The story of 2007 port

26 May 2009 by Jancis Robinson/FT

Last week's London tasting of the newly released crop of vintage ports, the 2007s, was held in a sort of transitional passageway at The Foreign Press Association in Carlton House Terrace. The glass overhead certainly helped us distinguish between the different shades of purple in these 42 samples, but I couldn't help seeing a parallel between the room and the transitional nature of the Douro Valley which had yielded them all.

Less than 10 years ago this was the most obviously backward of the world's classic wine regions, with grapes still trodden by the feet of locals whose lives seemed to have more in common with the third world than with Europe. Planting of vineyards in neat rows and terraces of a single vine variety is still relatively recent, and mechanisation in the vineyards and cellars even more so.

But this century has seen a transformation. Realising that they could no longer depend on local labour, the major producers have installed computer-operated alternatives to the human foot for the all-important extraction of colour from the grapes. Those producers used to be called shippers, because that was mainly what they did: buying in grapes from local growers, turning them into wine up the valley, shipping it down to Oporto, maturing it in lodges by the river in the Oporto suburb Vila Nova de Gaia, and then shipping it around the world. But today, the shippers have become growers.

The five big port groups control about 80% of the port market between them and the likes of the Symington family (who produce Dow's, Graham's, Warre's most famously) and The Taylor Fladgate Partnership (Croft, Fonseca, Taylor's, etc) have recently added a good 1,000 hectares (2,500 acres) of prime vineyards to their holdings, as well as upgrading their wineries and all-important storage facilties in the challenging Douro Valley - with its harsh winters and summers. This means that they no longer buy nearly as much from local growers, who are now increasingly dependent on the local co-ops and their relatively paltry prices. Life is becoming tougher and tougher for the legion of smallholders in the Douro.

(Our photograph shows, left to right, Adrian Bridge of The Fladgate Partnership, Paul Symington, and Christian Seely of Quinta do Noval at the tasting of 2007 vintage ports reported on here by Richard Hemming.)

But there are other important structural changes that impact much more directly on us wine consumers. Table wines, labelled Douro rather than port, have become a fully established, and highly profitable, product of the wild Douro Valley. Producers whose table wines have already established a reputation, such as Quinta do Vale Dona Maria and Quinta do Crasto, are already able to sell their top table wines at the same price as their vintage ports (even if, admittedly, their vineyards tend to be better suited to the former than the latter).

This makes it all the more extraordinary that the Taylor Fladgate Partnership continue their policy of eschewing serious table wine production. They argue (see Taylor's and table wine) that they want to focus on port for the moment, but they must be aware of the extent to which port prices have lagged behind those of other fine wines. As this affects prices of vintage port in the saleroom, this is most unfair, for the quality of port is better than it has ever been. At the bottom end of the port market, however, the shippers have brought much of this on themselves by engaging in a price war via the large retailers.

They like to point to the resulting increased volumes sold in the UK as a sign of buoyancy in the port market, but this has to be countered by observations such as the one made at last week's tasting by a member of the wine committee at the nearby Oxford & Cambridge Club. He observed that the club's current holdings of vintage port will last the members 40 years at their current rate of consumption. Oxbridge colleges report the same sort of slowdown in demand. Vintage port is the port trade's calling card, the essence of the Douro trapped in a bottle. Its appearance every three or four years reminds us all that port exists and should encourage us to pull some corks - certainly on the basis of the quality and sheer sophistication of the best 2007s shown last week.

Bill Warre, of the port family, popped in to the port tasting after lunch at Boodle's (where presumably he does his best to keep their stocks well below 40 years' worth). He has tasted every port vintage at this early stage since the 1948s, and even he was hard pressed to find any vintage remotely like the 2007.

Rather like the 2008 bordeaux, no one realised at the end of August that good quality wine would eventually result. This was an unusually long, cool, steady growing season, without extremes of heat or drought. In fact the rains were unusually generous, and the temperatures moderate enough to preclude the sort of shutdown that can stop photosynthesis and

ripening in very hot weather. Sugars came from proper ripening of the grapes rather than desiccation, so there were few raisiny characters in the wines. Nights in particular were usefully cool and these ports are all remarkably fresh - one or two even have a strange note of greenness. The harvest was two weeks later than usual, and the grapes spent longer than usual in lagares, the Douro's distinctive shallow fermentation vats. Touriga Franca grapes in particular benefited from the long season, while Tinta Roriz (Tempranillo) especially benefited from yields shrunk by a poor fruit set and both sorts of mildew.

I was amazed by quite how many of these vintage ports confronted us - even though the style comprises a mere one per cent of all port production. Presumably because wine is now so fashionable in Portugal, and there are so many able winemakers now in the Douro, there are many more individuals who want a shot at producing this classic wine, port at its most expensive. Expect to pay over £200 per six bottles in bond for the top names, much less for most of the generally rather weaker ports produced on the single quintas (individual wine farms), many of them associated with one of the famous producers. Perfect for 2007 babies.

Favourite 2007 vintage ports

Taylor's
Graham's
Dow's
Fonseca
Quinta do Noval
Warre's
Niepoort
Taylor's, Quinta de Vargellas Vinha Velha
Smith Woodhouse
Niepoort, Pisca
Quinta do Vesuvio
Quinta do Vesuvio, Capela
Niepoort, Broadbent
Quarles Harris
Quinta do Vale Meão

See my full tasting notes on all 42 wines with suggested drinking dates for some of the likely bargains, including some of Symington's less famous bottlings.