

IN WINE COUNTRY

“I make ports that I like.”

As the holiday entertaining season approaches, we thought it might be valuable to learn more about dessert wines. Fortunately, a creator of fine dessert wines is located in Petaluma: Sonoma Valley Portworks.

In 1992, while trying to create the perfect after-dinner table wine, a dash of chocolate essence inadvertently dropped into the glass of port Sonoma Valley Portworks' winemaker was enjoying at the end of the day. One sip and he knew he had stumbled onto something extraordinary. Blending a touch of bittersweet chocolate with aged tawny and liqueur port from South Australia, SVP created Deco.

Since then, the company has introduced two more blended ports: Maduro, a blend of the best from three different South Australian port styles; and Aris, from grapes grown in the Clarksburg area.

Port, sherry, dessert wines, and after-dinner wines all have one thing in common. They have been “fortified.” Fortifying is the process of adding brandy spirits to the fermenting must. The grapes that are used to make port are harvested much the same way as table wine grapes, although often they are allowed to ripen on the vine a bit longer to concentrate the natural grape sugars. The grapes are crushed and pressed, and fermentation is initiated. About halfway through the fermentation process, a high-proof grape spirit (brandy) is added to the fermenting must. By Law, the spirit has to be grape based and distilled to approximately 190 proof -- almost pure alcohol. Brandy spirit halts the fermentation process. The wine is then put into barrels for aging and future blending.

The sweetness you taste in a fortified wine is the natural grape sugar that has not been

fully fermented into alcohol. The higher alcohol in fortified wine is a combination of the alcohol created by the beginning fermentation (5-6%) and the brandy spirit added to stop the fermentation process (13-14%). Most ports have a total of 18 -21% alcohol, and 8-12% residual sugar.

Sonoma Valley Portworks' Bill Reading told the Post his port-making philosophy.

“My palate is the determining factor. And, what I like are ports that are fruit driven, not masked by either the alcohol or residual sugar. The fruit can come from the wine grapes or the grape spirit used to fortify the fermenting must.

“The best port grapes are ones that have enough body and structure to stand up to the fortifying spirit, higher grape sugars, and many months of wood aging. To my taste, petite sirah is California's premier port grape.

“The fortifying spirit plays a big role in the final outcome of the port. Many port-makers purchase off-the-shelf 190 proof continuous still spirits made from who-knows-what grapes. At 190 proof, the spirit has no discernable character – no taste, no smell, no color. It is used to stop the fermentation and nothing else.

“For my petite sirah ports, I use a lower proof spirit (145 proof) made from premium North Coast grapes distilled in an Armagnac pot still. The lower proof means that much of the grape character was retained. I then age the spirit in small oak casks for 18 months. Because it is lower in alcohol, I use more of it to arrest the fermentation. This spirit adds additional layers of flavor and maturity to the finished port.

“The ports I buy for blending are from wineries that have been making premium fortified wines for

many decades – in both California and Australia. One of the Australian port houses I buy from has been making port for more than 150 years. They have 125 contiguous vintages in wood in their aging warehouse. We are the first and only winery that the Australia government allows to import fortified wine for blending and bottling in the United States.

“Many ports are more than 20% alcohol. It's my opinion that when alcohol exceeds 19.5%, it becomes too dominant. I try to keep the alcohol in all my ports below 19%.

I have the same philosophy about retained grape sugars. Many ports are over 12% residual sugar, which I consider cloying. I try to keep my ports below 10% sugar. If a port is more than 19.5% alcohol, and more than 12% retained sugar, chances are all you're going to taste is alcohol and sugar.

“If, however, you're interested in rich, fruit-forward flavors that will linger sensuously on the palate and finish cleanly without too much alcoholic heat, then this is what you want. You want a port made from the right grapes, with the care of hand (and foot)-crafting, close-monitoring of the conversion of sugar to alcohol, and the careful addition of a premium, barrel-aged spirit.

That's what I like. That's what I make.”

Sonoma Valley Portworks also makes a California cream sherry (Duet), a 9-year-old fortified muscat (Amuse), and a grappa (Spirit of the Harvest). Their tasting room is at 613 2nd Street in Petaluma and open weekdays. Call 707.769.5203 for a tasting appointment. Visit portworks.com for more information.



CAREERS IN NUTRITION SINCE 1989



- Natural Chef
- Nutrition Educator
- Nutrition Consultant

- Penngrove, Berkeley, Santa Cruz - Classroom or Distance Learning format - Organic emphasis - Comprehensive and affordable

FREE LECTURES with Ed Bauman, Ph.D.

ASTHMA, ALLERGIES & ADRENAL BURNOUT,
October 6, 6-7:30 pm, Bauman College Penngrove

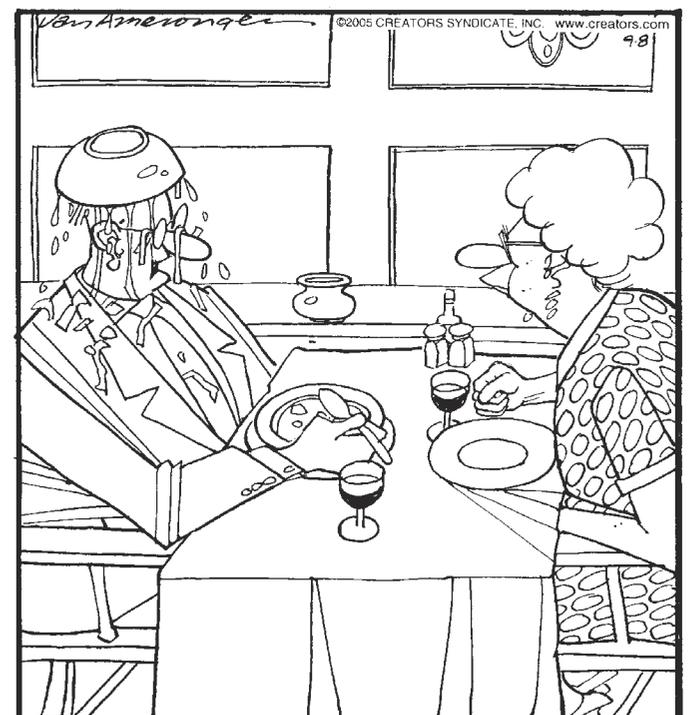
HEADACHES AND HEARTACHES
November 3, 6-7:30 pm, Bauman College/Penngrove

10151 Main St., Ste 128, Penngrove

www.baumancollege.org, (800) 987-7530

BALLARD STREET

by Jerry Van Amerongen



“Then you disagree with my assessment?...”