



## I make ports that I like...

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 both 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 (most?) 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 port, I use a lower proof spirit (145 proof) made from premium North Coast grapes distilled in a single-batch Armagnac pot still. The lower proof means that much of the grape character was retained. I then age the spirit in a solera system (probably the first in California). A solera is a blending system that retains a portion of the spirit from each vintage, minimizing character fluxuations from vintage to vintage. Additionally, each year, the solera spirit gains more depth and maturity. This spirit adds additional layers of flavor and age to the finished port.

The ports I buy for blending are from wineries which have been making premium fortified wines for many decades – both here in California and Australia. One of the Australian port houses I buy from has been making port for over 150 years. They have 125 contiguous vintages in wood in their aging warehouse. Among several other “firsts,” 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 over 20% alcohol. It's my opinion that when alcohol exceeds 19.5%, it becomes too dominant (hot). I try to keep the alcohol on all my ports below 19%. The same goes for the retained grape sugars. Again, many ports are 9% or more residual sugar (cloying). I keep my ports below 8% sugar. So, if a port is over 19.5% alcohol and over 9% retained sugar, chances are all you're going to taste is alcohol and sugar.

But, if you're more interested in rich, fruit-forward flavors that will both linger sensuously on the palate yet finish cleanly without too much alcoholic heat, then 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 do.

