



‘Please pass the port’

A simple guide to the etiquette and customs associated with the serving of port at Livery Company dinners and banquets

No City of London Livery Company dinner or banquet would be complete without the serving of a good quality vintage port before the Loyal Toast. Whilst diners are not obliged to partake of the port, everyone at the table has a role to play since the port decanter will be passed around by the diners rather than by the catering staff.

A number of customs associated with the port service have arisen to ensure the decanter circulates among all the diners so they all get equal opportunity to share in the wine. If you follow these simple rules you won't go wrong:

1. Always pass the port to the diner to your left, or as they say in the Royal Navy ‘Port to port’.

The port decanter will be placed at the end of your table or ‘sprig’, to the right of your host or whom-so-ever is sat at the top table end of a sprig. In the event of particularly long sprigs, a port decanter may be placed at either end, each proceeding down one side of the sprig.

No matter where the decanter(s) are initially placed they always pass to the left (clockwise on a round table) and continue to circulate until empty. If a diner does not wish to partake of the port he or she simply passes the port onward to their left.

2. Encouraging your fellow diners to pass the port.

In the unthinkable event that a fellow diner allows the port decanter to settle upon the table at their position, a polite way to invite them to continue passing the port is to ask the errant diner ‘*Do you know the Bishop of Norwich?*’.

The response to this question will usually be ‘*No I don't, do tell me more?*’ (or words to that effect), in which case you can replay ‘*Oh, he was an awfully nice fellow, but he rarely passed the port*’. This is said to derive from a past Bishop of Norwich who used to fall asleep at dinners, perhaps in part because of his prestigious consumption of port, whereupon the decanter(s) would all come to rest in front of him to the annoyance of his fellow diners.

The other possibility is that your guest does know the incumbent Bishop of Norwich, in which case you had better have an amusing story to tell about The Rt Revd.

Another option is to ask your guest a more direct question such as ‘*Have you got an up-to-date **pass....port?***’

3. Not allowing to decanter to touch the table

Some Livery Companies and Regiments of the British and Commonwealth Armed Forces observe the custom that the port decanter should never touch the table, further ensuring that the decanter does not settle with a diner (unless they wish to hold it aloft for the evening). Whether this custom is practiced by your Company should be confirmed with the Clerk.

To facilitate this custom, the Hoggit decanter was invented. It features a rounded base that can only be seated in a specially made wooden foot that resides with the host. The decanter would tip over if placed on the table, thus ensuring that it continues to circulate.

4. Waiting until the Loyal Toast

The port is served prior to the Loyal Toast, and in sufficient time to allow it to circulate fully among all the diners before the Loyal Toast is called. It is exceptionally bad form to drink the port prior to the Loyal Toast. Diners who do not wish to drink port may participate in the Loyal Toast (and subsequent toasts) with wine or water.

Equipped with these few simple rules of etiquette, I hope you and your fellow diners will enjoy your port at future Livery Company dinners as much as I do.

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Further exploration of the history, customs and enjoyment of port may be found in *The Port Companion* by Godfrey Spence (2002), ISBN 1-84092-374-1

