

PRESS REPORT
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WEST SURREY WINE SOCIETY DECEMBER MEETING
Port Wines with Charles Minoprio MW

An evening with Charles Minoprio MW tasting a range of fine ports accompanied by mince pies and stilton cheese made the perfect start to the festive season for members of the West Surrey Wine Society. A renowned after-dinner speaker to Vintners dinners and the port houses in Oporto among others, members had been looking forward to his visit and were not disappointed. With a long and distinguished career in the wine trade, including Chairman of the Institute of Masters of Wine and the Champagne Academy and Master of the Worshipful Company of Distillers, he proved to be a wonderful raconteur with a pithy sense of humour and an amazing stock of historical anecdotes. His two-hour presentation went in a flash leaving Society members urging him to make a return visit.

Port, said Charles, was designed for the British climate by the British and is made by the Portuguese in mainly British companies which are still largely owned by the British. He described Oporto as “the last outpost of the British Empire” and it became clear as members tasted the Taylors Chip Dry White, (the first white port made) which is really an aperitif, that port is inextricably linked to the long history of English involvement in Portugal dating back to the Second Crusade in 1147 when English troops diverted to Oporto to help drive out the Moors and many of them settled there. The Treaty of Windsor in 1386 between England and Portugal, which is still valid today, cemented close relations and Oliver Cromwell’s insistence that no English person could be tried by a Portuguese court as a condition for supporting Portugal against the Dutch made Portugal a very attractive home!

The English market for wines from the Douro, the centre of port production, opened up when England banned the import of wines from Bordeaux during the war with France and dropped the tax on Portuguese wine. Port evolved from shippers adding brandy to wine to stabilise it for the long voyage to England where the sweet smooth wine proved ideal for the cool British climate. The well known British port houses, such as Symingtons, Taylors, Sandeman and Warre, were established from the late 1600’s onwards and still dominate the port trade, however port as we know it did not appear until well into the 1800’s. More than 50 varieties of grapes are permitted in making port. The steep-sided extremely hot Douro Valley is a difficult and costly environment for growing vines which partly explains why they can cost so much.

In between these fascinating insights Charles took society members through the different styles of port. Tawny ports are aged in barrels for up to 40 years. He showed a Wine Society’s 10 year old and a Graham’s 20 year old. Opinion was split between the softer rounder 10 year and the drier 20. He warned that cheap tawnies are usually a mix of white and basic ruby – and best avoided! LBV ports or late-bottled vintage were introduced by Taylors in the 1970’s – usually a blend of vintages held in cask for up to 6 years and intended as a substitute for vintage ports. The Wine Society’s LBV 2012 was easy drinking but rather bland. Crusted ports such as the Wine Society’s Exhibition 2007 are also a blend but kept in bottle for 3 years and this example showed it has much more flavour and depth than the LBV.

The top quality ports are vintage ports. These are the very best ruby ports kept in barrel for 2 years and then assessed to see if they are good enough to be ‘declared’ which happens only 2 or 3 times in a decade. Vintages not good enough to be ‘declared’ are often sold as single-quinta (a quinta is a wine estate) ports such as the Quinta dos Canais 2010 that members tasted – still very young and fruity. The Taylors 1985 was from a ‘declared’ year – a much appreciated opportunity to taste a classic port. Vintage ports are at their peak from 20 – 40 years after bottling, though some over 100 years old are still in excellent condition.

For more information on West Surrey Wine Society please visit www.westsurreywinesociety.org.uk

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