

Whether it's a light rosé or a £2,500 vintage, port is shaking off its dusty image for a richer future. **Ellie Broughton** asks where the new buzz has come from, and how to invest wisely in its niche market.

IN A GLASS DARKLY



There was a time when the only thing that touched a bottle of port was dust, but today consumers are reaching out for another taste of the historic wine.

Once the preserve of Oxford colleges, boozy cheese courses and a pre-driving-limit era, a number of factors conspired to take port out of the picture. Increasingly stringent drink-driving laws, reduced restaurant spend and the rising popularity of the cocktail have all put pressure on consumers to drop the port course. Yet port had held its own in the market; the average export price having fallen.

But new developments from top port houses have stirred up interest from both old and new consumers. Port might well have been out of style for a decade, but this year it's making up for lost time. Its producers have begun

to invest in both the beginner and the experienced port drinker, with three major launches coming from the British Fladgate Partnership.

At the upper end of the market, the seasoned port drinker has been catered for this year with a couple of new launches. Fladgate's first wine hotel The Yeatman opened in Porto, Portugal, in September 2010, and the company followed this launch by releasing a limited edition vintage at £2,500 a bottle. Producers have also looked for ways to debunk port's stuffy image with the launch of pink port and easy-drinking brands such as Noval Black – neither of which need to be decanted,

and both with cocktail recipes behind them.

These new trends have come a long way from port's first incarnation. It was created for the British market, as consumers were priced out of the market for French table wines during the War of the Spanish Succession in the early 1700s.

Portugal signed an agreement with Britain to import its product at a lower duty, and compensated for the longer sea freight by adding brandy to preserve the wine. The Douro Valley, where port begins its life, is the world's third oldest appellation after Chianti and Tokaj, and the wine is now established as an intrinsic aspect of English dining.

Serena Sutcliffe is head of Sotheby's international wine department and an expert on port. She points out that, in contrast with the hundreds of Bordeaux and burgundy chateaux in France, there are only around 10 quality port houses in the world. This makes it a lot easier for collectors to acquaint themselves with the house styles and vintages on the



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market, and also makes collecting port a more exclusive hobby.

The good years

Some port wines can be enjoyed as soon as they are released, but the most prized bottles are the vintage ports. 'Vintage years are announced just three or four times a decade,' she explains. 'But port has a very long life, with some vintages from the 1940s and 1950s drinking fabulously now.'

Sutcliffe advises beginners to read the websites of different port houses such as Taylor's, Fonseca, Noval and Graham. The next step is to develop the palette for port by sharing a mature vintage with friends. She suggests

buyers look for underrated vintages. 'The 2003s are not expensive now; you might spend £500 for 12 bottles of a wonderful Taylors for instance. But the 1997 Taylors is a bit less in price than the 2003 and it's quite a tip. I think the 1997 is the underrated vintage of the 1990s. There are now some great 1994s, and, if you've got the money and want an absolute classic from way back, look to the 1970s. The 1970 in particular is a bargain.'

Port is still a beautiful match for autumnal and festive foods, such as stews and casseroles, cheese and fresh walnuts, and will always be a favourite of cold northern European countries. However, wine buffs in Russia are beginning to develop a taste for port and it also has fans in the air-conditioned dining rooms of East Asia. This historic British investment could soon become a global favourite. ■

THE YEATMAN HOTEL: A LOT OF BOTTLE

Port has not only inspired new waves of collectors and bartenders this year, it has also been the driving force behind a new wine hotel. The Yeatman sits on the slopes of Vila Nuova de Gaia, Portugal, the historic town in which port is made and most of the port houses store their barrels.

The hotel is just a minute's walk away from the nearest port lodge and an hour and half's drive from the Douro Valley. However, the Yeatman's own 25,000-bottle wine cellar will stop guests straying too far from the restaurant, as will its new Caudalie spa.

From wine dinners sponsored by local producers to white port cocktails on the terrace, the hotelier's passion for Portuguese wine is infectious. Book for São João (St John's Festival) on June 23 and 24 to see the Yeatman's river view at its best.

