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1970 Vintage Port: Last of the legends

Axel Probst enjoys an extensive tasting of one of the great 20th-century Port Vintages, the last to permit export in cask, and with a consistency of quality that would not be matched for another quarter century

The last of the really big ones—at least for a long time—1970 is a fully declared classic Vintage. Quality-wise, it closely follows the big years 1955, 1963, and 1966 in all possible aspects, and 1970 is also the last vintage for a long time where one could blindly purchase the big names, because all of them performed very well, if not better. The years to come were a lot more difficult in choosing the right bottle of Port. The next declared Vintage was 1975, which was bottled more for political reasons, because 1974 was the year of the Revolution (but the quality did not allow

declaration), so 1975 was a “must declare.” With the nickname “breakfast vintage,” most of these Ports should have been drunk, as they appear to be somewhat light and held together only by acidity. 1977 is a big year as well, but not uniformly. Cockburn and Noval did not declare at the time, and some other producers nowadays suffer from huge bottle variation—and these variations range from very good, to catastrophic, often the result of changes in winemaking techniques. The 1980s produced only a handful of very good Vintage Ports, most of them from 1980

or 1985. It is, therefore, 1994 that is the next year after 1970 to impress with a homogenous quality throughout.

But let us get back to the Douro Valley in 1970. After the 1960s, which was probably the best decade ever, producers began to invest in brand marketing, vineyards, and advertising to elevate Port to its well-deserved place among the finest wines in the world. Since very little money was made from the few outstanding years prior to 1963, Port at this time was somewhat forgotten. At the end of the 1960s, quintas were enlarged, houses and

wineries rebuilt, new vineyards planted, and brands sold and bought, leading to the first wave of consolidation in the Douro Valley. Probably the most famous switch of brands and properties came in 1970, with the Symington Family buying Graham's Port—including the prestigious Quinta dos Malvedos and the brand Smith Woodhouse.

But 1970 also taught the producers another lesson: With not only fantastic quality but also generous quantity, many producers could not find enough workers to pick the grapes. The Douro Valley being one of the steepest wine regions, almost all picking is done by hand. As a consequence of this experience, Ramos Pinto's chief enologist João Nicolau de Almeida began to search for easier spots in the demarcated region to acquire at least some assistance from machinery. Some years later, he picked Quinta da Ervamoira, which is still in the demarcated region but not as steep.

A special year

As in all great vintages, weather is crucial, and it all starts and ends with water—especially if you have the typical three months of hell (*tres meses de inferno*), with temperatures peaking at up to 122°F (50°C) in summer. Winter rainfall 1969/70 was slightly above average, followed by a cold and very dry spring and further rain in June. From July to October 1970, almost no rain fell, and temperatures were moderately hot. The harvest started on September 21 under ideal conditions, with just the right amount of light rain, providing the best possible conditions for perfect grapes.

Last but not least, 1970 was the last generally declared Vintage where producers were allowed to export Port in cask, and therefore the last Vintage where different bottlings can still be found in the market today, especially in the UK. From 1974 on, it was possible to ship Port only in bottles.

So, please buy and drink as many 1970 Vintage Ports as possible—the big names will only get more expensive. Many are only starting to enter their drinking plateau, which will easily last for three more decades. 1970 is one of those Port vintages of which everyone in 20 years will say, or at least think, “Why didn't I buy more of these in the good old days...”

All photography courtesy of Axel Probst.

THE TASTING

Andresen

One of the lighter Ports of this vintage: orange-red color. Honey, malt, and tobacco in the elegant and balanced bouquet. The palate is also elegant, with honey, chocolate, and hints of caramel. The aftertaste is rather short. | 88

Barros

There are many bottles on the market that simply say “The Douro Wine Shippers & Growers Association Ltd” on the back, and just “Vintage Port 1970” on the front. In fact, I have never seen a label saying Barros Vintage Port 1970, but with some help from the Port Wine Institute (IVDP), they identified the producer by the number of the *selo*. Deep dark-red color, very alive. Complex nose with cherry, green tea, plums, and some herbs in the background. Jammy plums on the palate, with very nicely structured acidity and some residual red-berry fruit. Medium-long aftertaste. | 90

Berry Brothers

In Vintage years, Berry Brothers choose a well-known producer and a special blend to bottle its Vintage Port. In 1970, the choice fell on Warre. It is a bit lighter than the original Warre blend. Dense, dark-red color. Precise malt and caramel on the nose, some tobacco in the back. Balanced, elegant palate with red-berry fruit and some floral freshness and white pepper. Fresh aftertaste. | 94

Cálem

Cálem's 1970 Vintage Port is always a very pleasant surprise, as only few Port drinkers have this brand in their mind when it comes to great Vintage Port. One of the darkest Ports of the year. Floral-fruity bouquet, with complex tobacco and juicy red fruit. Smooth palate, with a lot of intensity. Milk chocolate, pepper, coffee, and toffee. Long and balanced aftertaste. | 96

Cockburn

With 50-year-old bottles, there is certainly a lot about provenance, because this was a fantastic one. Dark-red color with intense red reflections. The nose reveals malt, coffee and honey. Fully integrated palate, with a fantastic length, complex chocolate and toffee, and some residual red-berry fruit. Long and structured in the aftertaste. | 94

Croft

Fully transparent dark-red color. Balanced malty and honey notes, butterscotch in the background of the bouquet. Slightly sweet on the first part of the palate, it shows supporting acidity, tobacco, cherry, and a precise herbal note. Long aftertaste. | 92

Croft Quinta da Roêda

As far as I know, this is the only year when Croft bottled two Vintage Ports in the same year. The single quinta shows dark-red color, with an almost

invisible rim. Tobacco, herbs, and white pepper in the balanced bouquet. A complex and balanced palate, with cherry, tobacco, and milk chocolate, very nicely integrated acidity. Long and complex in the aftertaste. A touch better than the regular Croft bottling. | 93

Delaforce

Fresh dark-red color with a fine orange rim. Floral notes, toffee, and acacia honey on the nose. Very chocolaty palate, with plum and a tiny sweetness on the palate. Drink over the next 10 years. | 86

Dow

Fully transparent dark-red color, with some orange hints. The bouquet shows hints of medicinal notes, then orange and malt. Deeply structured palate, with malt and honey notes, chocolate and still some floral freshness. Long, very long, and precise aftertaste. | 95

Ferreira

Deep dark-red color. The nose shows honey, toffee, and malty notes. Very nicely supporting acidity on the palate, with toffee, chocolate, and even some residual red-berry fruit. Medium-long in the aftertaste. | 90



Fonseca

This is the Vintage Port with the greatest aging potential of the year; it will easily see its centennial birthday in fantastic condition. Some bottles even seem to be still somewhat asleep. Dark-red color with intense reflections. Red-berry fruit, tobacco, and chocolate. The palate is still not fully open: tobacco, coffee, red-berry mix, mainly raspberry, and an incredible complexity underneath. Long and intense aftertaste. | 95+

Gould Campbell

The Symington's 1970 “baby brands” are showing incredibly well, and it makes you wonder why someone would call them that. Medium reflections in the fully red color. Cherry, chocolate, and tobacco in the perfectly balanced nose. Creamy palate, with chocolate and tobacco. Medium-long aftertaste. | 90



Graham

1970 was a very important year for the brand, as it had been sold to the Symington family alongside with the spectacular Quinta dos Malvedos and Smith Woodhouse, and because they did produce an incredible Vintage Port. Almost fully transparent dark-red color. Intense red-berry fruit and cherry in the bouquet; tobacco, coffee, and chocolate. Perfectly supporting acidity and tannins on the palate, intense red-berry fruit, chocolate. Long, complex, and fully balanced in the aftertaste. Drink (easily) until its 100th birthday. | 93

Kopke

Extremely dark-red color. Intense, fresh nose with raspberry, chocolate, vanilla, and a balanced mix of herbs. Toffee and chocolate in the complex and well-structured palate. Medium-long in the aftertaste, with some medicinal notes. | 93

Niepoort

There is some discussion as to whether bottle shape influences aging. Therefore, I have compared the straight to the dumpy bottle side by side many times now. Fully transparent red-orange color, with a thin rim. Tobacco, honey, malty notes, and a mix of residual fruits, white pepper, and chocolate. Fresh and fruity on the intense nose. Creamy and complex palate. Tobacco, raspberry, and chocolate. Long, multilayered, and balanced. Huge potential, but already drinking fantastically well. The provenance is more important than the bottle shape! | 98

Quinta do Noval

For many years, the “regular” Noval Vintage Port did not show that well, but recently it came around quite nicely. Dark-red color, with intense reflections. Tobacco, red-berry fruit, cherry. A hint of sweetness on the palate, white pepper, tobacco, cherry, and raspberry. Long aftertaste. | 92

Quinta do Noval Nacional

Almost forgotten after 1963, 1966, and 1967, the 1970 is one of the mega-stars of the Vintage. This perfect bottle showed fresh, clean, and fully

transparent dark-red color. Intense and balanced bouquet, without being too concentrated in any direction. Malt, coffee, cherry, and minty notes. Breath-taking complexity on the multilayered palate. Red-berry fruit, tobacco, and spicy notes. Long and complex in the aftertaste. | 99

Offley

This is one of the hidden champions in 1970—never among the top ten, perhaps, but it never fails to be a fantastic drinking Port. Medium-intense red color. Raspberry and a slight sweetness on the nose; chocolate. Very nicely integrated acidity on the palate, with coffee, raspberry, and malty notes. Balanced aftertaste. | 90

Quarles Harris

At the last tasting, this was the best of the Symington’s three junior brands. Very clean, dark-red color. Structured palate, with perfectly supporting acidity. Toffee, malt, and coffee notes. Long and balanced aftertaste. | 92

Ramos Pinto

Fully transparent dark-red color, with intense reflections. Spicy and herbal nose, with tobacco,

raspberry and white pepper. White pepper and tobacco are also noticeable on the palate, with a very good intensity and finesse. Long aftertaste. | 93

Sandeman

Sandeman Vintage Port 1970 has already matured more than others. Medium-red color. Balanced bouquet, with malt, some orange peel and honey. Delicate, elegant palate, with orange, malt, and honey notes. Medium-long in the aftertaste. | 89

Smith Woodhouse

The last junior brand of the Symingtons does not fail to impress either. Very intense dark-red color. Slightly sweet nose, with floral notes, chocolate, and hints of blueberry. Creamy and fresh palate, with well-integrated acidity and residual cherry and blackberry fruit. Long and perfectly balanced aftertaste. | 92

Taylor

Taylor’s 1970 is one of my benchmarks in terms of well-bottled Vintage Port. Of the three dozen bottles of this that I have tasted, not even one was off. Clean dark-red color, with medium-intense reflections. A structured and complex bouquet, with honey and tobacco. Intense and multilayered palate, with tobacco, toffee, malt, and honey. Long and complex aftertaste. Although fantastic to drink right now, this Port will age perfectly over the next 50 years. The very scarce Quinta de Vargellas 1970 Vintage Port was produced from vines that were lost shortly after the harvest due to the construction of the lock. It is a bit more elegant than its big brother (93). | 98

Warre

With a direct comparison to the BBR Vintage Port, which was also produced by Warre, the “original” shows a bit more concentration and complexity. Deep, dark-red color. The bouquet shows raspberry, chocolate, tobacco, and white pepper and malty notes. Perfectly supporting acidity, the palate revealing milk chocolate, cherries, raspberries, and white pepper. Long and precise aftertaste. This is, and will be for the next 30 years, a fantastic Vintage Port. | 95

