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Journal

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Hearty Port Pairs Well With Sweets

By [Jim Hammond](#)

Of the Journal

Now that Thanksgiving leftovers are only a pleasant memory, it's time to get ready for the holidays. While sugar plums may not be dancing in your head as they will be on stages where "The Nutcracker" ballet plays, many of the sweets depicted therein will be on your table.

That leaves the question: What wines will complement the high sugar content of holiday goodies?

While many wines do go well with sweets— chocolate and Cabernet Sauvignon, for example— one class of wines will always complement desserts, but also stand alone when our sweet tooth begins to throb.

Fortified wines such as port and sherry provide an understated sweetness and welcome warmth to those cold winter nights. Portugal and Spain, respectively, are home to these wines, although New World versions abound.

A British favorite

Port is a fortified wine in which the fermentation is halted by the addition of distilled grape spirits, or brandy. Because some of the sugar has not been converted, the resulting wine is sweet. Sherry is fortified immediately after the fermentation has completed, making sherry naturally dry. Alcoholic content is higher than unfortified wines but still gentle on the palate for those who find cocktails too potent.

Port wine was shipped to England in the early 1700s while the British were at war with France and deprived of their claret. Pity, but it seems the British were often at war with the French. Because the long sea voyage would spoil the wine, the Portuguese fortified it to prevent oxidation, and port was the result.

The British became avid drinkers and importers of port; many of the wine merchants who export port are British firms.

Port comes from the Douro Valley in northern Portugal, and received its name from the seaport city of Porto at the mouth of the Douro River. Red and white port are made from several red and white grape varieties, with red port the most popular.

Tawny port is aged in wooden barrels, which impart a golden-brown color. Ruby port is stored in concrete or stainless steel tanks after fermentation to preserve the rich claret color and then stored for three to

five years. Vintage port, derived from a single vintage year, must be approved by the regulatory body's tasting panel and comes with a much higher price tag.

While you can enjoy port with many desserts or by itself it really shines when paired with Stilton cheese, an English blue cheese. One could substitute Gorgonzola, but the English would claim it's not the same thing.

Some suggestions

I suggest starting with amontillado ports, which are plentiful and inexpensive, and work up or down the range based on what your palate prefers. Try it with baklava, but keep your sticky fingers off the bottle.

Port wine is also made domestically, often using the Zinfandel grape, although I've tasted port made with merlot and other red wine grapes. Some New Mexico wineries also make port. Conditions have to be just right for making port, and few, if any, domestic wineries can pull it off every year. Try both domestic and porto wines as they taste very different.

Prices for the imported ports start at \$10, but can climb to several hundred dollars for vintage ports.

Several years ago I had a glass of Taylor Fladgate vintage port at a high-end restaurant. I neglected to ask the price and nearly choked when the bill was \$35. Maybe that's how the Duke of Clarence really met his end. Salut!

Jim Hammond has been exploring wines in North America, Europe, and Australia for more than 20 years. A published author, he includes information about wine in every book. You can reach Jim at jim@jim-hammond.com.

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