

PORT

Symington Style

WITH THEIR **DECLARATION OF THE 2011 VINTAGE**, THE VENERABLE DOURO FAMILY SHINES THE SPOTLIGHT ON THE DISTINCT WINE STYLES OF ITS MAJOR HOUSES

by Timothy Moriarty



On April 15, Symington Family Estates announced that it was declaring 2011 a vintage year for their port companies, including Graham's, Cockburn's, Dow's, Warre's, Quinta do Vesuvio and Smith Woodhouse. The last generally declared year in the Douro was 2007.

The wet winter of 2010–11 set the table for a great year, though with typical ups and downs: An unusually warm spring led to early bud burst; a cool, dry summer saw good sugar development but lagging phenolics and stressed vines; but late-August rain and weeks of sun in September and October led to a late but successful harvest.

The 2011 ports are characterized as having exceptional depth of color and concentration. They are intense and finely balanced with marked minerality, bitter chocolate and berry fruit flavors and with the acidity and tannins to confer long aging.

But do generalizations make sense, given that the Symingtons have as many as nine different port styles among five major houses?

"It is a complicated category to manage," admits Rupert Symington, Joint Managing Director of Symington Family Estates. "We maintain this quite complicated portfolio as a matter of tradition but also a matter of defending the different flavor profiles that customers are looking for." But Symington adds that for the consumer, port need not be a complicated affair and the various wines in the family's portfolio are easy to navigate.

At a series of seminars in New York, Washington D.C., Chicago and San Francisco, members of the Symington family presented the 2011s along with some older vintage wines. It was an excellent opportunity to contrast the house styles—though, as Rupert Symington makes clear, "It's a matter of technique more than house style." For some of the houses in the Symington Family Estates portfolio, the techniques have evolved over hundreds of years. "We try to keep those houses separate," he says. "They have their own vineyards, winemaking teams and aging warehouses, so we can genuinely get the wine in the bottle tasting different." ■

Meet Sadie Flateman: Putting a Buyer's Palate to Port

Sadie Flateman, a wine buyer at 67Wine in New York City and a Certified Sommelier, tasted through the range of 2011s (but did not attend the tasting led by the Symingtons). Guided only by her own palate and experience, she found much to admire. "There were a couple of wines that stood out to me because they were so joyful, so fruity and exuberant," she says.

Flateman, who has a number of "young, adventurous" customers at 67Wine, is willing to make some unorthodox suggestions. "Of course all these ports need 20 years to harmonize. For young port like the 2011, it's all about the primary fruit. In 20 years it will be about the tertiary flavors and the complexity of that. But I like to say to customers, buy at least two. Experience both ends of the process. Know what's required of a young wine, what makes it worthy of aging."

Having been surprised by the opulent savory pairings at a port dinner she attended, she also recommends drinking certain ports with certain savory foods—marinated game meat and aged beef. "I know this goes against the rules. It's not for everybody, but I've seen it done really beautifully,"

Following are the various house styles, as described by attending family members Rupert, Dominic and Charles Symington, followed by Flateman's independent impressions of the 2011s.

GRAHAMS

Concentration, power, longevity. "Typically we stop the fermentation a little bit sooner than, say, Dow's. We're getting a little bit more grape sugar, a bit sweeter wines. The Grahams style is rich, with plummy, eucalyptus notes."

Graham's 2011 Vintage Port: "Deep plummy nose, exuberant fruit, hearty tannins and spice." —S. F.

DOW'S

Elegance, poise, structure, an abundance of blackberry fruit and floral tones. "A bit leaner, a bit dryer, perhaps the word is austere," due to a longer fermentation.

Dow's 2011 Vintage Port: "Dark raisins on the nose, licorice, thick tannins and a schistous quality. Earthy and a bit minerally." —S. F.

COCKBURN'S

Fresh, balanced, dry on the finish. "This is a style of the

northeastern corner of the Douro. Perhaps a little hotter character of fruit. We leave these wines longer in wood. Cherry, maraschino cherry, kirsch. The winemaking is dryer, not as dry as Dow's, not as sweet as Graham's."

Cockburn's 2011 Vintage Port: "Creamy, wild forest berry, profusely grapey. Aromatic. Minty freshness and fresh tobacco quality. A lot of dried fruits ranging from fig to apricot. The finish was very long and sweet. I felt it was the most jolly of the wines. Cockburn is the wild young boy, the Warre's more of a lady." —S. F.

PHOTO: DANIEL KRIEGER



Sadie Flateman, a wine buyer at 67Wine in New York City and a Certified Sommelier, tasted through the range of 2011s for THE TASTING PANEL.

WARRE'S

Elegance, finesse, length and balance, while still retaining an underlying opulence. Intense red fruit and floral-resiny aromas.

Warre's 2011 Vintage Port: "Much less pronounced aromas, less brightness of fruit, and then on the finish I got roasted coffee bean. Elegant, finessed, but more restrained, feminine." —S. F.

QUINTA DO VESUVIO

"Blueberry, blackberry, sweeter, richer, very dry."

Quinta do Vesuvio 2011 Vintage Port: "Big, powerful, masculine. Plummy. Schisty. Fig and orange blossom." —S. F.