



# A Port for all Weathers

Rick Staff  
with a remit to sniff, taste,  
and spit his way around Nanjing  
and disseminate the drinkable.

POINT SYSTEM  
0-10 A WARNING  
11-14 A Feasible Party Prop  
15-17 Heartily Recommended  
17-19 Exceptionally Good  
20 The Apoogee Of  
WINE EXPRESSION



It is sobering to think that affairs of state and the hard pragmatism of trade have shaped our wine enthusiasms as much as any purely aesthetic merit. Consider port wine, which developed its style and popularity not because of winemaking artistry, but as a result of Britain's myriad fracas with the French from the late 17th century onwards. Britain, in need of a more politically correct wine supplier, turned to ally Portugal; and a partnership began that filled the gap left by the embargos and heavy taxes on French wine with the very un-Portuguese names of Taylor, Dow, Croft, Symington and Graham's et al. (names which still dominate the port trade).

Wrought from the steep and improbable schist terrain of the Douro valley and shipped out from Oporto at the mouth of the valley's river (from where port takes its name) this is a far more protean liquid than the indelible image of upper crust English wintering of old confines it to. Though there are many styles, all port shares the characteristics of a fortification process, where grape spirit is added to stun the yeasts and arrest the wine's fermentation before completion, producing wine that is typically sweeter and stronger than others. The most likely explanation for fortification is simply that some Douro wines were being made that way, by accident or design, and the British merchants liked what they tasted; seafarers spiking the wine en route with brandy to stop it going off on the lengthy sea passage is another possible explanation.

Vintage port is the trophy wine within the port houses' stable (though it only represents around 1% of overall production), and is made from a single 'declared' year of excellent quality, which happens around three times a decade. The wine matures lengthily in bottle, some vintages for hundreds of years, producing deep-red complex masterpieces, with a price to match. By far the most extensively produced wines are the so-called rubies, bottled after a couple of years in cask, meant for early drinking and far more affordable than the vintage kings of the auction rooms. Various contrivances, however, are employed to use the marketable stamp 'vintage' on the label of the humbler ruby style. Late Bottle Vintage (LBV) is one, not from any declared vintage year, showing little or no improvement with bottle age, though as its moniker suggests bottled later than a standard ruby, usually after five or six years in cask. Though lacking the depth of real vintage port, it can be a deliciously simpler drinker; New World Old World Wine on the lower floor of New City Mall houses an assertively fresh Graham's Fine Ruby 2009 (¥248) and an LBV 2003 from the same firm (¥398), which is a little drier with a trace of cranberry - 15 and 15.5 points a pricey piece respectively.

Tawny port is the wine drinker's answer to Nanjing's climate, being equally at home next to a roaring air con on a dank chilly day or drunk stone cold from the fridge in a searing heat wave. A tawny typically has a faded brown colour, due to the oxidative process in wood barrel ageing. The average time the wines have spent in wood is stated on the label; nutty and sweet they can be as rich as Croesus at the 40-year mark, though you will need to be as cashed up as the old king himself to buy them over here. Humbler tawny fare, where the age is not stated, can also make for a great wine, see the Don Pablo Tawny (a mere ¥79 from Metro); brick-red in the glass with a smack of caramel and marzipan on the tongue, and when chilled (my preference for any tawny) makes for a splendidly refreshing and satisfying spicy food partner. Chuff it along to the curry house and forget the lager, and the cigar (16.5 points). **NJ**