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ON WINE

Top Values in Tawny Port: The Bottles to Buy Now

When a recent study revealed that not all tawny Ports are as old as their labels profess, our wine columnist wondered: How much does age really matter? She found five outstanding bottles for close to half the price she might typically pay.



A MATTER OF TIME Is age a guarantee of quality? Some excellent value for money can be found in the 10-year range.

ILLUSTRATION: KOTRYNA ZUKAUSKAITE



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WHAT IF THAT “10-year-old” tawny Port on the shelf was actually closer to seven or eight years old? Would it really matter, or is eight years old close enough?

Research undertaken recently by the University of Groningen Centre for Isotope Research in the Netherlands, commissioned by Dutch journalists, found by way of radiocarbon

dating that some tawny Ports were not as old as their labels stated. The findings have sparked controversy: A number of companies have postponed tawny Port sales, while Port producers have questioned the research methods. I was intrigued nevertheless. It made me wonder how reliable a measure of quality age actually is.

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What's the (purported) age of your favorite Port? Join the conversation below.

Port is a wine produced from grapes grown in the Douro Valley of Portugal and fortified with grape spirit to halt fermentation before all the sugar is converted to alcohol, then aged at lodges in the Douro region and in cellars in the city of Vila Nova de Gaia. Whereas ruby Ports, bottled young, retain their ruby-red color, tawny Ports, aged in wood, acquire a paler, brownish hue over time owing to oxidation (though a basic tawny, aged just a brief time, can be as red as a ruby).

Tawny Ports are made from blends of different wines—young and old—according to the style of the particular house. The wines used for blending may be aged in wood for a few years or for several decades. Generally the longer the aging, the more expensive the wine. (A 40-year-old tawny Port will cost substantially more than its 10-year-old counterpart.)

The Instituto dos Vinhos do Douro e do Porto, I.P. (IVDP) determines whether a Port qualifies for its designated age via samples producers submit to the organization's board prior to bottling. According to Christian Seely, CEO of Quinta do Noval—one of the oldest Port houses, founded in 1715—the wines are certified by the IVDP “on the basis of the character and quality,” and not merely on their numerical age. “I think this is right,” he said. “Just because a wine might have a mathematical average age of over 10 years old, it would not be certified if the quality was not good enough.”

Does it really matter if the wine is a blend of vintages that may or may not add up to a decade?

Symington Family Estates, based in Vila Nova de Gaia, owns several Port brands, including Graham's and Dow's. When I emailed the company's CEO, Rupert Symington, he replied, “In order to pass muster with our regulator, we typically have to age the wines

longer than their strict average age, so our customers are getting even better value than they think.”

Like many oenophiles, I have always favored 20-year-old tawnies. But the Dutch radiocarbon dating study, and what it revealed about slippery age definitions, begged the question: Do 10-year-old tawnies consistently taste that much younger than 20-year-olds? To find out, I bought 10 bottles of tawny aged 10 years (or so their labels said).

The accessible price of a 10-year-old tawny Port is definitely part of the appeal. The wines I purchased ranged between \$19 and \$35 a bottle—a bit more than half the price of their 20-year-old counterparts. As Adrian Bridge, CEO of Fladgate Partnership—parent company of several port houses, including Taylor Fladgate—explained, aging Port costs money. “As CEO I’m looking at stock that’s tied up. We put wine aside for decades,” he said. Mr. Bridge characterized the Dutch study as “a tempest in a teacup.” He told me the wines that go into the Taylor Fladgate tawny blends are aged for years beyond their stated label age.

Some of the wines in my tasting definitely tasted much younger and fruitier, with little detectable influence of oak, while others were more austere, with more pronounced acidity and the influence of oak. Ports aged in different types or sizes of oak will often vary notably in character. Mr. Symington noted that the Dow’s tawnies are aged in larger oak vats, as opposed to the oak barrels the Graham’s tawnies age in. “This results in a slightly stickier mouthfeel,” he said. “I always associate Dow’s 10 Year Old with candied orange peel.”

Five 10-year-old tawnies I tasted truly stood out. The Quinta das Carvalhas 10 Year Old Tawny Porto (*\$19 half bottle*), was one of the richest and sweetest wines of my tasting. The W. & J. Graham’s Aged 10 Years Tawny Port (*\$30*) and Quinta do Noval 10 Year Old Tawny Port (*\$27*) were also full-bodied and rich but marked by a bright acidity. The Taylor Fladgate 10 Year Old Tawny Porto (*\$26*) and the Dow’s Aged 10 Years Old Tawny Port (*\$32*) were drier, with nutty, savory profiles. The aromas of these wines ranged from fig and gingerbread to roasted nuts and vanilla—the very scents of seductive desserts.

The rest of the 10-year-old tawnies ranged from less impressive to downright disappointing. These looked and tasted more like ruby Ports, their fruit less integrated with oak. But the five I liked were wines I’d definitely drink over and over again. And since an open bottle of tawny Port (refrigerated) can last a month, a tiny glass can be a pleasant weekly or twice-weekly ritual—and a cheap one as well.

All tawny Ports are fairly high in alcohol—around 20%—and for that reason they are generally consumed at the end of a meal, with or without dessert. But some wine professionals, like Yannick Benjamin, wine director of Contento restaurant in New York, find these wines work well with a savory course. Mr. Benjamin might pair a 10-year-old tawny with a savory dish like a duck liver mousse. “The wine needs to be richer than the dish, and the residual sugar of the wine overcomes the fat and richness.” By contrast, he noted, 20-year-old tawny is a more delicate wine “best accompanied by something simple like aged Parmesan or Comté.”

Linda Milagros Violago, who oversees the wine program at Canlis restaurant in Seattle, pairs a Niepoort 10 Years Old Tawny Porto with a chocolate cake with chocolate icing. But she also likes to pair tawny Port with something simple like cheese or nuts.

Does it really matter if the wine is a blend of vintages that may or may not add up to a decade? In practice, not so much. After all, the producers whose Ports I liked have been making consistently excellent wines for hundreds of years. Isn't that the (real) point?

OENOFILE / 10-Year-Old Tawny Ports that Deliver Top Value



1. Dow's Aged 10 Years Old Tawny Port \$32

A beautifully balanced tawny from one of the top names in Port. Although Dow's is famous for its vintage Ports, this slightly drier tawny style aged in large vats was one of my very favorites in this tasting.

2. W. & J. Graham's Aged 10 Years Tawny Port \$30

This tawny Port is richer and sweeter in style than the 10-year-old Dow's. (Both are owned by Symington Family Estates based in Vila Nova de Gaia, Portugal.) It's a delicious, almost sumptuous Port.

3. Quinta das Carvalhas 10 Year Old Tawny Porto \$19 (half bottle)

Quinta das Carvalhas is the name of a grand estate owned by Real Companhia Velha, a company that produces a wide range of wines, including Port. This is a rich, toffee-like tawny—a dessert unto itself.

4. Quinta do Noval 10 Year Old Tawny Port \$27

This wonderfully aromatic tawny Port marked by notes of licorice and spice is made from a blend of wines that are over a decade old. This wine offers the perfect balance of mellow (oak) and bright (fruit).

5. Taylor Fladgate 10 Year Old Tawny Porto \$26

This is the bestselling 10-year-old tawny Port in the U.K., according to the website of Taylor Fladgate, one of the top names in tawny. This elegant, nutty Port, made from a blend of wines more than a decade old, shows why.

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