Vintage port - a jetlagged tasting

3 Nov 2004 by JR

See also the full tasting notes on this extraordinary event.

Tasting nearly 100 vintage ports on your first two days in a completely new time zone is probably not the most obvious cure for jetlag. Having attempted it last week immediately after flying back to London from New York, and having followed the second day's port tasting with yet another wine tasting, I should probably admit now that I am not just crazy about wine, but crazy.

On the other hand, m'lud, in mitigation I would argue that an opportunity to taste blind almost all significant vintage ports bottled in the last 30 years does not come round very often. And anyway, hang on, I was really doing it for you, the reader. Yes, it was probably all your fault.

Whatever the reasons, excuses and motivations, I was deeply grateful to the editorial team of the highbrow new wine magazine *The World of Fine Wine* for dreaming up this ambitious tasting. They organised the bottles, swathed them in numbered plastic bags and efficiently plied us with their contents. The Portuguese Embassy lent their dining room in Belgrave Square and therefore that degree of decorum traditionally associated with vintage port. Whether I showed as much decorum when I fell into a deep sleep at six o'clock on the second evening is open to question. (At least I was in a decorous location, my own bed.)

Even in my less-than-robust tasting condition, I could discern some wines that stood out. My favourites from both this and other significant tastings are listed in the box.

Last week we tasted vintage ports from all the important years 1970, 1977, 1980, 1983, 1985, 1991, 1992, 1994, 1997 and 2000 as well as lone representatives from the more unusual vintage port declarations 1975, 1978 and 1982. Perhaps the most interesting observations for anyone with vintage port in their cellar concerns how ready these various vintages are to drink and whether they seem to have fulfilled or bettered their early promise. After all vintage port is, or at least has traditionally been, one of the wine styles expected to spend longest maturing slowly in a damp, dark cellar.

I can report that, perhaps not surprisingly, the 1970s are certainly ready to drink now, with the sole exception of Fonseca 1970 which has the deepest colour of the 1970s and still, amazingly, seems a little tough on the finish. In fact all the 1970s seemed to me to have rather rougher tannins than one would expect for such venerable wines, presumably because of how the wines were made all those years ago. Today in the Douro, just as in other wine regions around the world, port producers have been trying to give their wines at least as much structure and ageing potential as in the past but with less obvious astringency. After all, wine drinkers in the US which has overtaken the UK to become the most important market for vintage port, tend to pull corks relatively early, even on vintage port.

The Cockburn 1975, never a great wine, is now downright old – rather like the sole representatives of 1978 and 1982, both from the Portuguese house of Ferreira. As usual the 1977s, all from a much-heralded vintage, were an extremely varied bunch and most seem to have evolved rather faster, some less gracefully, than was hoped. The Smith Woodhouse 1977 has always been an exceptional wine, an underpriced, supposedly second-division port from the Symington group responsible for such houses as Graham, Dow and Warre, but in blind tastings of the 1977s it has wooed many tasters with its extremely dark, youthful colour and very obvious, almost brutal concentration. Not for the first time I picked up a certain green streak in this wine and cannot see its becoming more charming, just weirder and weirder.

As has been the case in the past, the Dow 1977 was definitely an underperformer, with Graham 1977 the standout from the Symington stable and Taylor 1977 its counterpart from the Symingtons' rivals, today called The Fladgate Partnership (including Taylor, Fonseca, Guimaraens and, nowadays, Croft and Delaforce). It was perhaps a shame that we did not taste Gould Campbell 1977, which has a decent claim to being the best-value vintage port ever, nor any wines at all from the excellent house of Niepoort whose consignment was lost somewhere en route from Vila Nova de Gaia to Belgrave Square.

A favourite subject among port lovers centres on the relative merits of the three vintages declared in the 1980s: 1980, 1983 and 1985. (It was a long wait until 1991 and 1992, with both these vintages from the early 1990s looking pretty

weak, except for Taylor 1992, to me.)

Among the 1980 vintage ports there was a vast difference in colour between the almost foxy ruby of the Taylor and the still-deep crimson of the Symingtons' wines, yet just to show that colour is not everything, my favourite 1980s were Taylor 1980 and Dow 1980, both of which I would ideally not drink for five or six years, but they were not as thrilling as the best wines of, say, 1997 and 2000. If 1983 seems to have been a Symington vintage (shame that our bottle of Graham 1983 was spoilt by cork taint and there was no back-up bottle), some of the 1985s seemed marred by tired, dried fruit aromas. Most are ready to drink. The glorious exception here is Fonseca 1985 which is a vigorous marvel of a wine. Of the 1983s, only Taylor 1983 and Fonseca 1983 seemed ready to drink to me. I would be inclined to hang on to most of the rest for quite a while.

And so to the last three vintages to be declared, 1994, 1997 and 2000 (2003 is expected to make its debut next spring), the vintage ports that are easiest to find on the market, even if they can seem ridiculously expensive compared to older vintages. The voluptuous 1994s were rapturously received initially but when I look at my marks (I tasted these younger wines without being sure precisely where the breaks between vintages lay), I see that I found some lacked intensity and that the 1997s and 2000s much more to my taste. Quinta do Noval 1994 is certainly an exceptional wine that promises to provide delicious drinking in the short, medium and long term, but many other 1994s seem dangerously advanced and likely to be outlived by many older vintages or, depending on your point of view, they are maturing usefully quickly and can in some cases be drunk with great pleasure already.

The 1997s are definitely more structured than the 1994s and most should probably be kept until the next decade. I noted some rather dry tannins on some. The 2000s on the other hand are thoroughly voluptuous and many look as though they will mature at almost exactly the same time as the 1997s. Surprises among the 2000s compared to my first look at them a couple of years ago were that Quinta do Noval 2000 seemed in much less sparkling form and both Ferreira and Croft seemed much more impressive than first time around. But perhaps three surprises out of the 15 2000s tasted with severe jetlag is not so remarkable.

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