



Glasses of *Import*

Is it liquid treachery to drink port in the summer? Taylor Fladgate CEO Adrian Bridge says, "Bring it on." | *By Katie Kelly Bell* |

There are as many rules and myths about port as there are styles of port. Who can keep up with the LBVs, whites, tawnies, vintages and rubies—let alone the proper technique for decanting and whether or not port should be passed to the left or the right? (It's to the left.)

As definitions go, port (most is made in Portugal's Douro Valley) is a fortified wine made from the juice of five different grape varieties.

It begins life as a typical red wine: Grapes are picked, often crushed by foot and allowed to start fermenting until the whole business is rudely interrupted by the addition of a spirit. The alcohol content goes up and grape sugars

remain, giving port its complex sweetness.

Although it's been around for hundreds of years, "tradition has its issues," notes Adrian Bridge, CEO of the Taylor Fladgate Partnership, one of Portugal's most respected and award-winning port producers. "Port tends to get stuck in a season and a specific period during a meal. We'd like people to drink it in the summer, before dinner or just whenever the mood strikes. Let's de-season it a bit... some might call that treachery, but I disagree."

We asked Bridge to share his thoughts on enjoying port year-round... and when it's time to break out a good cigar.

AdrianBridge's job is a barrel of fun.



The port-producing estate of Vargellas, the finest in the world by some standards

White

Taylor Fladgate's white port is a chip-dry style (some houses make sweeter styles) crafted from Portuguese white grape varieties and fermented longer than traditional port, which gives it a much drier, crisper taste. Aged several years in oak vats, it tends to be an acquired taste. Bridge serves up his cocktail-style (equal parts tonic and port, finished with a twist of lemon) for a refreshing poolside aperitif.

Ruby

Fresh, young and ready to drink, this style is minimally aged (all the better to keep the bright ruby color) in large oak casks. Ripe, intense fruit dominates the flavor profile. Ready to drink at bottling, Bridge prefers his "in front of the fire, après ski. Think central heating for humans, and it goes best with anything chocolate."

LBV (Late Bottle Vintage)

Crafted from superior grapes (but not superior enough to make the cut for a vintage port), these wines are from a single vintage year, aged in large oak casks, then filtered and bottled before shipping (hence the "late bottle"). LBV is no-fuss, has proper aging and usually comes in at a civilized price. This is an ideal starter port to enjoy before making the big collector's leap to vintage ports. Bridge suggests enjoying it with "blue cheeses, but it is also great with something like a blackberry and apple crumble with cream. Of course, anything chocolate works here, too. Some days, a cigar (like a Montecristo No. 4) is just the thing."

Tawny

Like ruby port, these are best served with a chill. However, tawnies are aged a minimum of 10 years and upward of 40 years in large oak vats. The ample aging results in a significant color loss, giving them their trademark autumnal hues. Tawny port boasts layers of complex brown sugar, caramel and almond notes, takes a chill nicely and can be a perfect finish to a summer picnic. Bridge prefers his "lightly chilled with foie gras or with a Churchill for a long smoke on the deck." He also suggests serving it with creamy cheeses, apple pie or crème brûlée.

Vintage

The ultimate liquid collector's item, the big names in this game—Taylor, Fonseca, Graham and Dow—craft the most sought-after and extraordinary ports in the world. Vintage port is only created in years that are deemed exceptional (each house makes its own call). The finest grapes from producer estates are crushed and left to age in oak vats for roughly 18 months. After initial aging, the juice is tasted, and the decision is made whether or not to declare the vintage. If declared, the juice is bottled and sold immediately. These wines can age over decades, and, because it ages in a bottle, vintage port creates sediment that requires special handling during decanting. Bridge saves vintage port for special occasions and notes, "This style of port stands alone. I tend to enjoy it on its own."

What to Try and What to Buy

BUY: Bridge counsels anyone lusting for a "value" vintage port to consider making a single quinta vineyard purchase from a non-declared year. Port houses won't declare vintages in consecutive years even though the harvest may have been spectacular. So, notes Bridge, "you'll get the same gorgeous juice from the same grapes of a declared vintage year and a much better price." Look for Taylor's Quinta de Vargellas 2008, Fonseca Guimaraens 2008 and Fonseca Quinta de Panascal 2008. *bbr.com* or *wine.com*

TRY: The full range of Taylor Fladgate tawnies (10, 20, 30 and 40 years) at the St. Regis Atlanta (*stregis.com/atlanta*). Sommelier Harry Constantinescu will pour tastes of each for a revealing side-by-side comparison.