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2015 ports seep out, subregional names to emerge too?



Jancis writes We haven't had a serious vintage port declaration for a while (see [The best 2011 reds anywhere](#)) but in April and May of this year most of the important port shippers launched some baby 2015s on to the market, and extremely good most of those we have tasted are too, as you can see below.

You can read about the special qualities of the 2015 growing season in the schist and slate of the

Douro (pictured here) in this [vintage report](#) we published in October 2015, but clearly some firepower is being saved for the 2016 vintage ports which are likely to emerge next year carrying the biggest names (Dow, Fonseca, Graham, Taylor and Warre). But there is no shortage of 2015 deliciousness in the form of single-quinta wines, some of the top individual vineyard bottlings that are now made in great years, and even the odd fully fledged vintage port from a top producer such as Quinta do Noval that now seems increasingly to be going its own way in terms of vintage declarations. There are also commemorative bicentenary vintage ports from Cockburn (which, a cynical observer might say, perpetuates this shipper's somewhat eccentric history of vintage declarations) and a Fonseca Guimaraens declaration to mark the Fonseca bicentenary celebrations in 2015.

The wines are characterised by slightly fresher acidity than usual for midsummer was a bit cooler than usual – high 20s rather than over 30^o Celsius in much of August. After a usefully wet autumn, an unusually dry spring and hot June, the vines were starting to shut down at the end of August. The Fonseca properties around Pinhão, for instance, recorded rainfall a third less than the 10-year average, so that, while sugar levels were decent enough, physiological ripeness was still elusive.

Some of the younger vines were so stressed by the drought that they were picked in early September but fortunately the top sites were rescued by rainstorms on 15 and 16 September that got things going again so that fine, ripe bunches were picked from about 21 September for Touriga Nacional and then five or six days later the Touriga Franca that was particularly successful in 2015. Touriga Franca is often 40 to 50% more productive than Touriga Nacional but in 2015 Franca was characterised by relatively few, small bunches of small, thick-skinned grapes with lower yields overall than Touriga Nacional.

As far as I know, only the Symington family indulged in a formal launch of this vintage in London, the early-evening tutored tasting to which Paul Symington alluded in [his fond farewell](#) to the late Tim Stanley-Clarke.

He pointed out how exceptionally buffeted the port wine trade has been in recent years by changes in ownership while, in parallel, being transformed by the introduction of much more sophistication in production methods, even if the old traditional foot treading is almost a thing of the past.

More than 80% of port companies have changed hands in the last 30 years (as of course they have in sherry country - see [Whatever happened to Harveys?](#)). And the really big change is that the major port shippers have become growers. There was a time when young Symingtons were expressly told not to disclose which farmers supplied grapes for their vintage ports in case they asked for too much money the following year.

Nowadays, the Symingtons own 1,035 ha (2,558 acres) of vines themselves, about 20% of them held personally by members of the family. And they have been acquiring land at a fiendish rate. They now have a wide array of sites in the port-growing heartland of the Douro, a substantial holding at Vilariça in the Douro Superior thanks to their [acquisition of Cockburn](#) in 2006, and earlier this year announced their first venture outside the Douro, in the relatively cool Portalegre subregion of the Alentejo.

Even within the Douro Valley there can be stark variation in weather and growing conditions. Average annual rainfall in the Baixa Corgo closest to the Atlantic, for instance, can be as high as 100 mm (4 in); some grapes here failed to ripen satisfactorily in 2015. In Pinhão in the heart of

port country it is close to 700 mm whereas further inland, at Quinta do Vesúvio for example, it struggles to reach 450 mm – hardly viable. 'You really shouldn't generalise about the Douro', according to Paul Symington, who announced that they are pressing to allow subregional names on port labels. 'It will inevitably come.' You read it here first.

Today, incidentally, is the closing date for UK merchant [Private Cellar's offer of 2015 ports](#). As you can see, prices are really very reasonable for some of the finest wines of their unique type, although most are for the patient, and youthful. As Paul Symington says, their twentieth birthday is judgement day for vintage port – though some of the single-quinta wines should drink well long before this. Adrian Bridge of The Fladgate Partnership assures us that his Guimaraens 2015 'will make superb early drinking' and of Croft Quinta da Roêda he notes, 'typically of the 2015 wines, the Roêda Vintage Port is immediately appealing and will make fine mature drinking by 2025, yet still be displaying all of its elegance and refinement 20 years later'. As you'll see below, I thought the tannin levels suggested a bit more patience than this might be needed.

The 15 tasting notes below are divided into the relatively few 2015s we have tasted and the four older ports shown by the Symingtons at the launch of their 2015s. They are listed in score order but you can change this.

Order by ▼

2015

- [Niepoort, Bioma Vinha Velha 2015 Port](#)Cask sample. Inky and the colour of elderberry juice. Wonderful dark-fruited intensity. Damsons, black plums and sweet spice. Roasted but not overripe. Incredible power but the sweetness is taken down a peg by charry, dark savoury finish. Glorious. (JH)Drink 2028-2050
Imported into the UK by Raymond Reynolds 19
- [Cockburn's 2015 Port](#)*This was the Syms' second vintage port from this house. From 70% Quinta dos Canais and quite a bit from Quinta do Vale Coelho. South-facing vines. 40% Touriga Nacional, 40% Touriga Franca, 9% old mixed vines (350 g of fruit per vine) and a bit of Alicante and Sousão. 3,500 cases – just 10% of production (very unusual in the world of wine). Blackish purple. Neat and focused and fresh and luscious. Quite sweet and purple and very charming. Tingling on the finish. Very exciting and energetic. Some black-pepper top note on the sweetness. Quite a dry end. Lots of chew. Very long term and ambitious. Hint of Edinburgh rock.*Drink 2038-2065
18.5+
- [Quinta do Vesúvio 2015 Port](#)*From 140 out of 400 ha of lots planted – varietally, not field blends – when they bought it in 1989. One of the Ferreiras planted monovarietal blocks in the 1970s so they have some of the Douro's oldest monovarietal blocks. Touriga Franca responds best to vine age. 60% Touriga Nacional, 30% Touriga Franca and 10% Sousão. North-facing vineyards, so very good in 2015. All foot trodden – very unusual! 1,000 cases. Blackish purple. Very exciting and heady nose. Extremely luscious nose – pure hedonistic pleasure! Massively ripe nose and then rigorous palate. Cool finish. Such energy and mineral finish. The sweetest wine in this collection but so much tannin that you don't really see it. So complex and clean. Lots of tannins!*Drink 2030-2070
£65 RRP 18.5
- [Graham's, The Stone Terraces 2015 Port](#)*One of the westernmost Symington properties, therefore coolish but in 2015 it was really, really dry. Made from a 2.9-ha steep vineyard at*

Malvedos facing east and north, and a tiny part facing west, in one of the hottest bits of Malvedos right down by the river. 820 g fruit per vine from single-row terraces. Mainly Touriga Nacional. Picked 12 and 13 September, earlier than most Symington 2015s. This is only the second Stone Terraces made - the first one was 2011. (There won't be a Graham's 2015.) Just 400 cases made (2% of Malvedos production). Hand picked. This is the first port to carry a Royal Warrant since Dow's had one a century ago.

Aromatic. Rich and pruny nose. Strongly, florally aromatic with a fine line of freshness through it. Almost refined on the finish! Very long and elegant. Drink 2025-2040

£140 RRP 18

- Niepoort 2015 Port Cask sample. Inky crimson, totally opaque. Fabulous wild, dark-fruited intensity. Elderberry and black plums, deep, long and chewy. A savoury character like roasted potato skins. Stunning complexity already. Deep and long and a great combination of sweet and savoury. (JH) Drink 2028-2048
Imported into the UK by Raymond Reynolds 18
- Quinta do Noval 2015 Port Very deep purplish crimson. Almost impenetrable. Very serious stuff. So dense and concentrated that the nose has to be encouraged. This is classic young vintage port! Massive young treacle notes with a top layer of dried herbs and clean, zesty, ripe, complex fruit on the mid palate. Not the sweetest 2015 vintage port but thoroughly convincing and glamorous - if very youthful. I wonder what quantity was made? Drink 2030-2060
18
- Dow's, Quinta Senhora da Ribeira 2015 Port South-facing property in the Douro Superior; 20 ha, some right by river and others east-facing higher up. The latter part is planted with Touriga Nacional, which suffers in the heat. 35% Touriga Nacional from here and 50% Touriga Franca, which enjoys the heat, from south-facing vineyards by the river. Yields of just 700 g per vine. Co-fermented with Sousão, picked about 22 September, and then other lots picked a week later. Sousão brings acidity and colour. Made using a new destemmer that allows some (often raisined) grapes to remain on the stems. 700 cases.
Very dark purple even though 20% of the volume is colourless spirit! Rich, buttery nose with a hint of balsam. Some high-toned floral aromas too. Not that heavy or dense on the palate and very dry finish. Very Dow! Neat and long term. Drink 2028-2042
£55 RRP 17.5
- Fonseca, Guimaraens 2015 Port It says Bicentenary on the label... Very dark crimson. Headily scented on top and very solid underneath. Very grown up and luscious with lots of sweet liquorice at the beginning but extremely dry on the end. Grainy and very chewy. Needs lots of time. Extremely vigorous. But no concessions to sweetness and softness. Drink 2033-2055
17.5
- Taylor's, Quinta de Vargellas 2015 Port Blackish crimson with medium rim. Heady and ripe on the nose. Subtle and savoury. Satin-smooth palate entry and a very dry end but really exciting and herbal in the middle. Very much in the Taylor's idiom. Neat and ambitious. Drink 2030-2050
17.5
- Ramos Pinto 2015 Port Medium dark crimson with a pretty pale rim. High-toned nose, almost claret-like. Pure start with great focus and flavours of blackcurrant pastilles. Refined tannins and quite a bit of acidity. Then alcohol and a hint of mint on the end. By no means massive. Clean and crisp instead. Drink 2030-2045
16.5
- Croft, Quinta da Roeda 2015 Port Mid crimson with a fairly pale rim. Peppery nose and some obvious ripeness. Very sweet palate entry and some floral notes. Rather a pretty wine with marked acidity and fine tannins in abundance. Finishes much fresher than it starts. Drink 2028-2048

OLDER VINTAGES

- **Graham's 1970 Port** *Charles Symington chose to serve this wine at his wedding - no greater praise! 1970 was the year the Syms bought Graham's.*
Translucent ruby with rusty rim. Very complex tertiary bouquet, decongestant (aniseed?) aromas and wonderfully sweet but very far from sickly on the palate with some vestiges of tannin. Just beautiful balance with sufficient freshness and vitality. Still very vigorous. A remarkably youthful bottle - not quite as knockout as the one described [here](#). Drink 1995-2040
18.5
- **Cockburn's 2011 Port** 3,000 cases. Very silky already and round and a hint of walnuts. Really rich and fresh and bouncy. Quite a charmer! Not that thick and sweet. Real delicacy! Seems to have developed relatively fast. Gorgeous. Drink 2020-2050
18.5
- **Quinta do Vesúvio 1995 Port** *They felt they got into their stride by then. This wine was chosen to celebrate Charles's first vintage. He also made the 1995s in Chile. He specialised in maturation studies and told his father they should start picking on 5 September and his father thought he was crazy - but he came round. Very hot vintage with very low yields.*
Rich and velvety and very mature and round and polished. Sleek and tannins only moderately in retreat. Rather poised. Lip-smacking and very long. Drink 2015-2040
18
- **Dow's, Quinta Senhora da Ribeira 1998 Port** *Historic wine. The previous generation had very strong links with this quinta. They sold it in 1956 during some tough times, but they continued to make the wine for the Lisbon family who owned it. It was very emotional when Charles and his father Peter managed to buy it back in 1998. (Charles started work in 1995.) It started to rain on the picking start day further down the Douro but this was picked pre rain.*
Exceptionally dark crimson still! Smells rather of claret. Neat and round and definitely fully mature. Round and lightly treacly. Not that sweet. Sinewy. Drink 2008-2022
17