



BLANKIET ESTATE

Dear Friends,

At the end of the 17th century, Europe was again divided by regional wars. England, Austria, and the Dutch Republic were fighting France who had allied herself with Spain. In 1690, England increased her import duties on French goods by 400% and France retaliated by banning English cloth importation and the exportation of wine. England had grown fond of Bordeaux clarets, so she had to find a new source for wine. Portugal's coastal regions were the closest alternative, but their red wines were thin and acidic and did not travel well by boat. Pioneering English merchants searched the upper reaches of the Douro river for more robust wines that would survive the journey to England. The story is that two Portuguese brothers thought of fortifying their wine by adding brandy. The alcohol gave the sweeter wines protection against spoilage during the voyage and its' fortified character became an instant success in England. A treaty, known as the Port Wine Treaty, was signed in 1703, boosting trade between England and Portugal. It was the beginning of the port industry.

In Portugal, vineyards are planted in the hot and humid northern part of the country along the steep bank of the Douro River. The Duero, as it is known in Spain, originates at 7,000 feet in the Iberian Peninsula's north plateau. It crosses into Portugal in an east-west direction through steep gorges where generations of farmers carved and maintained narrow terraces to make its' way to the seaside town of Porto. Over 100 varietals are allowed in Portugal to make port, but only five or six are widely used. Some have powerful tannins like cabernet sauvignon, others the fruitiness of merlot or the high notes of cabernet franc. Generally, they are high vigor, high sugar with dark fruit characteristics when grown in Portugal's terroirs.

Many different styles of port are made and classified according to a highly regulated system depending upon other things: the vintage and their time in barrel. The best ports are made, not surprisingly, from fruit grown on the steepest vineyards from the best years and blended to near perfection by the talented Quinta's winemakers. Because port wines can age for an exceptionally long time, they can achieve unbelievable complexity.

Katherine and I love port as an after-dinner sipping drink. Thirty years ago, we started buying and laying down in our cellar, a few bottles from a handful of producers. Owning a vineyard and winery, we were destined to try to make some from our estate. The first vintage was made in 2007. We used sorted berries that were too ripe for our flagship wine program but still had the high acidity characteristics from our site. The berries were fermented in French barrels. Grape brandy that was distilled from our wine was used to stop the fermentation and keep some natural residual sugar. Every year we made a barrel or two, using the solera method and adding the new fortified wine to the previous year's production. By 2013 a few promising tasting barrels attracted the attention of our French cooper friends who were visiting us. Our port trials were nearing the quality of the top Portuguese producers.

We saw a dramatic improvement in our port after two new optical sorters were installed at our winery. Special software was created to sort out the berries with a higher sugar content than the ones used for our estate wines. These berries also had sweet plum and fig flavors that we felt were perfect for port making. We also began to age our port in old Cognac barrels from France that stored brandy for 30 years.

Being an incorrigible collector of things, I began buying at auction, old wine bottles dating from the 16th, 17th, and 18th centuries. The bulbous shape of these hand-blown vessels reminded me of the rum bottles that pirates favored on their ships because they did not fall off the table while sailing through rough seas. Sourcing the glass for this flat-bottomed bottle was a challenge. Finally, after a yearlong search, we found a glass producer in Italy willing to make bottles for us. Then we commissioned some of the best engravers in England to etch our angel logo on brass seals to make the wax cachets we hand-applied to the curved glass bottles.

So, fourteen years after our first experiment, we decided it was time to bottle some of our port. We created two blends for this inaugural release. The first one, named Prince of Hearts number 5, is our California expression of the fruitiness and complexity of a great vintage of Dow. It exhibits blueberries, blackberries, dark cherries, and oriental spices. The second blend, named Prince of Hearts number 7, is an homage to the Quinta Do Noval Nacional, exhibiting uncanny caramelized notes of pineapple flambé, fig jam and hoisin sauce. We conducted many blind tastings during the past two years, positioning our two blends against Portugal's best producers and their superb 2001, 2011, 2016, and 2017 vintages. We can assure you that our bottles are standing tall among all of them, but we invite you to be the judge.

Our inaugural release is limited to 500 wooden boxes containing one 500 ml. bottle of each blend and will be a wonderful gift for the coming holidays.

Celebrate life with a glass of port!



Claude and Katherine Blankiet