

CORK DORK

DRINKING IN THE DECADES

We're popping the cork on our favorite (liquid) time machine

BY SETH ELI BARLOW

IT WAS the oldest thing I'd ever tasted—barely 2 ounces of a 1927 vintage port wine. It was just a month shy of its 90th birthday when I had it, and in those interceding years it had changed from the red, ripe and harrowing wine of its youth to something softer, more demure. Where once had been wild strawberry and dark chocolate, there were now stewed plums and cooked hazelnuts. But more than the simple flavors on my palate, what struck me most was the single, indescribable flavor of time. It's both a flavor and a feeling, the tangible perception of age through taste, as though every single one of the wine's 90 years had laid the thinnest dusting of character across my tongue.

1927 was an exciting year. Charles Lindbergh had just completed the world's first solo transatlantic flight, and *The Jazz Singer*, the first movie to feature synchronized dialogue, was playing in sold-out theaters



Harbor a taste for port wine? Personally, we're all a-boat it.

across the United States. Actor Sidney Poitier and Pope Benedict XVI were born, while down in Cleveland County, my own grandfather turned 1 year old. It's my favorite thing about drinking aged wine, the way the years pass not in days but in ounces. That, more than anything else, is the magic of port—but that magic isn't reserved for bottles from the 20th century or those carrying triple-digit price tags.

Port, much like Champagne, is a wine whose fame comes not only from being delicious but because it's been made in just *one* place, in just *one* way for centuries. Port comes from Portugal—specifically, the Douro River Valley, where vineyards cling to the steep hillsides, finding footholds in small hand-carved terraces built into the rock face. Any number of grape varieties that grow in the Douro Valley can be used to produce port with the caveat that they must be grape varieties indigenous to Portugal. In other words, don't try looking for a port made of cabernet sauvignon or merlot; instead, you'll find grapes such as tinta barroca, sousão and, most importantly, touriga nacional, a grape known for its structure and notes of ripe blueberries and plums.

Like other wines, the grapes for port are crushed and fermented, but that's where the similarity ends. Where other wines ferment until reaching dryness, port's fermentation is stopped short by the addition of flavorless grape brandy, a practice that dates back to the early days of the wine trade, when shippers were looking for a way to ensure that their cargo wouldn't spoil on the weeks- and months-long journeys. This not only preserves some residual sugar in the wine, but also boosts the wine alcohol content to around

20 percent. The result is a wine that's both sweet and incredibly rich. It's easy to understand the mindset of a 17th-century sea merchant—add a little brandy to make sure the wine stays good? *Sure, why not try it?* And when they realized that people liked this new, fortified style of wine even more than before, port was born.

Very little about port's production has changed over the past 200 years. Grapes are still picked by hand, and in some instances, human feet are still used to crush the grapes and begin fermentation. The greatest innovation in port production has been the wine's diverse styles that now dot the shelves in your local wine shop. Ruby port, the inexpensive and easy-to-find bottlings that tend to get brought out to pair with dessert, is what most people think of when they think of port, but those wines are just the gateway to one of the most diverse wines on the planet. The greatest signifier of style is the vessel of aging: wood or bottle. Tawny ports are the most famous wood-aged example, spending, on average, nine to 10 years aging in barrels before bottling. The years spent in barrels expose the wine to oxygen, creating the wine's signature nuttiness and bricklike color. Aged tawny gets my personal vote in the race for the most dynamic port style; there's just something so wildly hedonistic about the way in which time changes the wine into something completely new,

something sultry and almost carnal. The **Taylor Fladgate 10-Year-Old Tawny (\$40)** is like drinking those fire-roasted chestnuts that Nat King Cole used to sing about—toasted walnut, vanilla, spice and just a hint of ripe red raspberry—while my personal go-to, the **W. & J. Graham's 20-Year-Old Tawny (\$78)** takes everything you love about the 10-year and cranks the dial up to 11 with a palate that's like drinking a brown-sugar creme brûlée.

If that's not old or extravagant enough, single-vintage tawny ports are produced bearing the label "colheita." These wines must be barrel-aged a minimum of seven years, though most producers will choose to hold them at the winery until the wine is ready to drink, meaning that, if you find a bottle, go ahead and pop the cork—the winery did the aging for you. Portugal's oldest port producer, Kopke, is known for releasing these ultra-rare wines decades after bottling. Current releases include the **Kopke 1985 Colheita (\$50, 375ml)** and the **Kopke 1965 Colheita (\$160, 375ml)**, which tastes a bit like flying through hyperspace in a walnut.

The other signature style of port, the so-called bottled-aged wines, range even further in style, from the lush and bombastic to the svelte. Perhaps the most common of these is the late-bottled vintage port (usually shortened to LBV). These are vintage wines that have been aged in barrels for four to six years before bottling. The **Dow's Late-Bottled Vintage 2011 (\$33)** is the perfect gateway into port—boisterous and fruity, like a rambunctious puppy in all the right ways, this is a wine that doesn't need additional decades to reach its peak. It's primed and ready to be drunk (ideally alongside a slice of chocolate

cake).

If an LBV represents the most easily accessible style of port, there is, of course, a wine at the opposite end of the spectrum. Vintage port is the Don Corleone of the wine world: A sip of vintage port is a glass no one can refuse. Easily the most expensive port style, vintage port is also the rarest, making up just over 2 percent of total production. Vintage ports spend only two years in the barrel before bottling, and once bottled, they'll bide their time, slowly maturing until they're eventually opened. Unlike tawny ports, whose flavors twist and turn with the decades, vintage port is an exercise in timelessness. It's not unusual for vintage ports from the 1950s or '60s to still taste fresh and ripe, balancing soft blueberry notes with mint and cocoa powder.

Vintage ports, however, are only made in years that the vintage is of exceptional quality. Since 1950, only a handful of vintages have reached this status, with 2007, 2011 and 2016 being among the most recent. **W. & J. Graham's 1994 Vintage Port (\$140)** is another personal favorite, bristling with thorny, wild berries and cool menthol. At just 24 years old, it's already incredible, but vintage port rewards a patient drinker. There's a reason vintage port was once gifted to newborn English royalty: By the time the baby was old enough to drink it, the wine would only just then be ready to be drunk. Whether you've got a 10,000-bottle wine cellar or, like me, a few boxes in the bottom of a closet, even the lowliest of cellars should make room for the highest of wines. ♡