



WORDS CLIVE HARTLEY

CHANGING FORTUNES

PORT has suffered declining or static sales for a long time, partially due to its higher alcohol levels, its sweetness and the image that portrays the drink as an old man's tippie and not popular with young people, especially women. It's a pretty ingrained attitude. As long back as 1776, English author Samuel Johnson declared "Port is for men".

In Australia we dropped the word "port" many years ago for our locally made fortified wines and adopted the terms "vintage fortified and tawny". According to figures supplied by the Australian Bureau of Statistics, fortified wine sales fell by 6.5 per cent in 2013 and account for a mere 2.7 per cent of total Australian beverage sales. The market is in a poor state, but has it bottomed out? While it still may be seen languishing in the dusty corners of cellar doors at wineries that try and cover all bases, there are still a handful of serious producers. Barossa Valley, Rutherglen and Swan Valley remain bastions of fortified wines. Historic Seppeltsfield in the Barossa is probably the most famous and is one of those "must visit" destinations. Here they make their iconic Para Tawny and is unique in offering a 100-year-old Liqueur Para at the cellar door.

In Rutherglen, Stanton and Killeen specialise in vintage fortified. This was due to the work done by winemaker Chris Killeen, who sadly passed away in 2007. Killeen was a VP lover and it was his dream to make the finest vintage port in Australia, and I firmly believe he achieved his goal. He used traditional Portuguese varieties rather than shiraz and he made the style dryer than was the sweeter norm. This tradition is now faithfully carried on through the enthusiastic CEO Wendy Killeen and her team at Stanton and Killeen. I asked

Wendy if she had seen an increase in younger wine drinkers interested in vintage fortified? "Definitely, through the cellar door I see a lot of interest in VP by the younger generation," she said. "It seems it's more sophisticated to drink VP rather than just plain port."

"Demand is steady. Once a consumer is educated about the greatness of this style of fortified, they generally become loyal drinkers. We have a museum of VP vintages (most, but not all) that go back to the early seventies." A selection of these older vintages is available through the cellar door and three times a year they do a vertical tasting of the vintage ports, so

plunged and foot trod multiple times daily to maximise extraction before the fortification. Sugar levels are monitored closely and when close to the required level the must is pressed and fortified with the selected spirit. We aim for a drier style wine, so fortification is done quite late, between 5-6 Be, aiming for an apparent Be of around 2-2.5 degrees". Spirit selection, sourced from Tarac in South Australia, is a critical step and when Chris was alive he tried to source the finest spirit for his VP.

Stanton and Killeen follow much of the same process as real port. This comes from the Douro Valley in Portugal and there are many styles. Ruby is the cheapest and

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it's not surprising that the younger wine drinkers are interested. Who wouldn't be!

Stanton and Killeen use four Portuguese varieties in their vintage fortified. Each variety makes its own contribution to the blend, as Wendy explains: "Touriga nacional and tinta roriz (tempranillo) add floral aromas and colour, with hints of spice coming from the latter. Tinto cao adds structure and acidity; while tinta barroca adds floral notes and vibrancy."

Grapes are picked with slightly lower levels of baume, around 13 to 14 degrees. Andrew Drumm, winemaker at Stanton and Killeen, explains the production process: "We use shallow open fermenters constructed specially by us for vintage fortified production, being wide and shallow to increase skin contact. The ferments are

youngest port resembling a fruity fortified red wine. Tawnys vary incredibly. There are some cheap tawnys on the market that see minimal ageing, but the best are a blend of different years matured in oak and bottled at different ages. The age indicated on the label, either 10, 20, 30 or 40 years is only an approximation or average. The slow process of oxidation and esterification produces an orange/tawny colour and aromas and flavours of nuts, raisin fruits and coffee, depending on the age. The 20 to 40-year-old blends are some of the finest ports made and the price reflects that.

LBVs is a port from a single year kept in oak for four to six years and then bottled. I've always known them as a poor man's vintage port, but they can be a nice way of ending a meal. Crusted port is a rare breed.

Here two or three vintages are blended and matured for a couple of years then bottled. Occasionally crusted port has the potential of great bottle age and is a lot cheaper than vintage port. They mature in bottle and will develop sediment or “throw a crust”, hence the name. Another rare port is the colheita which is from one vintage but is aged for a minimum of seven years in barrel then bottled - a sort of vintage tawny.

That just leaves vintage port. Regarded as the pinnacle of production, it is a collector wine but only represents a mere 1 per cent of production. Made from a blend of the finest grapes sourced from the best sub-region (Cima Corgo) and only produced in a good vintage, a port house produces simply one vintage port for that year. In other years the house may make a single quinta vintage port which is released when they don’t “declare” a vintage; in other words when they decide not to make a house vintage port that year. Quinta is the Portuguese term for estate so these are from one vineyard and it would be sourced from their best vineyards.

There are some treasured traditions at the table when it comes to port. Vintage port is traditionally passed to the left or clockwise around a table. If someone fails to pass the port, you say: “Do you know the Bishop of Norwich?” which is supposed to bring to their attention that the port needs passing ... it’s a long story.

Ruby and filtered LBVs can keep for around a week, while aged tawny can go for a month. The older the vintage fortified wine the quicker it should be consumed. Port should be served in at least an ISO tasting glass and never in those archaic small fortified wine glasses that hold 60ml filled to the brim.

