

“Anniversary Fortified Tasting”

Institute of Masters of Wine, September 2013 – Trinity House, London

This was an exceptional experience for those who adore fortified wines as I do. I was certainly not alone in reaching moments of vinous ecstasy during this tasting. Sadly, I did not have time to taste all the wines and chose to concentrate on the comparatively drier styles and leave off the richest and most unctuous. Some of these glorious fortifieds are indeed fairly expensive and quite rare, but many are modestly priced considering their extraordinary complexity and dimension of flavor. I am presenting the wines more or less in the order tasted, essentially from the driest and most delicate to those which are full and sweet, with a detour now and again. It is important to recall that “sweetness” is not governed strictly by measurable sugar content given the very high acidities of some fortifieds. In other words, it is the *apparent* sweetness that counts in tasting terms.

Hidalgo-La Gitana Manzanilla Pasada Pastrana – Spain *****

Pale gold. Beautiful and enticing with subdued flor and blanched nut. The palate delivers a clean entry, appealing texture and is notably long and elegant with very fine acidity and a subtle nutmeat undertone. High class. Aged 12 years. At around \$30 retail in the U.S., this is a superb value.

Equipo Navazos La Bota de Manzanilla 42, Sanlúcar – Spain *****

Pale gold. Assertive nose displaying roasted nut and a volatile lift. Commands attention and draws you in. In the mouth, there is fabulous focus, intensity and a long line. This has racy follow-through and superb finesse. Particularly lasting saline conclusion. Individual and deserving of its \$50 price tag.

Rey Fernando de Castilla Antique Palo Cortado, Jerez – Spain *****

Pale yellow with tawny highlights. Multifaceted aromatics offering dried white and yellow fruits and a delicate, fine nuttiness. The taste is gorgeous and weightless with an elevated acid spine. Very long aftertaste delivering highly aromatic and expressive roasted nuts. Totally arresting.

Emilio Hidalgo Amontillado 1874 “El Tresillo,” Jerez – Spain *****

Very pale tawny yellow. Beautifully mature bouquet with varied reflections of white fruits together with nutty, oily and oxidative characteristics. The palate is vibrant and very dry, with dramatic intensity and well-aged flavors. A pronounced backbone carries exciting nutty and white fruit accents.

Barbadillo Reliquia Amontillado “Manuel y Aurora,” Sanlúcar – Spain *****

Very pale yellow with brick cast. Marked rancio bouquet offering roasted nuts and old wood and showing great composure and maturity. In the mouth, this very old Amontillado has remarkable substance and presence with notable evolved and roasted flavors, yet retains a transparent feel. The finish is impressively long and dry. Aged around 100 years in a single cask refreshed by another old Amontillado.

González Byass Palo Cortado “La Canoa,” Jerez – Spain **+**

Very pale yellow gold with extremely light tawny tint. The nose is particularly focused with surprising freshness, offering blanched nut and dried yellow fruit notes. There is wonderful richness and volume on the palate – this fine Palo Cortado really fills the mouth. Terrific aromatic expression and complexity through a warm and riveting finale.

Lustau Oloroso VORS (30 years old), Jerez – Spain *****

Very pale yellow with a suggestion of tawny. Gorgeous, profound bouquet, totally captivating and multidimensional with subdued rancio expression and great class. In the mouth, this Sherry is more linear than the nose implies – very long with wonderful tension, finishing with very fine roasted inflections.

Curatolo Arini Marsala Superiore Riserva 1988 – Italy ****

Very pale yellow gold with a faint touch of tawny. Very subtle, complex aromatic expression with noteworthy focus delivering almonds, candied white fruit and complementary oxidative aspects. This Marsala exhibits a lovely, disguised sweetness and polished feel along with very subtle dried fruits and a roasted overtone. Ends just a bit short. This is a blend of base wine, table wine, mistella (fresh must with alcohol), and mosto cotto. Aged for 22 years in small Slavonian oak casks. 18% alc.

De Bartoli Marsala Vecchio Samperi Ventennale – Italy *****

Very pale yellow gold with tawny cast. Well-developed and forthcoming nose, nutty and not at all dense. The taste follows the nose and has a light, delicate and transparent profile. Exceptionally long, finishing with an extraordinary high-toned flourish of rancio and roasted qualities.

Blandy's Verdelho Madeira 1887 – Portugal *****

Very pale yellow gold with tawny. Exceptionally intense and vital bouquet revealing sweet accents at first, then superb complexity marked by oily, nutty and volatile highlights. The palate has transparency and striking aromatic lift with subtle rancio notes. The aftertaste is long and retains vibrant, fresh acidity, concealing the sweetness beneath (91.25 g/l). A great old wine! Identified in 2011 and bottled from demi-john in 2013.

Henriques & Henriques Sercial Madeira 1971 – Portugal **+**

Very pale tawny yellow. Penetrating to the nose, but the volatility adds interest. The bouquet is marked by an oiliness and small dried white fruits. In the mouth, this Sercial is wonderfully alive and seemingly without any density. Marvelous acidity carries mature flavors. Has real intensity and an extremely elegant dry finish.

Quinta do Noval Nacional Vintage Port 1994, Douro – Portugal **(*)**

Moderately dense red with a still-youthful purple rim. The nose is rich and clearly concentrated though contained. Very classy and wonderfully deep dark fruit. In the mouth, Nacional displays notable focus and youthful cut. There is marvelous precision and equilibrium. Defined by a fresh frame of acidity at the end. This 1994 is only just entering the mid-point of a very long life.

Taylor Quinta de Vargellas Single Quinta Port 1970 – Portugal ****

Very pale dark red. Aromatically, Vargellas is very attractive and soft with considerable charm, just passing the red-fruit stage of life. The taste is warm with an underpinning of sweetness (106 g/l). There are subtle notes of development and a warm, lasting, rather soft ending. Drinks well now and is likely to become more delicate over the next 7 to 10 years.

Taylor Vintage Port 1955 – Portugal ****

Very pale red, slightly cloudy. Well-developed yet quite intense, warm nose offering small red fruits, licorice and hints of dried spice. The palate shows more evolution, but is still warm and rich with understated flavors. This 1955 is losing its strength at this stage and may not have the material to improve further.

Niepoort Vintage Port 1952 – Portugal *+**

Very pale brown with clear yellow rim. The bouquet of this '52 is soft and understated with restrained candied fruit and a smoky nuance. In the mouth, the Port is gentle, resolved and round. Has charm but not excitement. Drink up.

Ramos Pinto 60-year old Tawny Port – Portugal *****

Light brown with yellow edge, unusually viscous and concentrated. To the nose, this old Tawny is warm and particularly rich, suggesting prune and fig. The palate is stupendous, not at all viscous as the appearance implies, yet caressing and exceptionally lasting. At first, there is pointed acidity in the finale; then, a delicate sweetness and dried figs which remain on the palate for some time. A superb and individual Port, blended from 1937 and 1962 with some 40-year old and small quantities from 1924, 1909, and a wine over 100 years old.

Graham's "Diamond Jubilee" Colheita Port 1952 – Portugal **+**

Very pale dark brown with transparent green rim. Surprisingly youthful nose with a sense of sweet dried yellow fruit and fig. The palate reveals the lightening of age and is particularly delicate with persistent, elevated acidity.

Graham's Colheita Port 1935 – Portugal *****

Pale brown with green rim. The mature bouquet displays gentle volatility and warm lift as well as a subtle rancio undertone and nutty accents. In the mouth, the Port at first delivers intense, bracing acidity and then remains for a long time, offering remarkably rich flavors for a wine nearly 80 years of age, with persistent roasted highlights. A grand old Port.

Graham's Vintage Port 1970 – Portugal ****

Moderately dense dark red. Rather open, with a background of red fruit, although it has lost the strength it possessed earlier in its life. The taste is warm and gently fruity. There is sweetness matched by well-balanced acidity. Enjoyable now.

Domaine Cazes Rivesaltes “Cuvée Aimé Cazes” 1978 – France **+**

Very pale yellow with light tawny cast. The bouquet is subtle, suggesting dried yellow fruit with spice and sweet fig accents. On the palate, this 1978 is notably delicate, lacy and very fine. There is delightful subtlety and even youthful freshness and fruit. The wine has considerable sugar (110 g/l), but it is offset by an elegant embedded acid frame. 80% Grenache blanc, 20% Grenache noir.

Domaine de la Rectorie Banyuls “L’Oublée” 1978 – France ****

Very pale brown. Soft, subtle bouquet offering an inviting rancio tone and sweet accents. The palate is distinguished by its delicacy and finesse. There is the satisfying subtlety of full maturity, and the wine finishes with a noteworthy spinal column of acidity.

Mas Amiel Maury “Charles Dupuy” 2009 – France **(+)**

Moderately dense very dark red purple. This Maury offers an exuberant aroma of healthy dark berries and is vibrant and very youthful. The taste as well is defined by gorgeous, ripe berry fruit. There is a well-calibrated interplay of sweetness, alcohol and acidity. So fresh and full of charm it can be drunk now, or laid down.

Château de Chambert “Rogomme” Malbec – France ****

Moderately dense very dark red. The nose displays concentration, focus and a medley of red fruits and subtle creaminess. There are tertiary accents as well. The taste has wonderful expressiveness and dimension with a background of generous fruit and evident but controlled sweetness. Generous, warm finish. This vin de liqueur comes from Cahors. They destem and heat the grapes, adding spirit to the warm juice. 17% alcohol, 167 g/l RS.

Orlando Tawny 1947 – Australia ****

Viscous, moderately dense tawny with green rim. Very mature to the nose with dominant old wood and penetrating volatility, beneath which is a profound richness and the scent of dark raisins. The palate is arrestingly intense and creamy with marked volatile highlights. Thick and viscous with lasting vanilla in the conclusion. Highly impressive, a real mouthful – but I would find this difficult to drink.