Syms to own Cockburn's, lock, stock & barrel

8 Oct 2010 by Jancis Robinson

What's the opposite of diversification? That's certainly what the Symington family seem set on. The Portugal-based family company that already owns Graham's, Dow's, Warre's, Smith Woodhouse, Gould Campbell, Quarles Harris ports and assocated quintas, as well as the Madeira Wine Company, is set to add the biggest port brand of all to its port-swollen portfolio, Cockburn's. Biggest by accumulated advertising spend over the years, anyway.

When Allied Domecq was broken up in 2006, its heavily marketed port and sherry brands Cockburn and Harveys were acquired by Beam Global, the American whiskey giant, while the Symingtons got the associated vineyards. The Syms actually made the wine for Cockburn's while Beam marketed it. Now Beam announce that they are giving up on the port market and that the Symingtons will acquire the brand too.

As Paul Symington puts it, 'in a very difficult market for port (and all wines), this is a strong vote of confidence by my family in the future of port and the Douro valley. We are looking at the long term, because in the short term and in the current climate this is a challenge.'

Following the transaction, the Symington family with their generations of experience in the port business (which they tend to call the Port Wine Trade) intends to try to develop and grow what they describe as 'one of the greatest names in Port' around the world.

The market for port has been challenging for some years now, with some of the best value in the world of wine available in the mid-quality range. (Watch out for some great bargains towards the end of the year.)

I assume that The Port Trade in general will be happy to see this historic name back in the bosom of the Douro Valley and Vila Nova de Gaia rather than being marketed and milked from Shepton Mallet, Somerset, or Deerfield, Illinois.

According to Beam Global's senior vice president and managing director Donard Gaynor, 'This is a "win-win" for both our companies and a logical next step for the brand. Symington has been a great producer of Cockburn's for years, and this transaction allows both of our companies to focus our dedicated resources and efforts on driving continued, accelerated growth of our core categories of excellence.'