

## Stirling Wines: Fortified Wines, Out-of-Fashion Hidden Jewels

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### Introduction

Fortified wines are created when spirit (normally un-aged grape brandy) is added to a still wine to boost the inherent alcohol content. Typically (though not always) the spirit is added when the wine is partially fermented; the increased alcohol knocks out the yeast, leaving residual sugar in the wine.

Put like that, it doesn't sound particularly attractive, does it? However, this process makes some of the classic greats of the wine world with amazing longevity, think vintage port and old Madeira. It can also make some seriously under-rated aperitif-style wines, such as sherry and the muscats of Southern France. However, because these wines have been around for ages, and in cheaper, sweeter formats were often granny's favourite tippie (remember Harvey's Bristol Cream?), they have fallen out-of-fashion. Bad news for the producers of fortified wine, good news for the vinous value investor.

Fortified wines are made all round the world, often as deliberate imitations of port and/or sherry. Some of these wines are sublime in their own right (e.g. Australia's Rutherglen liqueur Muscat's and Tokay's). And there are also delicious fortified wines from the Mediterranean islands (e.g. Marsala from Sicily and Commandaria from Cyprus). However, for the purposes of this brief overview, I am going to focus on four wines: port, madeira, sherry and the so-called *vins doux naturels* of Southern France.

### Port

Port is fortified wine from the Douro valley in Portugal, nearly always red. Its name comes from the city of Oporto, where nearly all of the port is stored and matured. But the wine itself comes from steep, terraced vineyards further up the Douro valley towards Spain, where the river is known as the Duero, home to the famous Ribera del Duero red wines.



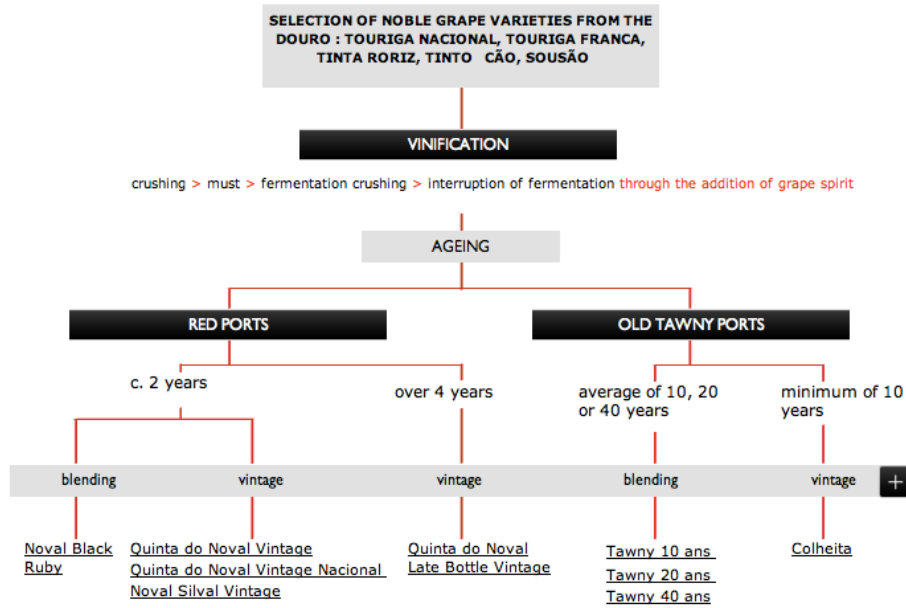
Red port is made from a variety of grapes, mostly unique to Portugal. Touriga Nacional, Tinta Barroca, Touriga Franca, Tinto Roriz (same as Spain's Tempranillo) and Tinto Cão are the big five. Traditionally, the wine grapes were crushed in low stone troughs called *lagares*, with teams of workers treading the grapes by foot, and some of the top wines still are. Today, with labour much tighter and more expensive, the wines are more likely to have been made in autovinification tanks, cap plungers or robotic *lagares*.

The fortifying spirit used to be distilled from wine made in Portugal but today is likely to be imported from France and distilled from Europe's wine lake. Ironically, EU measures to drain the wine lake have led to a reduction in distillation subsidies; so today port producers are facing sharp price increases in the price of spirit.

There are two broad categories of port, which are either aged in bottle (red ports) or casks (tawny ports). See **Exhibit 1** for a very helpful schematic from top Port producer Quinta do Noval, which quite by coincidence is owned by AXA, the ultimate controlling share holder of Sanford C Bernstein

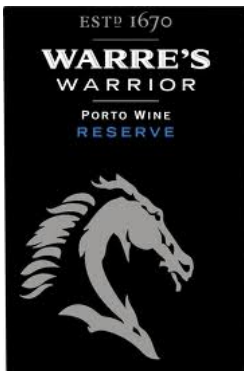
Exhibit 1  
Schematic of port styles

VINIFICATION – AGEING – BLENDING OF OUR PORTS

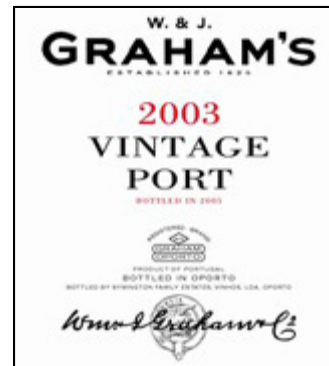


Source: Quinta Do Noval

**Ruby** port is the simplest and the cheapest style. It is aged in bulk for two or three years, blended across the years, and bottled with what one author refers to as a strong, fiery personality. Warre's Warrior is one of the better examples of this style.

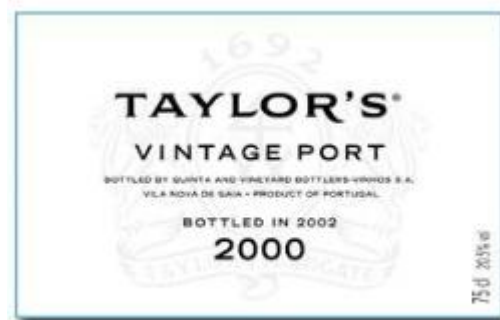


of the decade if not the century!). There are a dozen or so top-class names in vintage port. Many of them are grouped into two large companies: Symington (Graham's, Cockburn's, Warre's and Dow's)



**Vintage port** is the most expensive style of port and only accounts for approx 1% of production. The highest quality wines from a single year are aged, spending 2-3 years in wood, before being bottled and sold. Typically, it is the consumer who is responsible for ageing the wines, for up to 30 or more years – my 1980's are probably just about at their peak. These days, some wine of this quality is made by most firms in most years. Nevertheless, the port houses will only 'declare' a vintage in years where they have sufficient quantity and they feel that the market can support another vintage (unlike the Bordelais who produce a vintage every year, typically announced as the vintage

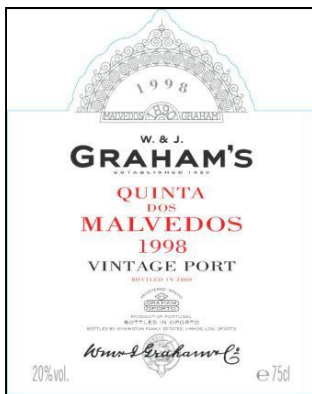
and Taylor Fladgate (Fonseca, Fonseca-Guimaraens, Taylor, and Croft).



But there are also superb standalone houses such as Bernstein's cousins at Quinta do Noval.



In years that the shippers do not declare a vintage, the high quality wine is often sold as a **Single-quinta vintage**. These typically represent very good value for money. They are still high quality wines but they mature earlier and the shippers typically age them for eight to ten years until they are ready for drinking. Taylor's Quinta de Vargellas and Graham's Quinta dos Malvedos are good examples.



**Late-Bottled Vintage (LBV)** is also a wine from a single year, bottled 4-6 years after the harvest i.e. they are more mature than vintage port when they are bottled and they are ready to drink within 4-6 years of bottling. They are not as high quality as the vintage wines or single quintas; however, still very palatable indeed.

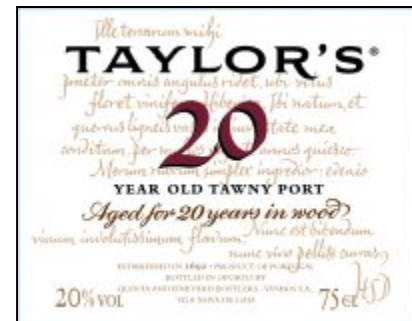
Before moving on to discuss cask-aged styles, first a word on the mis-use of the word tawny. Commercial 'tawny' port will never have seen a cask in its life. The difference to a commercial Ruby port is that it is made from lighter skinned grapes or may even be ruby port diluted with white port.

The real 'aged' tawny ports are very different creatures from 'commercial' tawny and indeed the vintage styles. These are aged in cask for typically 10 or more years, and the harsh tannins and phenolics precipitate out, leaving an amber, silky smooth wine. The age statements are approximate since these are blends across several vintages. These ports are made from very high quality wines; for example, they can be

based on wines that would have been destined for a vintage if the shipper had declared a vintage that year. Typically, they are also much cheaper than vintage port (though more expensive than LBV) and in my view represent a real bargain. I think they are best drunk chilled but not cold, and make a fantastic winter aperitif or a superb accompaniment to Christmas cake. Two widely available personal favourites are the Warre's Otima range....



...and Taylor's tawny's.



Finally, **Colheita** means harvest or crop in Portuguese. The ports are tawny ports from a single vintage, bottled with the year of harvest on the label. They are not as widely available as the aged tawny's but can be equally delicious.

## Madeira

Madeira is an Atlantic island which belongs to Portugal and lies 750km off the coast of North Africa, due north of the Canary Islands. Its wine industry developed as a stopping off point for Dutch vessels sailing to the then East Indies. It then became a favourite port-of-call for vessels on their way from Europe to the Americas. Hence the strong American affinity for Madeira, which was held in such high esteem that it was used to toast the Declaration of Independence in 1776!

Over the course of time, it was found that Madeira somehow tasted better after it had made the trip across the tropics. Up to the 1900's, wines underwent long sea journeys to create this flavour until shippers turned to ways of recreating this effect without leaving the island of Madeira.

Today there are three ways of maturing Madeira. The first is a type of *estufagem* (named after the Portuguese word *estufa* i.e. the hot rooms where the wine is aged). In the first process, the wine is held in

large (20,000-50,000 litre) stainless steel tanks, where hot water circulates through a stainless steel coil to heat the wine to a maximum temperature of 55°C. In the second type of *estufagem*, wooden casks are stored in warm rooms, with temperatures typically in the 30°C - 40°C range. This is a gentler method than the first bulk method and typically used for higher-quality wines. The third method is to let the wines age naturally in wooden cask stored under the eaves of lodges in Funchal, the capital of Madeira. This is used for the very finest madeira.

There are only now a handful of producers of madeira, with the largest being Justino Henriques. However, probably the best known (at least in the UK) is the Madeira Wine Company, in which the Symington family of Oporto has a controlling interest, which includes famous brands such as Blandy, Cossart Gordon and Leacock.

The most planted variety on Madeira is the red-skinned Tinta Negra Mole which is the base of the vast majority of cheap madeira. However, premium madeira is based on four 'noble' white-skinned varieties (Sercial, Verdelho, Bual and Malvasia), each of which is the base of slightly different style of wine.

Fermentation of madeira is normally arrested with grape spirit to produce a wine with an ABV of between 17% and 18%.

**Sercial** is grown on the coolest vineyards, at heights of up to 800m, on the north side of the island. This grape is related to the wonderfully named mainland Portuguese grape Esgana Cão, meaning Dog Strangler! Sercial ripens with difficulty to produce a wine which is tart and astringent when young. Fortification and ageing take some of the edge of this wine; but it remains the driest of the four premium styles. If you want to treat a very discerning American, with a dry palate, try Henriques Vintage Sercial.



**Verdelho** is also planted on the north side of the island, but typically at lower altitudes and ripens more easily than Sercial, and tends to produce a medium dry wine.



**Bual** is grown in warmer parts of the island on the south side, and produces medium rich wine.



**Malmsey** is produced from Malvasia grapes which are usually grown on the warmest sites at low altitude on the south coast, and produces the sweetest madeira wines. This wine acquired an eternal notoriety when Shakespeare decided that the character of the Duke of Clarence should be drowned in a butt of Malmsey in his play Richard III. Malmseys are arguably the longest life wines in the world. If you can ever get your hands on a bottle, try the Solera 1808 Leacock bottling from what is regarded as the finest ever vintage.

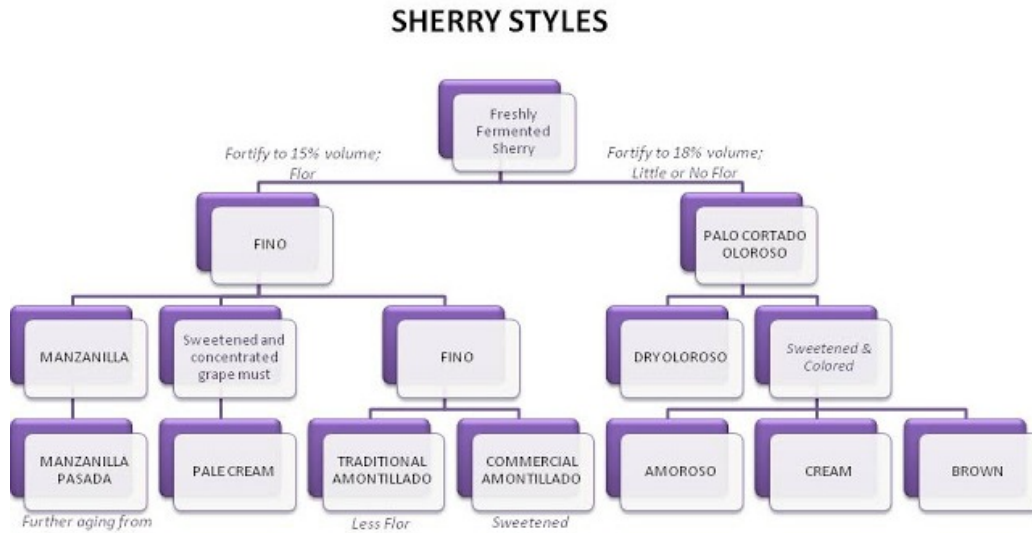


**Sherry**

At its simplest, Sherry is a fortified wine from a delimited area near the Spanish city of Jerez de la Frontera in SW Spain. In contrast to port, sherry is 95% based on a single white grape the palomino. There are a multiplicity of sherry styles (which can be very confusing, see below **Exhibit 2**)

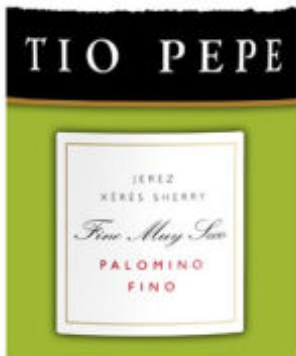
*Finos* which lose their covering of *flor* (either naturally or though further fortification) start to oxidize and turn amber. These wines are called *amontillados*. True *amontillados* are delicious bone-dry, full-bodied complex wines e.g. this example Los Arcos from the specialist quality Bodega Lustau.

Exhibit 2  
**Sherry Styles**



Source: Total Wine & More

However, the world of sherry broadly divides in two. The first family is lighter in body. The dry base wine is fortified to 15% and then put into barrel. A thin film of yeast-like substance called *flor* grows on the surface of the wine, which protects the wine from oxidation and preserves a light colour and results in a wine called Fino. Perhaps the best known commercial bottling of Fino is Tio Pepe from the house of Gonzalez Byass.



If the Fino is aged in the city of Sanlúcar de Barrameda, it is called *manzanilla*. These wines are somewhat lighter in style than a *fino* and have a salty twist that allegedly comes from the coastal location of the warehouses. Delicious as an aperitif with salted almonds.



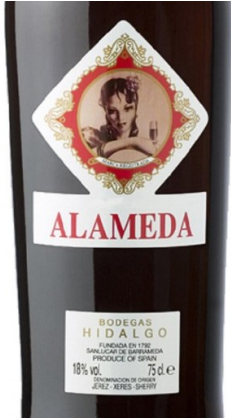
But beware! The name *amontillado* has been bastardized over the years; and most commercial *amontillados* are medium-dry blended sherries of dubious provenance. Check the back label very carefully or ask your trusted wine merchant.

The second group of wines called *olorosos* are fortified to 18% alcohol, and the high level of alcohol inhibits the growth of the *flor*. As they age, they oxidize and turn dark brown, and gentle evaporation increases the alcohol content, sometimes up to 24%. These are definitely after-dinner drinks. As they exit the barrel, *olorosos* are dry and some are bottled in their natural state e.g. this example also from Lustau.



But they can also be made in varying degrees of sweetness without detracting from the finesse. Here is

a recent find from Bodegas Hidalgo who are best known for their *manzanilla* La Gitana.



There are two further styles which deserve mention before leaving sherry. Firstly the rare *palo cortado*. This style of sherry is bone-dry and sits between *amontillado* and *oloroso seco* in intensity. It is initially aged under *flor* on its way to becoming a *fino* or *amontillado*, but inexplicably loses its veil of *flor* and begins aging oxidatively as an *oloroso*, resulting in a wine that is nutty, fresh and complex. And then PX. This wine is made from the Pedro Ximénez grape. The grapes are typically air-dried to give extra-intense concentration of sugars and flavour. As one wine writer has commented, it tastes like liquid Christmas cake. It does taste divine poured over vanilla ice-cream; but that seems like a terrible waste.

Finally, very old sherries, whatever their style, can fall into one of two classifications: VOS (very old Sherries) which are at least 20 years old; and VORS (very old rare Sherries) which are at least 30 years old. One superb example of the former comes from Gonzalez Byass, producers of Tio Pepe *fino*.



### Vins Doux Naturels

This phrase means 'naturally sweet wines' in French; and the wines are sweet but not really that 'natural' because they are made by *mutage*, the French word for the addition of grape spirit to arrest fermentation. These wines fall into two broad groups: whites based on muscat and reds based on grenache.

Perhaps the best known commercial sweet muscat from France is the **Muscat de Beauges-de-Venise** which is a light, fragrant pale gold sweet wine from the eponymous village which is a Côte-du-Rhône-Village. Pleasant, easy-going but not a grand classic

Similar to Muscat de Beauges-de-Venise, but with a bit more character is the **Muscat de St Jean de Minervois**. This wine from the Languedoc has more delicate orange-flower aromas and is a delicious accompaniment to a light dessert.

However, I like my wines with a bit more stuffing. Probably the most historical of the Languedoc Muscats is the **Muscat de Frontignan**, whose wines have been appreciated by a distinguished roll-call of historical celebrities, including Pliny, Voltaire and Thomas Jefferson. The wines must be at least 15% ABV with 125g/l sugar, and making for a delicious aperitif. Try Château de la Peyrade.

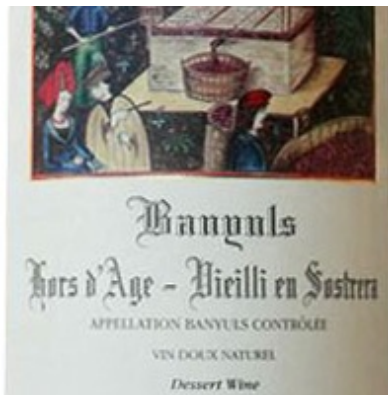


**Muscat de Rivesaltes** is the biggest appellation in France and much of what is made is decidedly ordinary, based on the slightly inferior musket-of-Alexandria rather than the more prestigious muscat-blanc-à-petits-grains. However, there are some superb wines made, which can age for over fifty years. These are often a great choice for buying a wine of the date of birth without absolutely breaking the bank. For instance this 1932 vintage from Domaine Cazes for approx £300 or the 1943 for approx £200.



Last but certainly not least come the reds. These are right up there with my all time favourite wines and should be a part of any well-stocked cellar. Essentially, they are French ports but, being primarily Grenache-based, they are less tannic than vintage port, and are also slightly lower alcohol. They are delicious as a digestif but they are almost uniquely well-matched with chocolate desserts. [The other matches to chocolate I would suggest are Recioto della Valpolicella from Italy and, if you have chocolate-orange dessert, a good tawny port]. The village of Rasteau, another Côtes-du-Rhône-Village, makes a red Grenache-based sweet wine; but for the best examples of this style come from Languedoc, or more precisely Roussillon in Southern France, which historically was northern Catalonia until the Treaty of the Pyrenees (1659) secured Roussillon for France.

**Banyuls** comes from the southern tip of France, made from grapes grown on steep terraced vineyards overlooking the sea, just north of the Spanish border. The dry red wine made in the same appellation is called Collioure. The grapes for Banyuls are late-harvested, often partly shrivelled, further increasing the concentration of flavour. And the spirit is added whilst the wine is still on the skins to impart even more flavour. The wines can be aged in barrels, sometimes topped-up, sometimes evaporating, or in huge glass jars called *bonbonnes*, or even in a solera system. For me the exemplary producer of this region is Dr Parc  of Domaine du Mas Blanc. And this autumn past I was lucky enough to taste the full range of wines with the patron, *sur place*. My favourite is the Hors D'Age, aged in a solera system, which can age for up to 25 years.



But the slightly cheaper Vieilles Vignes from old vines over 40 years old is also delicious.



**Maury** lies slightly further north in a hilly area in the Agly valley. The wines are made in the same way as Banyuls, but tend to be more tannic in youth and have a deeper colour; although with ageing the differences between the two appellations narrow. The two most famous names in Maury are Domaine de la Pr ceptorie and Mas Amiel (both fairly widely available).



But a recent find is a smaller producer Coume du Roy, available at Sherry Lehmann in New York and from Top Selection London.



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