



1977: A Vintage year in many shapes and sizes

Axel Probst reviews an excellent year, including some fine wines—and bottle formats—that were missing when the vintage was first declared

The majority of Port producers declared and bottled a 1977 Vintage Port, making it a “general declaration.” It was the first excellent year, with fabulous Ports, since 1970,

so the market was “thirsty,” and sales very brisk and successful. Unfortunately, some important names are missing. At the prestigious Quinta do Noval, neither a Vintage Port nor the extremely rare

Vintage Nacional was bottled. Krohn did not declare, and while Cockburn bottled many thousand bottles, it applied to the Port and Douro Wines Institute (IVDP) too late to release the wine as Vintage Port. Only after the Symington family assumed full control of the brand in 2011 were they able to negotiate successfully with the IVDP, so that it is now possible to purchase Cockburn’s 1977 Vintage Port in nice single wooden cases.

As in all great Vintage Port years, weather is the key to success. Winter is always crucial for replenishing the underground water reserves to enable the grapes to survive the “three months of hell” that follow. (*Nove meses de inverno e três meses de inferno*, “nine

months of winter and three months of hell,” is how an old saying sums up the weather in the Douro.) A rather cold flowering period led to some delay in the growing process, but the grapes managed to catch up due to a very hot August and September. The harvest started at the end of September, and farmers were extremely happy with the overall quality of the grapes.

Prior to 2007, Port lovers could not purchase bottles larger than magnums. Although some producers bottled larger formats much earlier, it was forbidden to sell those formats under IVDP regulations. Producers were only able to open these for promotional purposes. Only after some intensive questioning

from an English friend of mine was this regulation abolished, so that nowadays Port lovers may acquire double-magnums or even larger formats. Today, the challenge is to find such bottles, since few houses produced, and even fewer are willing to sell, their comparably small stocks of these large format bottles.

Vintage Port has to be bottled in the second or third year after the harvest, and it matures slowly in bottle. For no particular reason that I can see, several producers bottled an unusually high proportion of their 1977 Vintage in magnum—and if you are lucky, you can even find some bottles of the very rare Tappit Hen format, which originated in Scotland. Some 200 years ago, it held a little less than 2 liters of Port, and it was given to guests for their way home, to ensure that they would not arrive more sober than they left. In the past, the bottles were closed with a lid to prevent spilling of the precious liquid (due to either poor riding skills or the heavy drinking beforehand, or both). In recent years the Symingtons released some of their 1975 and 1977 Tappit Hens for their Dow, Graham, and Warre brands in special-edition cases. The latter-day incarnation of the Tappit Hen is the Tregnum—that is, three times 0.75 liters = 2.25 liters, increasing slightly the volume of the ancient bottles.

I had the pleasure of participating in some tastings of 1977 Vintage Ports, comparing the three different formats—standard bottles, magnums, and Tappit Hens. As with all wines, the larger-format bottles slow down the maturation process, so that the wines show fresher and fruitier. Because Vintage Port matures quite slowly even in standard bottles, this slower maturation might, of course, be less desirable if you want to enjoy the Port today. Since many big names show perfectly from standard bottles now, I would recommend keeping the larger-format bottles for at least another decade, if not for the next generation. None of the large formats showed better than the standard bottles in our tasting.

Another distinctive feature of the 1977 Vintage is that it is the first where quality among the top houses is more variable than it was in vintages up to and including 1970. If you want to find the cream of the crop in 1977, you cannot go with the big names alone.



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NOTES

Berry Bros (bottled by Quarles Harris)

As early as 1947, the famous London shipper and merchant Berry Bros & Rudd used to bottle Vintage Port as its “own selection.” It changed the producer from year to year, and its bottling varied from the original blend. Much darker than the original Quarles Harris 1977 Vintage Port. Fresh red berry fruit and milk chocolate on the nose. The palate also reveals spice, cherry, and mineral notes. Medium-long aftertaste. Drink to 2045. | 90

Cálem

Slightly worn, medium-orange color. Crème brûlée and orange notes. In the mouth this Port shows very good acidity, with orange peel and a certain creaminess. Drink soon. | 90

Cockburn

Due to the late release, the cork is labeled “Crusted Port.” Fresh, medium-red color. Well-balanced, spicy and fruity nose, with an underlying complexity. Red berry fruit, chocolate, and tobacco on the palate, with a long, structured aftertaste. Drink to 2040. | 94

Croft

Very transparent dark red with a noticeable rim. Elegant, balanced nose, with some sweetness, cherry, and hints of cassis. The palate shows a certain sweetness, with a good stabilizing acidity, little volatile acidity, and elegant fruity notes, mostly raspberry and cherry. Medium-long aftertaste. Drink over the next 10 years. | 90

Delaforce

Medium-red color. Balanced caramel, orange, and honey on the nose. Fresh, vivid palate with some malty notes and caramel. Medium-long aftertaste. Drink to 2030. | 90

Dow

Bottle: Fresh, dark-red color. Elegant fruity bouquet with malt, cherry, and a hint of raspberry. Noticeable acidity on the palate, malt and spices in the background. Unfortunately, there is considerable variability, some bottles showing higher volatile acidity. | NS.

Magnum: Even a touch darker in color. The nose is already affected by volatile acidity. Underneath, a precise and structured palate due to the slower maturation. | NS

Ferreira

Although many Portuguese houses rather struggled in bottling outstanding Vintage Port, Ferreira really surprised with its 1977 Vintage Port. Transparent dark red color. Malt, orange, and honey on the nose, with some tobacco in the background. Soft palate, with very nice finesse and complexity. Long aftertaste. Drink to 2040. | 94

Fonseca

Bottle: Deep red color. Spicy and complex bouquet with lots of intensity. Chocolate, raspberry, and a very delicate malty note on the palate, and huge structure. Long-lasting finish with a soft tannic backbone. Drink through to its 100th birthday in 2077. | 98

Magnum: Very similar, but with more red-berry fruit and more powerful tannins. Not better than the bottle but less mature and showing more freshness. Drink beyond its 100th birthday. | 98

Graham

Bottle: Fresh, medium-red color. Balanced red berry fruit on the nose, with some mint in the background. The palate first shows a sweetness, then malt with perfectly integrated acidity and some elegant cherry in the background. Long and balanced aftertaste. Drink to 2050. | 94

Magnum: Much darker in color, with a spicy and fruity bouquet. The palate, however, was transiting from red berry fruit to the first malty phase and seemed less pleasant to drink now. Needs more time. | 91

Tappit Hen: Deep dark red color. Elegant fruity nose, some parts still asleep. Fresh red berry fruit on the palate, with a soft tannic structure and nicely integrated acidity. Long and fresh in aftertaste. | 94

Gould Campbell

Bottle: Even slightly darker than Smith Woodhouse, both being bottled by Smith Woodhouse at the time. Unbelievably fresh bouquet for a 40-year-old Vintage Port. Red berry fruit with chocolate. Noticeable tannic structure on the palate, followed by cherry and cassis notes. Medium-long aftertaste. Will improve further over the next decade. | 91

Magnum: Identical in color. Even more fruity notes and chocolate on the nose. The palate does not show its full potential now but needs another two decades to fully develop. Fresh aftertaste. | 94

Guedes

This is a very small Portuguese producer that ceased to exist shortly after bottling this Port. Medium-red color. Spicy-fresh nose, with balanced mint and orange. Tobacco on the elegant palate and raspberry in the background. Medium-long. Drink up over the next 5 years. | 90

Messias

A dark, intense core to the medium-red color. Minty and spicy nose, with some milk chocolate in the background. Fresh and elegant palate, with mint and chocolate. Medium-long. Surprisingly fresh still. | 90

Niepoort

Bottle: Noticeable rim in the dark red color. A structured bouquet, with tobacco notes in the background. Some sweetness on the palate, followed by strong raspberry fruit and tobacco. Medium-long aftertaste. | 91



Magnum: The magnum format was exclusively bottled for the importer in Belgium and only in very small quantities. Transparent, very dark red color. Same tobacco notes, but still some residual red berry fruit, balanced and complex. Long aftertaste, which is dominated by chocolate. Leave the magnums for the next generation. | 94

Offley

Offley Vintage Ports are often very elegant, but this one surprised with its freshness and complexity as well. Dark red color. Balanced fruit-malt-coffee bouquet and palate, very fresh. Medium length. | 94

Quarles Harris

Transparent red color. The nose offers toffee and honey. Fresh palate, with chocolate and cherry fruit and some white pepper in the background. Medium-long aftertaste. | 90

Rebello Valente

There is a saying among Port producers that one should serve Rebelo Valente Vintage Ports whenever women are at the table. The '77 Vintage shows a luminous red color and a balanced, elegant bouquet, with malt and tobacco. The palate reveals mixed red berry fruit, elegant and well balanced. Medium long. Don't keep longer than 10 years. | 90

Royal Oporto

Dark red color with a huge rim. A balanced and elegant floral nose, with very little red berry fruit remaining. A structured palate, with malt and some background coffee. Short aftertaste. Drink soon. | 88

Sandeman

Medium-red color. Spicy, malty bouquet, along with tobacco. Sweet but structured palate, with sweet raspberry and cherry, fresh. Medium-long

Previous spread: The spectacular Douro landscape. Above: Cockburn's flagship Quinta dos Canais cellar.

aftertaste. A very consistent bottling, with very few bad bottles. | 90

Smith Woodhouse

Bottle: One of the darkest of all the Vintage Ports from 1977 with no transparency at all. Fresh, elegant bitter chocolate and cherry, some raisins. Noticeable tannic structure on the palate, cherry and chocolate. Long aftertaste, with some astringency. Still slumbering. | 90

Magnum: Same color. I would have guessed this to be from 2000 had I been tasting it blind. Fresh, fruity nose with chocolate and a little raisin. The palate also shows an incredible freshness, with milk chocolate and dark cherry, tobacco, and white pepper. Long, fresh aftertaste. | 94

Taylor

Bottle: In 1977, Taylor's flagship Quinta de Vargellas was finally connected to the electric system in the Douro Valley. Dark red color with violet reflections. Fresh spicy nose, with tobacco and raspberry. Fresh and fruity on the palate, with the first malty notes, but also still residual red berry fruit and tobacco. Long and sophisticated aftertaste. | 98

Magnum: Identical to the bottle in color, but less awake in general. More fruit and chocolate and greater freshness. I would prefer the regular bottle now. | 95

Warre

Bottle: Transparent dark red color. Elegant and balanced fruity bouquet. The palate also shows the typical complex elegance of the house, with fresh chocolate and a remarkable balanced-fruit structure. Long and multilayered aftertaste. | 94

Magnum: Medium red color, with a darker core. Also much less developed and more fruity, with more chocolate on both nose and palate. Long and balanced aftertaste. | 91

Tappit Hen: Some degrees darker than the magnum. Almost as backward as the magnum, with red berry fruit and chocolate. Very balanced and elegant. Leave this special bottle for your children or grandchildren, because this is when a Tappit Hen will be showing at its best. | 91