

Declaring the 2007 Vintage Ports

Without a doubt, Vintage Port is the blue chip of fortified wines. As a general rule, when Mother Nature blesses the Douro valley with great growing conditions, which happens on average only three vintages per decade, do all the shippers make Vintage Port. This special occasion is dubbed a universal declaration.

In honour of the 2007 vintage, winemaker David Guimarens of the Fladgate Partnership was recently in Toronto showcasing his companies Vintage Ports- Croft, Fonseca and Taylor Fladgate. I had a chance to chat with him one on one, gaining a better perspective for the vintage and current state of affairs in the mountainous growing region.

ES: You make mention of two types of growing years when it comes to making Vintage Port. What are they and how do they affect the final product?

DG: There are the hot years such as 03 where concentration is achieved through berry shriveling. The wines are big and the tannins in youth tend to interfere. They need time in the bottle before showing their best. The other type of growing scenario is the cooler year, where concentration is achieved through long hang times and low yields. This produces wines with silky tannins and beautiful fruit. This is the character of the 07s, 77s and 66s.

ES: Tell me about the growing conditions in 2007?

DG: The 2007 growing season is characterized by lower than average temperatures combined with several periods of rain during the spring and early summer. Unlike any of the previous four years, there was no significant heat wave during the summer months. The average July temperature was 1.7°C lower than the 30 year average (1951-1980).

The picking started between the 20th and 25th September with perfect warm weather contributing to balanced fermentations which gave plenty of time to extract the entire colour and flavour from the skins, without reaching excessive temperatures.

Twenty four hours of constant rain on the 2nd October changed the course of the harvest. Although the Ports produced after this date are still of good quality due to the fine weather from the 3rd October forward, they do not have the same depth and structure of those produced before the rain.

ES: Where were there viticultural problems?

DG: The frequent rainfalls resulted in the biggest threat of mildew since the difficult 1988 season. The result was the need for much greater care in the treatment of the vines, but only the less attentive farmers in the region suffered significant losses in production.

ES: Any grapes of note?

DG: All the grape varieties performed well, however Touriga Francesa should be highlighted for its above average quality, which was evident from early September in the vineyard.

ES: What characterizes a great Vintage Port?

DG: The secret is to make a big wine but with complexity. Complexity is achieved via blending.

ES: So how many varieties do you grow?

DG: We work with 10.

ES: How much Vintage Port do you produce?

DG: It only represents 2 or 3 percent of production?

ES: So what products dominate sales?

DG: We run our business on wood aged/tawnies, LBV and Ruby Ports. Vintage is a bonus.

ES: So what is your favorite type of Port?

DG: Vintage Port. That being said, Tawnies are wonderful no brainers that ready to drink while the Vintage Ports age.

ES: Which countries are the biggest purchasers of Vintage Port today?

DG: U.K. USA and Canada

ES: And inside Canada?

DG: Quebec

ES: Has the economy hurt VP sales in the past year?

DG: A declaration of a Vintage is always a good opportunity to measure the effects of the economy. Regarding the 2007 pre-release orders, the US is taking less than the 2003s. The UK has ordered above our allocations and more than the 2003s, and in Canada we are expecting orders at similar levels to our previous declaration.

ES: How do you respond to the fact that you can purchase Vintage Port for from the 80s and 90s for the same price, if not cheaper than the current release?

DG: Since joining the EEC in 1986, Portugal has suffered tremendous inflation, which has only settled down in recent years. To add to that the significant strengthening of the Euro versus other currencies has further put pressure on the price at which we must release our recent vintages. Older vintages such as the 94s or 85s are often stock that is already in the market, and where these have not suffered from the same inflationary pressures.

Regardless of the above issues, a Declared Vintage Port is released at very reasonable prices when you compare with other great wines of the world, and even more so when these declaration have never occurred more than 3 times in a decade.

ES: Do you feel that some houses are trying to make Vintage Port, whether it be pure or Single Quinta, regardless of growing conditions (or if you will, not producing only in the worst vintages) as a means to make more money?

DG: Undoubtedly all of the established Port houses have given a lot more focus to the Single Quinta Vintage Ports, and rightly so. With the standards for a classic vintage set so high and resulting in only 3 out of 10 years being declared as such, out of the other 7 years there are still very good Vintage Ports being made. By bottling these as individual Terroir (Quinta) Ports, the difference is clearly made.

As these magnificent Vintage Ports, which portray the personality of the Quinta from which they come from, are released at significantly lower price than the classics, they give the consumer more opportunities to enjoy the wonders of a Vintage Port. The standard for these Single Quintas is still very high. Since 2000 we now have 3 classic Vintages and 3 Single Quintas.

ES: Off the topic of VP for a moment, Croft was the first house to produce a Pink Port. How has that turned out for you?

DG: We started the project in 2008 and it has been a tremendous success. So much so that the IVDP created a new category for the product in record time. It is a fun product which breaks the mindset that Port is only drunk in winter. It has attracted new consumers and the wine can be served either as an aperitif (chilled) or as a patio sipper.

Rating the 07 Vintage Ports

94 Taylor Fladgate Port Quinta de Vargellas Vinha Velha (\$249)

This limited production bottling is made from 100 plus year old vines and it shows great depth and refinement. It sings with violets, mint, plums, licorice and spice. Lots of backbone will allow this wine to age for 50 year no problem.

94 Fonseca (\$115)

This is a robust offering serving up a mélange of cassis, smoke, licorice, earth on the nose. It is sweet and full bodied with a concentrated mouthful of spice, cocoa, buckwheat honey, figs and minerality. Long finish with serious tannins, so cellar this beauty away until 2020 and drink until 2040.

94 Taylor Fladgate (\$119)

Taylor is renowned for violet/floral quality. This combines with graphite, plums and cassis. Elegant and full bodied, it offers ripe dark fruits- figs and plums, as well as spice and cocoa lingering on the finale. From 2020 to 2040.

92 Croft (\$109)

This opaque wine shows a lovely bouquet of damson plum, overripe cherries, eucalyptus, licorice and coffee. In the mouth, it is voluptuous with no harsh edges even though tannins suggesting a long life ahead. The finish hangs around for a while. Drink from 2015 to 2030.

Port Parlance

There are 2 main categories of Port -wood aged and bottle aged. Wood aged Ports spend extended time in barrel, losing their colour, becoming softer, sweet and nutty. Bottle aged Ports are darker, powerful and more fruit driven.

Wood Aged

Tawny: The entry level –generally simple stuff.

Age Indicated (10, 20, 30 and 40 years): The best form of Tawny. It is a blend of wines that have been aged in barrels for extended periods. The age indication is the average age of all the wines in the blend. i.e a 10 year old may be a blend of 5 and 15 year old wines.

Colheita: A Tawny that comes from a singular vintage and has spent a minimum of 7 years in cask.

Bottle Aged

Ruby Port: The lightest style.

Reserve: A fuller bodied Ruby. Sometimes referred to as a Super Ruby.

LBV: Late Bottled Vintage Ports are from a single year that spend anywhere between 4 to 6 years in barrel before being bottled. They can be either filtered or non-filtered. Generally ready to drink upon release, the non-filtered versions can improve with age.

Vintage: Only from the best years, bottled before its second birthday, never filtered and should only be drunk after 20 year in the cellar.

Single Quinta Vintage: A Vintage Port from a very good year, made from a producer's best vineyard (quinta). These wine mature more rapidly than pure Vintage Ports.

IVDP

Instituto dos Vinhos do Douro e Porto is the governing body for all things Port and table wine from the Douro valley.