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I am a devoted fan of Port, especially the Vintage type. There is something undeniably passionate about the combination of power, sweetness and elegance of a 20 plus year old bottling. Earlier this year, I was lucky enough to participate in a tasting of VPs, spanning the 20th century, including the fabulous trio of 1928, 34 and 35.

So, when my travels brought me, this past summer, to the breathtaking Douro valley, with its picturesque quintas (vineyards/farms) embracing the incredibly steep slopes, I was expecting to be blown away by my favorite fortified. Yes, there was truly some impressive Ports to be had, but to my surprise, the wines that intrigued me the most were the Douro DOC dry reds.

Douro Days

Both Port and Douro wines are made from the same grapes. Over one hundred are authorized. But after harvest, vinification diverges. Fermentation for Port wine generally transpires in a lagare - a low granite (occasionally stainless steel) open top trough. Grapes are either crushed under foot or via mechanical paddles which emulate the gentle treading of the tootsies. Port wines have only have two to three days to extract both colour and flavour via a fast and furious fermentation, before being hit with the aguardente (neutral brandy). The brandy eradicates the yeast, leaving natural sweetness and raising the alcohol level to 20%. Aging then transpires in older barrels. Douro reds wines follow standard red winemaking protocols- 8 to 12 day fermentations to dryness in stainless steel tank or lagare, regular macerations and then aging in new barrels.

Even though the Douro has a long history of dry wine production, the industry, until recently, has concentrated primarily on Port. Thus, there was little ambition to produce world class table wines. The break through moment came in 1952, when Fernando Nicolau de Almeida, oenologist at Ferreira, after a visit to Bordeaux, decided to produce a premium dry red from indigenous grapes. His genius was Barca Velha. Initially, acceptance for this new style was slow. But by the early 70s, a few more bottlings started to join the marketplace, and by the 1990s, the evolution was in full force.

Another contributing factor to the rise of dry wines is the Quinta/Beneficio classification system. Every vineyard in the valley is rated from A to F. For Port, 'A' is the best, benefitting from prime exposure, lower altitudes, better grapes (Touriga Nacional, Touriga Francesa, Tinta Roriz, Tinta Cao, and Tinta Barroca are preferred), age of vines, vigor, schist soils, etc... 'F' is the least.

Each year, the Instituto do Vinho Douro e Porto (IVDP), the governing body over all things vinous, authorizes production amounts for Port wine for each quinta. The amount authorized fluctuates depending on the quality of the vintage and state of the market. This ensures there is never an excess of Port flooding the shelves, and what is available, is of quality.

A and B vineyards receive the largest piece of the pie, while the rest receive virtually none. What is not authorized as Port, automatically becomes Douro wine. Financially, it makes sense to concentrate on

premium table wines, and what is good for the proverbial goose, is not necessarily ideal for the gander. Higher altitudes, cooler zones, less exposed areas, granite soils and a myriad of grapes make for excellent table wines.

Depending on the year, over 50% of the crop can be relegated to table wines. So does the future lie for the industry Douro or Port wines? According to Manuel Lobo of Quinta do Crasto, “we believe that both industries have a future. Port, because the region is the only one in the world that can produce and declare the authentic version (the region was first demarcated in 1756); table wines, because the Douro wine region has a unique identity, what with the different amount grape varieties and terroirs, which are a result of mountain viticulture.”

Rupert Symington of Symington Family Estates, producer of Dow’s, Graham’s, and Warre’s Port adds, “it is very important to recognize that with its steep slopes and very low yields, the Douro can never be competitive with other regions of Portugal in terms of cost of grapes. The only future for DOC from the region is in terms of delivering quality at a higher price as it does with Port. What is required is a greater perception of the region as source of quality DOC wines that can be sold at a price equivalent to the least expensive Port (i.e. \$15 or above). As with high unit production costs there is absolutely no future for the Douro as a cheap volume producer of wines.”

Thankfully, the Canadian market has started to embrace the diversity of the Douro. Although Port continues to be the red carpet of the industry, table wines are the young stars, poised to capture the future.

The following wines were sampled while in Portugal and are currently available in Canada.

Douro Wines

93 Brites Aguiar Bafarela 17 Gran Reserva 2009

If you love high octane/hearty/thick Zin or CNP, this is your drop of juice. At 17% alcohol, think of this as a dry Port. Super concentrated and rich, it just oozes copious amounts of blueberries, blackberries, mocha fudge and spice. The length just goes on and on. A self-gratifying wine if there was ever one!

92 Quinta do Vale Meão 2008

This dark cherry/violet tinged red is a blend of 55% Touriga Nacional, 30% Touriga Franca, 10% Tinta Roriz and 5% Barroca. Full bodied, it offers impressive concentration as well as profile of cinnamon, cocoa, raspberries, cassis and damson plum. First-rate length and firm tannins ensure that this wine will age well over the next two decades.

91 Quinta do Crasto Reserva Old Vines 2008 (\$36.50)

Sourced from 70 year old vines, this blend comprises some 25 different grapes. The nose yields abundant crème de cassis, violets, bbq spice and mocha fudge. The palate is ripe and emulates the nose, as well as an orange peel note. There is excellent length and firm tannins, which bodes well for aging. Hold it for a few years and drink it until 2020.

91 Casa Ferreirinha Quinta da Leda 2007 (\$44)

Still extremely youthful looking, the black/purple colour is the precursor to a bouquet of violets, spice, dark cherries, mint and dark fruits. Full bodied, superb length and solid tannins make for a wine which is drinkable now or until 2025.

91 Brites Aguiar 2007

A huge perfume of blueberries, blackberries, balsamic, mocha and violets flatters. The palate is extremely rich and powerful, with 15.5% alcohol and good tannin structure underneath the baby fat. The finish is long. Drink until 2020.

90 Prats & Symington Chryseia 2008 (\$70.50)

The wine is a partnership between Bruno Prats, formerly of Cos d'Estournel, and Rupert Symington of the Symington Family. It is a hearty offering which serves up BBQ spice, smoke, plums, raspberries and licorice. Full bodied, there is excellent length, with some hard tannins appearing at the end. Pair it with braised lamb shanks in a rosemary tomato sauce.

89 Niepoort Batuta 2008 (\$105)

Batuta is made from an ensemble of Douro grapes, the primary one being Tinta Amarela. It is wall to wall damson plums, spice, dark cherries, raspberries and vanilla. It finishes fresh, with very good length and an herbaceous note.

88 Quinta de Ventozelo Reserva (\$22.95)

Huge vanilla, plum, smoke, cocoa and dark cherries soar out of the glass. Supple tannins and very good length make for a wine which accessible right now, but can still age another 5 years.

88 Quinta do Vallado Reserva 2008 (\$38.75)

This opaque wine showcases a huge menthol and dark cherry nose, with hints of raspberries and licorice. The palate unfurls the cassis, menthol, herbs and licorice. It a gutsy offering which requires some rich meat to tame the tannins, so my suggestion would be to enjoy it with suckling pig.

88 Prats & Symington Post Scriptum de Chryseia 2009 (\$27.95)

Post Scriptum is the second wine of Chryseia. That being said, quality wise, there is nothing second rate about it. Medium body, the inky black/ purple colour leads into a dark fruit tinged offering which is accented by herbs/cedar, orange peel, spice and violets. There aftertaste is persistent.

87 Real Companhia Velha Evel Tinto 2007 (\$14.95)

This modern style Douro shows a good deal of upfront black and red fruits, all built on a medium bodied frame. Tannins and acid are all in check. Medium in length, it is well suited for grilled chouriço or Italian fennel sausage.

86 Flor de Crasto 2009 (\$9.95)

This blend of Touriga Nacional, Tinta Roriz and Touriga Franca is an opaque coloured red which is chock full of spice, black raspberries, dark cherries and floral aromas and flavours. It is light to medium body with a smooth texture, or, in other words, a perfect BBQ wine.

86 Ramos Pinto Duas Quintas 2008 (\$17.95)

The intense nose of cassis bush and tobacco opens the door to a mid weight wine with a peppery palate. Fresh acid and supple tannins round out the experience.

85 Symington Altano 2009 (\$12.99)

Here is a smooth and easy drinking red, gifted with violets, crème de cassis and herbs. There is medium length and it is ready to drink.

Port Wines

96 Taylor Fladgate Scion (\$3500)

This is a once in a lifetime experience, at a once in a lifetime price. In 2008, winemaker David Guimarens learned of the existence of two barrels of 1855 tawny port, which were part of a distinguished Douro family's private reserve. In 2009, the last surviving female member passed away, with no children. Her heirs, many of whom were not related, decided to sell the two barrels to Taylor. In 2010, the wine was bottled, after having spent 155 years in cask. Incredibly, there are no faults and the long hot aging process has concentrated the wine to an unbelievable depth and complexity. The dark walnut colour unfurls the red carpet in the form cherry blossom chocolates, dried fruits, spice, licorice, and dried flowers. The finish is uber long with loads of caramel, nuts and spice, as well as great acidity, bordering slightly on VA. To further put the glory of this wine into perspective, it was made from pre- phylloxera vines in the same year the famous Bordeaux classification was conceived.

96 Taylor Fladgate Vintage Port 2009 (\$100)

Two thousand and nine was a debatable year for most shippers of Vintage Port. Some were impressed with the quality and others not. Clearly, the good folks at Taylor have scored huge with their wines- Taylor, Fonseca and Croft. This was my favorite of their portfolio. It is a full bodied and rich wine with an opaque purple tinged colour. Violets, plums, cherries, spice and cocoa mesh together with outstanding length and 50 plus years of aging ahead of it.

94 Dows 1970 Vintage Port (\$270)

Although maturing, this Port is ready to drink. On the nose, the fruit is dry as well as having an orange peel and nutty component. In the mouth, the fruit is more youthful, with a peppery edge chiming in on the superb finale. It should drink well for another twenty years.

94 Fonseca Vintage Port 2009 (\$100)

Big, rich and full bodied, the 09 Fonseca possess a saturated colour and a bouquet of crème de cassis, plums, raisins, spice, violets, dark cherries and earth. There is a long finish and 40 plus years of longevity.

92 Croft Vintage Port 2009 (\$75)

I believe the Croft style offers accessibility and richness, and this is the best edition to date. Crème de cassis, plums, boysenberry and cocoa are all present. It is approachable now, but will only benefit with age. Thirty years ahead of life.

90 Sandeman Vau Vintage Port 2000 (\$29.95)

Hold on to your hats, folks! This delicious Vintage Port is only \$30 in the Ontario market! It is black in colour with prunes, raisins, violets and cocoa. Soft, round and accessible, it is ready to drink now or over the next five years.

89 Quinta do Infantado Ruby Port NV (\$15.95)

This is the best ruby Port available in the Canadian market! Infantado only owns 'A' class vineyards, and, subsequently, the quality is undeniable. Violets, cassis, dried cherries and tobacco leaf are present on the nose. Medium sweet, there is density, delineation and a lasting after taste.

88 Sandeman Aftiv White Port (\$14.95)

Made from a bevy of indigenous white grapes, this white Port reveals orange marmalade, white flowers and lemon peel. It is sweet, but not cloying, so chill well and serve as an aperitif. Or, create a cocktail by mixing it with tonic and a lemon wedge.