amore ports. They make a delicious pairing with your favorite chocolate dessert. Mark Dryden of Cabernet & Co. in Naperville suggests adding a touch of raspberry wine to chocolate port for a delightful combination.

Wines to try

Listed here are some recommended ports that are available locally. Prices are suggested retails and may vary.

Good Introductory port: Dow's Fine Ruby Porto of Portugal, \$13

Classic port with dark, intense fruit: Warre's Warrior Special Reserve Porto, \$16

Complex, excellent value: Jonesy Aged Tawny Port of Australia, \$11

Intense ruby port: Heredias Ruby Porto of Portugal, \$18

Rich, nutty and powerful: Quinto do Noval Tawny Porto of Portugal, \$19

High quality producer: Quinto do Infantado Porto of Portugal, \$25

Wonderful chocolate flavor: Rosenblum Desiree Chocolate Port of California, \$21

A great sip or over vanilla ice cream: Trentadue Chocolate Amore Port of California, \$25

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