

# wines

## FOR A FORTIFIED FESTIVE FINISH

By Simon Hardy, of Fitting Wines



*illustration by Valentina Shapiro*

A great way to add flourish to this festive time of year is to indulge in the delights of so-called fortified wines. Port and sherry are the standard-bearers of the fortified style of wine, yet many of today's wine drinkers have either never tried them or ignored them as being too sweet. Regrettably, therefore, it has become one of the less familiar styles in the wonderful world of wine. Fortified wines make some of the best pairings for blue cheeses, fruity and nutty desserts, Christmas pudding and all things chocolate (the darker, the better). They can also be enjoyed simply as a digestif after a meal or to

accompany a moment of meditation, which (for some) might include a cigar. In fact, the French commonly refer to these wines as "vins de méditation". As the old year gives way to the new, any celebration would seem incomplete without fortified wines, since they make such perfect seasonal partners.

The fortification process not only accentuates the fresh fruit flavours of the grapes that go into these wines, but also results in alcohol levels of between 15% and 20%. The addition of alcohol stops the fermentation and prevents the yeasts from converting any more of the grape sugars to alcohol. The level of unfermented sugars that remain in the wine

is therefore higher than you find in a typical dry table wine and accounts for the naturally sweet taste of many fortified wines. It's worth noting that the higher the level of alcohol, the longer you can safely keep the fortified wine – providing you have enough either space or patience (not to mention bank balance).

Here is a short guide to several types of fortified wines, which range from lighter and finer to richer and heavier, along with some recommended examples to serve with your festive meals. Fortified wines are best enjoyed in small glasses, which help to moderate the alcohol kick.

## VIDAL-FLEURY – MUSCAT DE BEAUMES DE VENISE 2010



15.0% alcohol

Drinking window:  
Now to 2025 though  
best drunk young

Serve at 8° C

Muscat is one of the few wines that most people describe as actually smelling and tasting of grapes. This style of fortified wine, or "vin doux naturel", as it is called in France, is made from the Muscat Blanc à Petits Grains, the finest of the many varieties of Muscat. Its exquisite and delicate aromas of dried apricot,

honey, lychee, orange zest and maple syrup lead to a full-bodied yet wonderfully fresh wine with great acidity that's not excessively sweet. This lighter expression of fortified wine goes well with fruit salad, fruit tarts, walnut cake, crème brûlée, and ice cream, as well as foie gras and blue cheeses.



## DOMAINE DE LA RECTORIE – BANYULS CUVÉE LÉON PARCÉ 2010



17.0% alcohol

Drinking window:  
Now to 2040

Serve slightly  
cooler than room  
temperature

Banyuls is a hidden wine treasure from the Roussillon, the sunniest region of France, with its Catalan heritage, where the wine traditions are reminiscent of Spain just across the border. This youthful style of Banyuls is sweet, intense and rich in fruits (as opposed to the maderized style of a traditional, aged Banyuls). Made predominantly from 50-year-old Grenache Noir vines, the wine is a vibrant deep purple, and reveals aromas

of blueberries, blackberries, macerated cherries, dark chocolate and a nice touch of charcoal. A fabulous depth of flavour with fine-grained tannins delivers a rich, yet not especially complex wine due to its young age. It is best enjoyed with chocolate desserts (dark chocolate in particular), profiteroles, red and black fruit desserts and blue cheeses. By keeping it in the fridge after opening you can enjoy it over many weeks or even months.



## WINE & SOUL – 10-YEAR-OLD TAWNY PORT



19.5% alcohol

Drinking window:  
Now to 2025

Serve lightly chilled

The tradition of making Port in the Douro valley of Portugal goes back more than 300 years. While many Port producers can boast proud histories, this particular producer is relatively young; it produced this port to celebrate its 10th anniversary. Made from a field blend of over 30 different local grape varieties and pressed in the time-honoured fashion by foot, this 10-year-old Tawny spent more than ten years in old chestnut barrels.

The colour is amber gold and the complex aromas combine nuts with figs and honey. The gorgeous fruit flavours of this very rich and smooth wine persist on the palate long after each sip. It pairs nicely with chocolate desserts, dried fruits, apple pie, crème caramel and terrine of foie gras. Aged Tawny should not be confused with the light, bulk-produced Tawny enjoyed as an aperitif by the French.



## LEACOCK'S – MEDIUM RICH BUAL MADEIRA 15 YEARS OF AGE



19% alcohol

Drinking Window:  
Now to 2030 and  
beyond

Serve slightly  
cooler than room  
temperature

There is no wine quite like Madeira grown on the small, volcanic Portuguese island of the same name off the Moroccan coast. Made from one of the rare noble varieties, this Bual is golden brown, raisiny and medium rich, in other words reasonably sweet (as it is fortified early in the fermentation process). The wine has been aged in large oak casks and deliberately heated by the sun under the eaves of the producer's lodge, one of the effects of which is to give the wine an almost

limitless lifespan. The youngest component in the blend is 15 years old, though the wine tastes like a more expensive single vintage Madeira. Be prepared for pronounced notes of dried fruits, honey, walnuts, gingerbread and liquorice, all sustained by a lingering after-taste that goes on and on. Serve it with warm foie gras, blue cheeses, nutty desserts, bread and butter pudding and crème brûlée. As Madeira can last for many months once opened there is no rush to finish the bottle.



## TORO ALBALA – DON PX PEDRO XIMÉNEZ GRAN RESERVA MONTILLA-MORILES 1985



17.0% alcohol

Drinking window:  
Now to 2035

Serve very cold  
straight from the  
fridge

Produced in Montilla-Moriles, a neighbouring region to Sherry in Andalusia, this sticky, bitter-sweet, yet very fresh-tasting wine is as dark and viscous as molasses, and best described as liquid Christmas pudding. Raisins, liquorice and tobacco aromas are followed by an explosion of dark chocolate, roasted coffee and fruitcake flavours.

It is hardly surprising that this wine, whose Pedro Ximénez grapes (known as PX) were left to dry in the baking sun of southern Spain, is the ideal match with Christmas pudding. Or try pouring it over ice-cream, especially vanilla. You will never be able to thank me enough! It also goes well with dark chocolate fondant and brownies.



Please contact Simon  
at [simon.hardy@fittingwines.com](mailto:simon.hardy@fittingwines.com) if you wish to order  
any of the wines listed here. Prices range from under  
CHF 18.00 per half bottle to CHF 50.00 per bottle.

Simon Hardy



Simon loves wine and knows an awful lot about it. He has been awarded the Diploma in Wines & Spirits, the top qualification at the Wine & Spirit Education Trust in the UK, and is an Associate Member of the Institute of Wines & Spirits in London. He is the founder of Fitting Wines, offering a range of personalized wine services. Contact Simon for a free consultation. He also presents a weekly wine show "On the Grapevine" with Mark Butcher on WRS.