

We Can't Make A Vintage Port.....But We Can Come Close !

by Don Panagapka (AWO News #23)

Why is it that when I compare my award-winning ports to a Vintage Port, I always come out second, out of two? Can we make a port like a Vintage Port from the Douro area of Portugal or not? I am quite sure that we can't, but we can come close! Here in Ontario we don't have the climate (hot, arid, slate and granite soil) of the Douro Valley nor do we have the grapes noted for the production of Vintage Ports (there are five or six primary grapes, none of which are available in North America, with minute amounts of twenty or twenty-five other varieties).

I started attempting to make port about twelve years ago using a Brehm Zinfandel and bottles and bottles of brandy (very costly as I found out). As many of us know, port is made by arresting the fermentation with brandy when the alcohol is at the 5-7% level. This effectively retains the huge fruit in the wine along with the tannins and alcohol (20%/vol from the brandy addition) that allow vintage ports to last up to half a century. My first attempts produced okay wines but I determined that the 40% alcohol/volume of the brandy diluted the wine too much making a lighter, ruby-style of wine.

As is my usual style I bought a 1983 Graham's Vintage Port and instead of drinking all of it I dissected most of it. That is, I measured the residual sugar content (in that case it was S.G.1.045), the acid level, and determined subjectively how much fruit complexity there was and the level of tannin (the alcohol content was printed on the bottle). To my surprise I found the acid level to be in the .45g/l range, low I thought for a wine that aged for so long. After more research I realized that tannins, sugar, and alcohol were all preserving agents that kept the port to maturity. Following this exercise I have made 5 different ports all of which I am very happy with. My philosophy is that proper Port needs years to age, and so why not make the best you can instead of finding out years later that you made a mediocre Port and by that time you are too old to make another.

The following are my suggestions to make a port "close" to a vintage quality:

- 1) Use top-quality product. Western U.S. (California, Washington, Oregon) grapes have the kind of intense fruit that is required to age the port properly. I use primarily Zinfandel (because of its complexity of flavours) as well as Syrah, and other western "intense" grapes.
- 2) Try to get grapes that have a low acid level in the .45 - .5g/l area. If you check on Brehm's website you can often get last year's leftover grape product where you can actually pick and choose stats that you want, that is, low acid/high sugar content. These grapes are not necessarily good for table wines (and thus discounted) but would be ideal for a port.
- 3) Obtain high alcohol distilled alcohol in the area of 151 to 170 proof. These are not available in Ontario but can be obtained in the United States and elsewhere. A brandy base is best if possible. Grain alcohols tend to leave an "off" taste that will dissipate with time but don't have

any flavour that will add to the port.

- 4) Use a long maceration period to extract as much of the tannin as possible prior to fermentation. The tannin will give the port structure and longevity. (Note that because of the arresting of the fermentation much tannin is still left in the skins and therefore the maceration is important).
- 5) Determine what sugar level that you want to have in the finished product (I suggest S.G. 1.030 to S.G. 1.045) depending on the intensity of the fruit. Less intense fruit should have a lower residual sugar content or the wine will seem "syrupy" for the intensity. The Pearson Square will help you determine how much alcohol to add and what your final S.G. will be.
- 6) Age the port in a barrel for 2 years just as they do in Oporto. This will give the "oak" required, but will also "smooth" out the wine (aeration through the wood) and help to marry the flavours and alcohol.
- 7) Bottle without filtration to preserve tannin structure. (use half-bottles for faster maturing if desired). It will take at least one year past the barrel-aging phase to determine what the port will eventually be like. At that time lots of fruit, complexity and a firm tannin structure will indicate that it has a long life ahead. If you are missing one of these components, drink up and start working on your other ports.

Bon chance !

p.s. I understand that older retired folks in their twilight years tend to like a wee dram of port or sherry as they sit in their rocking chairs overlooking the sunset.