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Wedding PLANNER

A Guide for Your Big Day





NOT JUST ANY PORT IN A STORM

Pairing food and wine is a lot like making beautiful music. A single note, played longingly by an alto sax, beckons for the rich deep bass, completed by the slow, steady swish of brushes on a snare drum, and the complex piano chords. Ah, jazz. A rich texture of sounds that slowly blends to perfection. You know, synergy. Take Port and chocolate, for example, it being February after all.

*A point of clarification about chocolate, for my male readers only:

You were thinking that the 14th was Valentine's Day? That's cute, but you'd be wrong, dude. The 14th is actually Boyfriend and/or Husband Assessment Day (and for your sake I hope it's not the "and"), so don't screw this up; spring for the real stuff. The real stuff meaning classic truffles from a chocolatier, not some foil-wrapped block you picked up at the grocery store. This ensures you of a high cocoa content and premium ingredients including – and this is the most important – natural vanilla. The chocolatier will tell you if it's in there. However, widely used and cleverly concealed in the ingredient lists of mass-produced chocolate is a synthetic vanilla flavoring derived from either petrochemicals or pine trees. Not very romantic, is it? Neither is the mouth-feel, which is a little gummy, a little plasticky, and altogether mediocre. It's important to remember that the kind of chocolate you bring her reflects directly on the kind of man you are. Do you really want her to be thinking artificial, synthetic and mediocre when she looks at you? Of course you don't. On the other hand, real chocolate is solid and authentic, rich and satisfying, with a silky mouth-feel and complex depth of flavor. All fine qualities in a man. See? She's looking at you differently already.

Although there are many fantastic chocolatiers in the metro area, my current favorite is Legacy Chocolates in St. Paul. I love the sheer honesty of the place; the focus is on wholesome, raw quality instead of frilly decoration. And that's you, isn't it?

If I can save just one couple from the horror of the heart-shaped box this year, I've done my job.



Welcome back ladies, and now for the Port. Or rather, dessert wine, according to EU regulations, as it hails from South Africa. Doing my research (no really, it was hard) for this column, I found that yes, the real dark chocolate I'm recommending rolls right over a vintage tawny Port. Every single one I tried got knocked flat. Incidentally, the vintage Ports do pair beautifully with cream-based desserts like crème brûlée and crème caramel, cheeses like English Stilton or Aged Gouda, and strangely enough, butterscotch (try the Butterscotch Budino at 112 Eatery with a vintage Taylor Fladgate).

But I loved the dark chocolate – what was I going to do? Thankfully, I had the good fortune to meet Roy Goslin, a South African wine distributor, who introduced me to a 2002 Hugo's Hill 2002 Cape Vintage Dessert Wine from Paul and Hugo de Villiers in the Paarl region. The beautiful blend is Tinta Barroca 6%, Tinta Roriz 22%, Souzão 22% and Touriga Nacional 50%. Each variety is harvested independently because they ripen at different times. Paul de Villiers develops each batch independently, and then blends them just before bottling. This is more time consuming and labor-intensive than the field blending that many use, but it's definitely worth it. Perhaps it's the Souzão, but this Cape Vintage has more than sufficient backbone to dance with the dark. For Valentine's Day, I was going to recommend that you try it in the dark, but the ruby color is so pretty – just leave the lights on. And pass the truffles. I particularly enjoyed the 99% Espresso, the 85% Classic and the 99% Double, in that order. They're rich, but satisfying without being filling, and that keeps you light on your feet in preparation for... future exertions.

For reasons never explained to me, in the late twentieth century blending was short-changed, even held in contempt. A disproportionate amount of emphasis was placed on single-malt this, single-barrel that. It was like some kind of quest for eugenic purity. What nonsense. Blending demands intimate knowledge and superior skill from the winemaker, the chocolatier, the chef, the musician. Come to think of it, some of the most enjoyable and promising things in recent memory are blends: Port, Bordeaux, Creole cuisine, jazz.

Enjoy the Port and chocolate this month.

Be so kind as to wait until morning to thank me. ■ Michael Swanson

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