Shippers disagree over 2009 vintage port

26 Apr 2011 by Jancis Robinson

The two major port shippers are taking very different views of 2009 as a port vintage. Adrian Bridge (pictured) of The Fladgate Partnership, owners of Taylor's, Croft and Fonseca, declared (as tradition dictates, on St George's Day, last Saturday) that they will release a vintage port from all three houses. This will join 2000, 2003 and 2007 as TFP's fourth declaration in a decade - one more than is usual.

Head winemaker David Guimaraens justifies the declaration thus: 'We haven't seen colour intensity and tannic grip like this in over 20 years. The quality of fruit is also impressive and the wines have excellent acidity.' Yields in 2009 were reduced, however, by low vine fertility and the exceptionally dry summer, so the quantities available will be smaller than of preceding declared vintages and allocations will be smaller. A small quantity of Taylor's Quinta de Vargellas, Vinha Velha 2009 will also be released, all these ports being shown to potential buyers in London next month and shipped to export markets towards the end of 2011.

As usual, Taylor's 2009 is based on a blend of ports from Quinta de Vargellas and Quinta de Terra Feita. Quinta do Junco has made a small contribution since 2000 and does so again in 2009. Fonseca 2009 is drawn from Quinta do Panascal and Quinta do Cruzeiro with a small proportion of wine from Quinta do Santo António, recently converted to organic viticulture. Croft 2009 is drawn entirely from Quinta da Roêda. An innovative special blog www.2009vintageport.com has been created, apparently, exclusively for Fladgate's wines.

TFP's big rivals the Symington family on the other hand will not be declaring 2009 a vintage for Graham's, Dow's or their new addition Cockburn's - and will be releasing only a very limited quantity of Warre's 2009 for commemorative rather than commercial reasons.

Paul Symington explains, 'The harvest report that I wrote at the time [see TFP's harvest report in italics below] gives the full background to this year. My family, with more than five generations here in the Douro (13 if you count my great-grandmother), declare a vintage when we have a truly outstanding wine that will earn the respect of the wine trade and consumers around the world. We will not declare for any other reason. We are bottling a Graham's Quinta dos Malvedos, a Dow's Quinta do Bomfim, a Dow's Senhora de Ribeira and a Quinta do Vesúvio 2009 [so-called single quinta ports rather than full-blown vintage port].

'But we are "declaring" 500 cases of Warre's 2009 vintage port as a special bottling to commemorate 200 years since the Anglo-Portuguese army, under the Duke of Wellington, liberated my home city of Oporto (each bottle is numbered). This great wine is in very short supply and many of the cases are already spoken for, as we have already shown it at the Big Fortified Tasting in London [earlier this month] where Berry Bros and others spoke very highly about the Warre's 2009. Quinta da Cavadinha is a higher and cooler vineyard, so produced lovely wines in 2009. The Warre's 2009 vintage port is exceptional in my view.

'William Warre (pictured), born in Oporto in 1784, played a key role in this great battle in 1809 as a Major in the Portuguese wing of the army (having spent years helping to train and equip the Portuguese people who were so desperate to regain their independence). We thought it fitting to make a Warre's 2009. We will be donating £48 per case (£4 per bottle) on every case sold of the Warre's 2009 to a charity for the wounded soldiers in Afghanistan (Help for Heroes). We feel that Major William Warre, Oporto-born and aged just 25 in 1809 when the battle took place, would have appreciated the fact that we are giving away all our profit on a wine that is dedicated to a battle he fought in to the wounded soldiers of today.

'On the 12 May 1809 one of the major battles of the Peninsular War took place, the liberation of Oporto by the Anglo-Portuguese army led by the Duke of Wellington. A young officer serving in this army was Major William Warre, who had been born in Oporto into the port family of the same name in 1784. This 25-year-old soldier had been sent north of Oporto on his own to try and prevent the escape of the entire French army under Marshal Soult. At the Salamonde Bridge on the Cavado river, William Warre together with a small band of local Portuguese volunteer soldiers and farmers built and manned a blockade on this bridge to prevent the retreat of the invading army. In the words of the great Peninsular War Oxford historian, Sir Charles Oman, 'This, unhappily, was not enough to hold back 20,000 desperate men who saw their only way of salvation on the opposite bank'. For his remarkable bravery at this and many other actions, Warre was awarded the Order of São Bento d'Aviz, Portugal's highest military honour.'

It seems safe to assume that Quinta do Noval will not be declaring a vintage in 2009 when they declared both 2007 and, unusually, 2008, as discussed in A decade of Noval LBV. But Niepoort have declared 2009, currently being offered in the UK by Raymond Reynolds.

THE FLADGATE PARTNERSHIP'S 2009 PORT HARVEST REPORT

The growing season started early at Quinta da Rôeda (Croft) with budburst occurring on 8 March. The size and small number of bunches, resulting from low fertility across all grape varieties, was particularly evident on Tinta Roriz and Touriga Francesa vines. Extremely healthy and vigorous vegetative growth during the spring and early summer coupled with low fertility resulted in early veraison. During a relatively cool July, the grapes ripened gradually. However, the almost complete absence of rain from July to September and very high temperatures from early August advanced phenolic ripening, particularly in more exposed areas in the Upper Douro, pointing to an early harvest. Picking began at The Fladgate Partnership quintas between 7 and 14 September and finished on 2 October.