

PREMIUM

Expert's choice: Tawny Ports

Winter is the ideal excuse – as if one were needed – to remind yourself of just how delicious these cask-aged, fortified treasures of the Douro can be. Sarah Ahmed picks her 18 favourites.



Sarah Ahmed

December 11, 2020



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Thankfully, with an extensive range of styles (and small-format bottlings) available, you need not be as rich as Croesus to enjoy benchmark tawny Port and will find it a versatile companion. An excellent aperitif or digestif, it also excels with cheese and classic Christmas puddings or chocolate, nut and caramel-based desserts.

Maturing tawny Port in seasoned small casks or vats differentiates it from ruby Ports (including vintage Port), which mature in the bottle. Ready to drink on release and without decanting, tawny Port is best served (and stored) lightly chilled, between 12°C-16°C.

Russet-coloured basic tawnies are wood-aged for about three years, and the more concentrated tawny reserve Ports for about seven. These styles typically retain primary plum and berry flavours, and once opened they can keep for a week or two.

‘You need to have enormous quality and structure to age in barrels,’ says Charles Symington (Graham’s), and – with prolonged wood maturation – higher-tier tawny Ports are a significant step up. They account for the alluring hue behind the name and combination of moreish approachability with tertiary complexity – citrus peel, dried fruit, caramel and ethereal, nutty, spicy wood notes. Having already undergone lengthy (controlled) oxidation, colheitas and tawny Ports ‘with an indication of age’ can last up to three months once broached.

Colheitas (sometimes labelled Single Harvest) must spend at least seven years in wood. Often aged for much longer, they can be labelled Very Old after 40 years in cask.

Tawny Ports with ‘an indication of age’ must reflect organoleptic qualities which correspond to the indicated age (10, 20, 30 or 40 years old). With no average age requirement, producers have considerable latitude when blending – especially those with extensive back-catalogues. A tiny component from precious barrels of inter-generational Ports – 80- or perhaps 100-year-old – brings depth, intensity and woody timbre. They sometimes also add volatile acidity: ‘Useful lift and zip,’ according to Ana Rosas, Ramos Pinto’s master blender.

This blending latitude explains the breadth of style within each bracket of tawny Ports with ‘an indication of age’ – from elegant to luscious, delicate to vigorous. For Kopke’s Port winemaker, Carlos Alves, the size and type of wood also ‘really gives profile to the house’.

Sarah Ahmed picks her favourite Tawny Ports

Kopke, Colheita, Port, Douro Valley, Portugal, 1941

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Bottled in 2020, a beautifully aged colheita, with a scintillating, finely tuned nose and palate. Appetisingly high-toned, yet honeyed and caressing, with spicy chutney, black cardamom, walnut and café crème notes to the nose and palate. Exceptionally long and precise, with delicate but persistent grapefruit and saline piquancy to the...