

# Your guide to passing the port

Society member Andrew Mason runs the forbiddingly named "Death Railway Tours Company" but he has a lighter side and it involves the drinking – or passing – of port. Andrew has put together the article below on a tradition that has much to do with formality and, we suggest, everything to do with drinking more of this seductive drop...

"Passing the Port" is a tradition going back centuries and is still enjoyed by Defence Force mess diners, some political groups and wine societies today. Its premise is to wish a person or people well and/or to honour them.

Toasting has several principles:

1. Hold the glass in your right hand as this hand was deemed the lucky hand (by the Celts). Holding it in your left was an insult to the toastee.
2. Your right hand was the sword hand and there could be no cover for nefarious behaviour during the close-quarter toast.
3. Chinking glasses represents church bells to stave off the devil.

Britain imported wine throughout the middle ages from France and neighbouring areas. During the Hundred Years' War with France they held parts of Normandy where they sourced wine and sent it back across the channel. Their stocks of fortifieds travelled well although their other barrelled red varieties were not so fortunate. After the cessation of hostilities (and subsequent loss of Normandy) it was deemed unpatriotic to consume French red so the British sourced wines from other neighbours such as the Portuguese.

Some wines were either of poor quality or did not travel well via ship so the British developed a means of removing odours and poor flavours from wine to make them palatable. They used burnt toast to soak up those harsh flavours and therefore wishing people well with a Port or "drinking the toast" became a common practice.

Toasting started with the Royal toast (with Commonwealth Services) with the toast to the monarch "The King" but grew into toasting both long-winded speeches and long-winded replies. The Americans use the "Loyal" toast within their mess quarters.

In military circles the President and "Mr Vice of the Mess" control the evening along with the imposition of fines. Fines these days are for any perceived minor infraction but originate from three main offences:

- Mentioning a lady's name
- Making a bet
- Drawing a sword.

Port is the traditional wine toasted by Commonwealth navies while Madeira (a form of Port) was permitted and would last longer on a voyage.

Some other traditions include:

- The decanter should be placed to the right of the host.
- The decanter then moves to the left in a clockwise direction to each diner "following the sun".
- The esteemed guest sits to the right of the host/president so that the guest could see the effect of the wine on others (to avoid any poisoned chalice).



Recently our tippie of choice at the Bridge over the River Kwai in Thailand was a 1999 Stanton and Killen Vintage Port, served chilled due to the humidity of the location. James Halliday has described it as a "truly eclectic six-variety blend which all comes together on the finish and aftertaste. Almost dry, very Portuguese in style".

The late Chris Killeen developed this wine using the Portuguese grapes of Tinta Cao, Tinta Barroca and Touriga with Rutherglen Shiraz and Durif. It can last 20 years or more and is under cork.

We used this port to toast the Australian lads who never came home from building the Thailand- Burma Railway, men who are buried close by in the Kanchanaburi War Cemetery and far away in the War Cemetery in Burma. In particular we toasted Corporal Jock Wild (from Manly) who died from dysentery just behind the restaurant in the Tamarkan POW Camp in 1943. Lest we forget.



About the Author: Andrew Mason is the manager of Death Railway Tours and takes pilgrimages to Thailand and Burma to visit Pacific war sites synonymous with the Death Railway including other touristy places. Visit [www.deathrailwaytours.com.au](http://www.deathrailwaytours.com.au).