

Any Port in a Storm

by Neil Guthrie

If you look out from one of the many hills of Oporto (Porto, if you are Portuguese) to Vila Nova de Gaia on the opposite bank of the Douro River, there is a glimpse of heaven. Dotted across the vista are the names of the famous port shippers in big white letters on the tops of the various lodges, or warehouses, of Gaia: S A N D E M A N , N O V A L , DELAFORCE, CROFT, OFFLEY, TAYLOR'S, DOW'S, WARRE, FONSECA, GRAHAM'S among them. Oporto itself is a jumble of grey granite buildings, crazy alleys and brightly coloured houses. (*Tourist note:* do not drive in Oporto. I made the mistake of trying.) The climate is not at all semi-tropical. The town has, in fact, a distinctly northern feel – one writer compares it to Whitby in Yorkshire. On the Gaia side, the lodges are a mixture. None has any great architectural merit; many are just big sheds. Some, like Warre's, offer the visitor nothing but a locked gate and an intercom that no one on the other side will answer; others, like Taylor's, have a sophisticated visitor's centre, multilingual student guides and the opportunity to buy recent vintages.

The wine itself must traditionally be made in and shipped from Vila Nova de Gaia, but the grapes are grown on *quintas* (estates) far up the Douro. How anything grows on the terraced banks of the upper reaches of the river is a miracle: there is more schist than soil and the slopes are vertiginous. Terrifying driving (again), but spectacular views. The summer heat is intense and



Taylor's flagship estate, Vargellas, one of the remote and beautiful quintas, or wine estates, of the Upper Douro

the landscape largely treeless. The grapes (Touriga Nacional, Touriga Francesa, Tinta Roriz, Tinta Barroca and Tinta Cão) are harvested by sure-footed pickers but unfortunately no longer sent downstream in flat-bottomed barges. Since the 1970s, the harvest has been sent to Gaia by road.

The new wine is aged in wood for 2 years. Small doses of brandy or grape spirit are added at intervals, which raises the alcohol to as much as 22 degrees, arrests fermentation and gives the port its potential for longevity. If the wine appears good enough, the shipper will 'declare' a vintage for that year (2000, most recently). The wine is then transferred to bottles for maturation

over a period of 20 years or more. A '45 would still be beautiful drinking. At a recent event put on by the Portuguese trade commission, Tim Hughes and I sampled many of the wines of the 2000 vintage and bought for the Club two cases each from Quinta do Noval and Churchill's (the latter firm established in 1981 and already a star). A good year will generally mean a declared vintage from all shippers, but results can vary and some shippers may be obliged to hold back. Less good wines are aged in wood only, often blended with each other and bottled when ready for consumption. Aging in wood can be relatively short for a cheaper port, like a ruby, or 20-plus years for a good tawny, but no port aged entirely in casks can match the glory of bottle-aged, unblended vintage port from a great year.

The whole process is a fairly modern invention, and an English one at that. The English have been buying wine from Portugal since the Middle Ages, but it was not until the late seventeenth century that English wine merchants in Oporto discovered the remarkable result achieved by adding brandy: a long-lasting wine of incredible refinement and depth, sweet but not sickly, subtle and lingering. As George Sainsbury wrote, 'the Almighty might no doubt have caused a better wine to exist, but ... never did'.

Families of English origin still dominate the port trade. One inescapable name is that of Symington, a concern with a vast empire that now includes many of the historic houses (Graham's, Warre's, Dow's, Smith Woodhouse, Gould Campbell, Quarles Harris). Taylor's is also famous, always of high quality, with a hint of violets on the nose. The shipper matters: even the individual

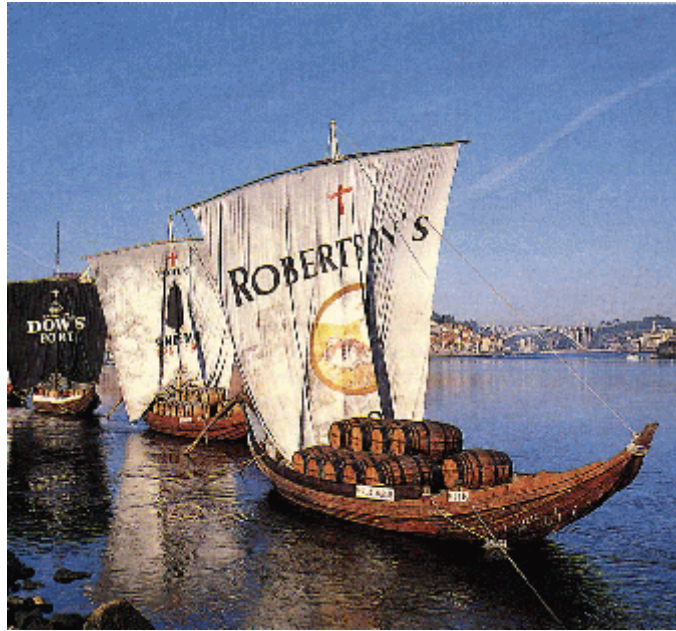


The town of Oporto

brands of the Symington stable retain their distinctive characteristics.

The way to see Oporto properly is to have an entrée with someone in the wine trade. I did not, so never saw inside the imposing English Factory, a sort of industry association *cum* private club, built at the end of the eighteenth century and rich in portraits, old furniture and, of course, great wine. When you finish dinner at the Factory, you retire to a separate room for the port. This is much as you would do at an Oxford college, but at the Factory no food at all is served with the wine, for fear of adulterating the total sensory experience.

Not having an entrée in Oporto is one regret. Another is that my father neglected to lay down a case of port from the year of my birth (1963, the best year since 1945) for me to start enjoying when I turned twenty-one. I have since tasted a '63 Dow's on a couple of occasions (including a recent event at the Club, about which more in a moment). It lived up to its reputation, but you'll be hard-pressed



These barcos rabelos used to be the only way to bring port down the Douro

to find any outside the luxury wine shops of the UK or the USA. (Dad, you can still pull through for the Big Four-O!) The LCBO had, at the time of writing, a limited quantity of '63 Fonseca, but it's rare to find anything as old as that. For more recent offspring, the following years should be available for laying down if you scrounge a bit: 1997, 1994, 1985 (not a success for all shippers), 1982 (a lesser year but still good, and therefore well priced), 1980, 1977 (the best since 1963; can be drunk now, but by no means at peak). The Board

used to release vintage ports in the run-up to Christmas, but sales in late 2001 were disappointing, I understand, and this seems to have meant the end of seasonal releases. Another reason – as if we needed any more – for the immediate abolition of our Stalinist-era liquor monopoly.

On a happier note, there was a tasting at the Club not too long ago featuring a superb lunch and a number of fortified and/or sweet wines. There was port of course (including the sensational '63 Dow's mentioned earlier), but also sherry, Madeira, Sauternes and Banyuls. Rest assured that we didn't drink the Club's port stocks dry: there are, for example, some choice '97s waiting for you to enjoy, in addition to those 2000s – but all in good time. For immediate drinking, we have Dow's 1970, 1977 and 1980, as well as some non-vintage offerings. All are subject to the Club's attractive pricing policy. A final piece of good news is that the UCT Wine Circle plans to make the pre-Yuletide port lunch an annual fixture. See you in December! □



The valley of the Upper Douro, lined with terraced vineyards