

The Douro's Leading Port Family: Symingtons' Success – Yesterday, Today, Tomorrow

The Port Wine Trade has endured a long and eventful history spanning over several centuries. At the heart of this industry lies Symington Family Estates, whose ancestry dates back to 1652 and through 13 generations. While tradition and heritage continue to play an important role in the Port industry, the category has seen some radical modern developments in recent decades. In no other sector of the wine trade do long-standing traditions and very modern innovations co-exist in such perfect harmony. Symington Family Estates stand out from the crowd among Port producers for several reasons, including company structure, vineyard and winery innovations, product developments and visions for the future.

The Symingtons are one of the few remaining family owned Port companies, and 6 members of the family currently run the business, ensuring that every aspect of production is overseen by the family, from viticulture through to winemaking, blending, bottling and marketing. This level of involvement is unique to the Symingtons within the Port trade. In terms of company structure, another feature that no other Port company has the privilege to share is the fact that each member has privately owned and managed vineyards. While family businesses are typically small-scale operations, this is certainly not the case with Symington Family Estates, as they are the largest vineyard owners in the Douro, with 940ha, and 25 Quintas. Many of these Quintas are considered to be the finest in the region, such as Malvedos, Bomfim, Senhora da Ribeira and Cavadinha, which each provide the backbone for the greatest Vintage Ports: Graham's, Dow's and Warre's. The unique business model adopted by Symington Family Estates will doubtless ensure that they will continue to prosper as the Douro's leading producer of premium Port. The Symingtons are also founding members of the Primum Familiae Vini, an international association with 12 members, each a family-run wine estate considered to be the finest of its region and with a strong international status. The main objective of the PFV is to 'defend and promote the traditions and values of family-owned wine companies, and ensure that such ideals survive and prosper for future generations.'

The Douro is the world's oldest demarcated wine region, and one in which tradition still holds an important place. This is evident in both the vineyards and the wineries. When one arrives in the Douro for the first time, the sight of the steeply terraced vineyards, set within the mountains, evokes a sense of history. The grape varieties permitted in the production of Port speak of tradition, as they are all indigenous, and can still be found grown as field blends in the vineyards. Identification of the varieties and bloc plantings are relatively recent occurrences. The Symington's modern developments in the vineyard are most evident at Cavadinha, where experimentation is centered around clonal selections of different grape varieties, rootstock performance, cover crops on vertical plantings to prevent soil erosion, and a rainfall simulator machine on the hillside to measure the extent of erosion. The steep terraced vineyards do not facilitate mechanical viticulture, and when one sees the intensity of manual labour that goes into such practices, notions of tradition are incited. The Symingtons have pioneered modern technologies in the Port winemaking process. Most significantly, the robotic lagar was first introduced at the Graham's winery from the 2000 vintage. These automated treading machines have had a revolutionary impact on the production of Port, as they present none of the disadvantages of traditional foot treading and produce Port of outstanding quality. The Symingtons currently have 16 robotic lagares in 4 of their wineries, and plan to install more at their wineries at Tua and Bomfim. Alongside such modern winemaking, around 10% of Symington's total production is produced in the ancient method of foot treading in stone lagares, notably at Quinta do Vesuvio. Furthermore, the fact that Symingtons have their own team of coopers who work in the same techniques as 100 years ago deepens the company's sense of traditional values.

In addition to the company's structure and viticultural and winemaking developments, product innovation is another area that reinforces Symington Family Estates' position as global leader within the Port category. Warre's Otima, a 10 year old Tawny with its modern packaging is a perfect example of an innovative brand designed to attract new consumers to the category. Other pioneering products include Dow's Midnight Port and Graham's The Tawny. Most recently, Dow's Nirvana is a blend created to match high grade chocolate. The Symingtons are also influential in their production of Single Quinta Vintage Ports, such as Graham's Quinta dos Malvedos, Warre's Quinta de Cavadinha and Quinta do Vesuvio, a category that offers some of the characteristics of a Vintage Port but matures earlier. By concentrating their production on high quality styles, such as reserve rubies, aged tawnies, single quintas and Vintage

Ports, Symingtons are ensuring long-term success in high value markets such as the UK, USA and Canada. Furthermore, Symingtons have recently expanded their Douro DOC production, with brands such as Altano, Quinta de Roriz and Chryseia. Paul Symington believes that growth of these wines will not have a detrimental effect on their Port trade, but will on the contrary attract new consumers to the Douro who will in turn discover Port wines.

There is no doubt that the Port Wine Trade is currently facing a number of challenges, such as rising production costs, exchange rates and decreases in availability of labour to name but a few, but the fact that sales have remained steady, unlike other fortified sectors such as Sherry, is an encouraging sign. Growth seems to be centered around premium styles, such as Vintage, single quinta, aged tawnies, LBVs and reserve rubies, and as Symington Family Estates account for over 30% of all Premium Ports, their status as the world's leading producer of premium quality Port is set remain strong. Paul Symington's desire for Port to be considered as a wine in its own right is truly inspiring. Large wine glasses should be used, Tawnies should be served chilled, Port can be drunk at any time of year, and should be appreciated in the glass for what it is: an outstanding wine that evokes long-standing traditions as well as modern innovations, but above all, speaks of its origin, the magnificent Douro valley. Though steeped in tradition, such passion for innovation looks set to carry Symington Family Estates' success forward for many years to come.

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