

History and Innovation by Symington Family Estates in the Douro

My visit to the Douro, allowed me to have a peak into the Symington Family Estates operation. The Symington's are descendants of one of the first Port merchants, Walter Maynard (English Consul in Oporto), who first shipped Port in 1652. Over 350 years later, there are currently seven family members actively working in the business producing the following Port brands: Graham's, Dow's, Warre's, Smith Woodhouse, Quinta do Vesuvio, Martinez, Gould Campbell and Quarles Harris.

Having very little knowledge of the family history and breadth of vineyard ownership, I was impressed when I learned of all the Quintas that the Symington's own. In total the company and individual members of the family own 22 leading Quintas totaling 1704 hectares of which 906 hectares are planted with vines. The sales from the family's Port companies account for over a third of all premium Port sold throughout the world. Although, I could happily write about each individual Quinta and their fascinating stories, I am most interested in the innovation implemented in the winery, vineyard and product line.

The Symington Family is instrumental in bringing innovation to the Douro, starting with temperature control during fermentation and the use of autovinifiers in the early 1960's. Continuing on their modernising path, stainless steel robotic lagares were introduced for the 2000 vintage. These robotic lagares with their silicone pads, replicate the gentle pressure of human feet, allowing the grape skins to be broken, but not the astringent pips. There are many benefits to using the robotic lagar; a key one is to alleviate the labor shortage in the Douro. It is increasingly difficult to find labor as the young prefer to leave this rugged area for city life. The robotic lagar saves the harvester an additional 4-5 hours of evening treading after picking all day, and can be run at any time of the day for any length of time. They are also easy to empty using their hydraulic arms to tip the contents out, instead of shoveling as required when using stone lagares. Although there are many robotic lagares in use today, foot treading is still practiced, as it is still one of the best ways to extract the juice, colour and tannins in a gentle way. It is interesting to note though, that the 2000 and 2003 Graham's Vintage Port using 36% and 78% (respectively) robotic lagar trodden wines won accolades and scored high points proving that they are an acceptable substitute for human treading.

It is not only in the winery that innovation is taking place, in the vineyard innovation is continuing with experimental plantings. Quinta da Cavadinha in the Pinhão valley has currently 3.1ha of experimental plantings. The plantings include Port grape varieties on 9 different rootstocks to test suitability, clones of Port varieties and rarer traditional Port varieties. There are currently 16 clones of Touriga Nacional, 10 of Tinta Cão, 8 of Touriga Franca, 25 of Tinta Roriz and 4 of Tinta Amarela planted in significant quantities to allow for 100 liters to be microvinified. Traditional rarer Port varieties that are planted include Souzao, Tinta Francisca, and Alicante Bouschet.

Another experimental vineyard is the 3.7 hectare Quinta das Lages in the Rio Torto Valley which has been certified organic since 2006. Three more vineyards that make their still Douro DOC wines situated in the Vilarica valley have begun to be farmed organically with certification due to take place in two years time.

As we have covered innovation in both the winery and the vineyard, it is necessary to speak of innovation in product. Port is viewed by many as an old fashioned drink and it has been increasingly difficult to appeal to the younger consumer. Three Ports in the Symington portfolio that are targeted to younger consumers are the Warre's Otima Tawny 10 year old with its sleek and cylindrical bottle, Dow's Midnight Port in a elegant black Port bottle and Graham's The Tawny in an equally modern clear bottle. All three of these Ports are ready to drink, with cotemporary packing and names to match.

In addition to developing a range of Ports targeted to the younger generation, the Symington Family has also ventured into producing still Douro DOC. They have two ranges one midmarket and the other premium. The midmarket wines are produced under the Altano label. There are currently four wines in production, a red from Tinta Roriz and Touriga Franca, an organically farmed red from Touriga Nacional, Touriga Franca, Tinta Barroca and Tinta Roriz, a reserva red from Touriga Franca, Touriga Nacional and a singular white from Malvasia Fina, Viosinho, Rabigato and Moscatel Galego.

The premium Douro DOC wines are a result of a joint venture between the Symington's and Bruno Prats (former owner of Cos d'Estournel) producing two reds, Chryseia and a second wine Post Scriptum. Chryseia is a blend of predominantly Touriga Nacional and Touriga Franca and is only produced in years where the grapes are of suitable condition. Post Scriptum will be produced every year and is a blend of Port varieties. Both these wines are made in the Bordeaux method where whole bunches of grapes are picked and vinified separately with ageing in French oak barrels.

Looking back at my trip, it isn't the Symington's extensive portfolio of vineyard holdings, brands, or long history in the Port trade that is most affecting. What is inspiring is the family's dedication, passion and commitment to the Douro. They recognize that Port needs to be modernized to survive in an ever competitive drinks market where fortifieds only have a small market share. They recognize that producing the best Ports require constant innovation in the vineyard, the winery and product line. I believe that they have figured out a winning formula and are positioned to continue on as a great Port family for many more generations.

Many thanks, to the Symington Family, Tim Stanley-Clarke and WSET for this lovely experience that I will never forget.