

Roy's 2004 Vintage Port Forecast

By Roy Hersh © December 2006

Dylan wrote: "The times they are a changing" and writing an article forecasting *declared* vintages is something that I take great pride in. As the renaissance continues in the Douro Valley and Single Quinta Vintage Port (SQVP) is released with regularity, the distinction becomes less clear, between "classic" vintages (declared on average, three times per decade) and SQVPs and "second labels" (such as Quinta do Portal and Graham's Malvedos respectively) which are released with far greater frequency.

The traditional shippers and producers of Vintage Port understand that this trend is here to stay and it looks to be a positive, for both the Port trade and consumers. With this in mind, I must embrace the change and therefore with the 2004 Vintage Ports (VP) already proceeding from cask to bottling line and in some cases, already heading to market ... I've listened to the *FTLOP faithful* and will produce reports on vintages likely to succeed, not just generally declared vintages. The Vintage Ports of 2004 are not just likely to succeed, but given the innate overall quality, deserve to be explored and enjoyed.

From early discussions I had with those directly involved in the Port harvests, few had any doubt whether 2003 with its ripe fruit and powerful tannins would be declared instead of the 2004, while both were still in "pipe" (Port casks holding about 61 cases). The common wisdom at the time believed 2004 to offer good quality and well-balanced wines.

Conversely, when I asked the same basic question when visiting Gaia and the Douro in October 2005, (except this time pitting the 2004 versus the 2005 vintage), responses were mostly non-committal and I found producers hedging their bets at the time, as both vintages

are seemingly “solid.” That said, it was almost unfair of me to ask the question while the ‘05s had barely finished their fermentation and fortification process. So I waited until my trip in June of this year to revisit the same question.

While the larger groups in the trade stated unequivocally that they’d be releasing their SQVPs, only the smaller producers were willing to bottle “classic” Vintage Ports from the 2004 vintage, coming on the heels of the 2003. While a few felt that the time has come to forget about concerns of “split declarations” and stated that declaring just three times a decade, “is a thing of the past.” This may be worth exploring further in the future, to see whether the tradition of declaring vintages (3x per decade) fits in with today’s Port buyer’s view of the marketplace and the Port trades long term position on these specific traditions.

Obviously market conditions enter this type of equation, as there are still enough 2003 VPs sitting on UK and US shelves (not to mention some lingering 2000 VPs that have recently been seen “on sale” in the USA). It is impossible to discount the fact that having back-to-back or “split-declarations” in a lukewarm Port market, does not necessarily make for a sound business practice. Or does it?

It is no surprise that The Fladgate Partnership and Symington Family Estates, (considered two of the more traditional Port Shippers) chose to release SQVPs and second labels, while other smaller producers and shippers were not as concerned with their traditional images and produced 2004 VPs without reservation. Part of that has to do with both company’s reputation for avoiding consecutive vintage declarations no matter how much they doth protest that quality reigns supreme (which ultimately it does). This is not meant as a slight of either of these extremely successful and family-owned operations; but one only need peer in the rear view mirror at their list of declarations to find the last time either had a back-to-back Vintage Port while their family was in charge. It certainly does not happen often. That said, have a look at their lineup of 2004 VPs and see what quality they have put in the bottle.

I know of at least one independent producer who is holding back the release of the 2004 vintage in favor of releasing their 2005, but asked not to be named. From what I have tasted

and from casual conversations with various producers, It seems like the 2005s are also going to be worthy as VP, although again, very few shippers wanted to go out on a limb and make a prediction.

So before providing my tasting notes on two dozen 2004 Vintage Ports I will provide some overall impressions of the '04 vintage and describe the growing season's weather patterns to help better understand the wines.

Unlike a generally declared vintage like 2000 or 2003 where the entire trade antes up samples, in 2004 it is not as easy to obtain cask samples from the Port trade. Their agents in the USA don't always find out about the non-declared vintage Port releases until they are told they'll be selling them. It somewhat surprises me that they don't have more information about coming releases, as I hate to be the one to break the news!

Tasting regimen –

The majority of the Ports below were tasted at least twice and on three occasions for some of them with a handful tasted just once. I first had them while visiting Portugal in June of 2006, when they were all presented as "cask samples. Unfortunately, I can not claim that all of my tasting was done blind for this report. Those Shippers that kindly sent "cask samples" to the USA were tasted blind at home, in flights of six bottles at a time. These particular 2004s were also tasted on two other occasions in Portugal. My wife would put numbered bags on the wines for me to taste, picked randomly from my sample box in the cellar and she yanked the corks too.

I would then taste them each three times the first day, (usually 4-5 hours apart) and twice the second day. Only a few were saved and re-tasted again, one final time on the morning of the third day. My last tasting of the 2004s came during the first week of October while in Gaia as well as the Douro. I had hoped to try more than 2 dozen vintage Ports from this vintage, but

I've learned how to prepare better by contacting the shippers/producers further in advance for the next VP forecast.

Overall impression of the vintage and when to drink the '04 VPs –

I like the 2004s and think they have their place in the cellar *regardless of your age*. In general (and I must paint with a broad brush stroke to make this point), I found that the 2004s were pretty easy-to-approach and although there were three or four (of 24) very intriguing VPs that I would buy for the long haul if I was in the 30-45 age bracket, the majority of the wines are in the 88-93 point range. That is not a bad thing, and I'd have no problem drinking an 88 point VP, given a price that made it a good buy. The narrow range mentioned above does not encompass the 2004s at the high and low end of the spectrum, though it does hint at an overall consistency.

Of the two dozen 2004 VPs I tasted for this article, I found that 13 of the 24 would have the aging potential to improve while cellaring for at least twenty years. Many of the others either lacked the type of tannins and/or requisite acidity level that will enable these Ports to improve for two decades or longer. ***The beauty of the 2004 vintage is the symmetry these VPs deliver on the palate as well as the “approachability factor.”*** Nearly half of all the 2004s I tasted, won't make for old bones but will make for very enjoyable drinking while they are young. And I am not talking about drinking them in 2007, although you certainly could enjoy the expressive upfront fruit profiles many will exhibit this young. But from about 12-18 years of age, (2016-2022) the '04s without the “+” sign in my notes, are VPs that will deliver lots of pleasure ... while in hindsight, will seem to have been purchased at an extremely reasonable price.

Can you please make a comparison between 2004 and any other vintage?

Absolutely! 1995 immediately comes to mind for several reasons. Although the growing seasons do not mirror one another, both were fraught with irregularities and problems that arose (as you'll read in detail about the '04). But more importantly, the decision on when to pick at harvest time was a critical factor in both vintages, with similar dynamics. Grape peril awaited those that made the wrong choice.

Additionally, in 1995 as in 2004, large quantities of VP producers from both vintages happened to follow pretty MAJOR Vintage Port declarations (1994 and 2003, of course). So that is just another similarity and like 1995 which was solid but never great, the 2004 will likely be analogous when viewed in a historical perspective.

The resemblances above aside for the moment, the greatest similarity in my comparing the two vintages, is due to tasting many Ports from these two vintages. From '95 I can't think of a better VP than the Vargellas Vinha Velha on the high end, with the Ferreira taking the prize as the best quality to price ratio Port of that vintage. Although there might only be one or two VPs from 1995 that I'd rate over 94 points, there are about a dozen others that I could recommend from that unheralded vintage and would enjoy drinking tomorrow or in five to ten years time. It offered a solid range of well-made wines that are more mid-term drinking VPs, to amuse our palates while we keep the '94s in the cellar.

By comparison, the 2004 comes on the heels of a vintage which I was moved by. If I was 30-40 years old, I would have bought MANY cases of the '03s (well, many more than I did!). The top dozen wines from 2003 will drink well for the rest of my days on earth. Conversely, the 2004s are rock solid, yet there is a narrower range of quality -- from fair to very good, with maybe one or two outstanding VPs (time will tell) from what I have tried so far. For me, the 2004s share many dynamics with the 1995 Vintage Ports and I hope to hear from the Port trade members to see if they agree with this or if they can come up with other vintages that are a closer match.

Pricing –

I can not claim to be an expert on what these cost around the world, but I can tell you the lowest prices I found in the USA on just a smattering of the wines that have made it over here so far. I have little doubt that as these become more widely available, the prices will be even more competitive. In retrospect, you'd have to look back a dozen years to 1994, in order to find a release price of the Quinta do Vesuvio that came out of the starting gate at \$45 per bottle. Now glance below and see what you think of these prices. If you'd like to discuss this topic or anything about the 2004s, click right here for a lively ongoing conversation:
<http://www.fortheloveofport.com/ftlopforum/viewtopic.php?t=1262>

Current USA Pricing (as of Dec. 6th 2006):

\$30 for Krohn (not tasted)

\$40 Dow's Quinta da Senhora da Ribeira

\$45 Quinta do Vesuvio

\$65 Quinta do Roriz

\$80 Quinta do Vale Meão (not tasted)

To buy or not to buy – that is what you really want me to elaborate on, right?

I could be coy and say it depends on your age, your financial situation and your buying strategy. All would be salient points. Earlier in this report I said that the 2004s have the “approachability factor.” Basically, that means that consumers don't have to wait for two or three decades to begin enjoying these Ports.

When solid vintages like this come along, I suggest seeking out the best values you can find amongst the top half dozen Ports and grab as many of those as you can afford, whether it is by the bottle or by the case. These are the kind of bottles you hopefully can find in the \$35-

\$45 range and will enjoy on a Tuesday night, when you get that hankering for a young VP that you don't have to decant for half a day. Spontaneity is a precious commodity! Also, if you like participating in horizontal tastings, buy a bottle or two from a large cross section of producers you can find and have your friends chip in to share in the cost as well as the drinking of these VPs together. It is a fascinating way to learn what to buy based on what tastes good to you!

To cut to the chase ... honestly, I would not pay more than \$50 for any 2004 VP, not because they are not worth it, but because the current state of the Port market should reflect the difference between release prices of the 2003s and a less-than-stellar vintage like 2004. Last but not least, if I were to come up with a numerical rating that represents my overall opinion of the '04 VPs, I'd say 91 points.

The 2004 Growing Season and Harvest Conditions –

After the spectacular and dry harvest of the 2003 vintage, the next few months saw lots of rain showers. Then as if someone turned off the spigot, the first half of 2004 was marked by exceptionally dry weather with cool temperatures during the springtime. The Symington's reported that Quinta do Bomfim, from January to the beginning of May, had only miniscule amounts of precipitation, which equaled below 50% of the ten year average for that time frame. This dry spell had an impact on the bud break and flowering throughout most of the Douro region. Had there not been ample quantities of rain in the fourth quarter of the previous year, I probably would not be scribing this article.

Fortunately, due to the vertical layering of the schist in the Douro's vineyards, the vine's roots are well equipped to meander thirty to forty feet deep down below the surface, to reach whatever reserves of water remain to provide liquid mineral nourishment. In May, things really started to change as the temperatures climbed and the sun was a constant. Still no signs of rain and lots of uncertainty were in the air heading towards the hot summer months.

July saw temperatures that exceeded 100 degrees Fahrenheit and with the impending August bake, concerns turned to worry as temperatures can and do exceed 110 degrees F. in the Douro, as they had the previous year. For extremes there are few wine regions on earthy that get as hot as the Upper Douro. In rare instances the sub-region of the Douro Superior which encompasses Quinta de Vargellas, Vesuvio and Canais amongst others, will occasionally reach temperatures approaching 120 degrees.

Clearly, the rain dances that were practiced each evening throughout the Douro seemed to speak to the rain Gods, as the second week of the month approached, there were three successive days of rain and another couple later in the month. In fact, more rain fell in August of 2004, than any August during the past century! Rejoicing took place and copious amounts of Port are rumored to have been consumed throughout the region. Almost as important as the wet weather was the reduction of the heat, as temperatures leveled off and a crop that was destined to produce tasty shriveled raisins instead would now proceed in a more natural and slow progression. Slowing down the physiological ripening of grapes is a good thing in the Douro, especially when Mother Nature cooperates.

Decisions were made by individual growers and by the Port shippers if they were to chance picking early in September to avoid "Oidium" (a fungus that causes powdery mildew on grapes) or gamble that the weather would improve and allow the grapes to reach fruition with proper sugar levels. Those that were willing to gamble were rewarded by unseasonably warm temperatures (about 85 degrees F.) and a dry Indian summer prevailed, providing perfect picking conditions. The grapes were picked a few weeks later than average, but in most cases, just prior to the downfall of serious rain that took place early in the 2nd week of October. Disaster had been averted and physiological ripeness was achieved and in some cases, the grapes were slightly overripe.

Lower than normal yields were seen in the majority of the Douro Superior and Cima Corgo sub-regions, however, the level of color extraction was reported to be very deep by a number of producers and shippers that are reviewed below. Additionally, one of the more important

dynamics of the harvested grapes is the critical balance of the acidity to sugar levels and in 2004; this was the strong suit of the vintage which is evidenced in the majority of the wines.

Here are the tasting notes on the 2004 Vintage Ports. Enjoy!

Note: Ratings that are followed by a + sign, represent VPs that should age and improve for at least two decades.

Also, most of these VPs were tasted on several occasions and in that case the last date was applied to the tasting notes.

2004 ~ Casal dos Jordões ~ Vintage Port ~ Cask Sample – Dark ruby color with plum, chocolate and prune aromatics. This is a pleasant off-dry youngster that is simple and approachable. Very straight forward grenadine syrup extract, with ripe tannins. A bit thin on the palate hopefully it will flesh out in the future. ~ **84-86+ points ~ (10/1/06)**

2004 ~ Croft's Quinta da Roeda ~ Vintage Port ~ Cask Sample – Ultra dark ruby color. Very grapey and tight initially, it needed lots of coaxing but showed spicy and floral aromas with a stemmy character. The '04 Roeda offers a medium weight, with ripe plum and cherry flavors and a bit of distracting herbaceousness which I also sensed on the nose. Otherwise, the fruit is quite sweet and is supported by zippy acidity which is totally approachable for early drinking pleasure. Tame tannins arrive late on the smooth but spirty finish. What a difference a year makes. ~ **88-90 points ~ (8/3/06)**

2004 ~ Delaforce's Quinta da Corte ~ Vintage Port ~ Cask Sample – Medium deep purple in color Delaforce's main Quinta produced a lighter style overall. It also showed a green streak on the nose along with dark cherry. Destined for early maturity, the palate is light to medium bodied and provides cassis and dark chocolate. The finish is shorter than the others and the tannins are pretty tame for this early stage. ~ **86-88 points ~ (6/27/06)**

2004 ~ Dow's Quinta do Bomfim ~ Vintage Port – One of my favorites from the Symington's stable of 2004 VPs. This dark purplish colored SQVP delivers a sexy nose and is laden with dense, ripe strawberry and raspberry fruit. The palate attack is surprisingly sweet for a Bomfim and it has more of a viscous, black fruit profile which is smooth and ultra-ripe. The tannins are prominent and showing more drying astringency than when I tried it nearly four months ago. Today it shows as a chewy, concentrated beast with a superlative layered finish. This youngster shows a solid core within which will drink best in a couple of decades or three. ~ **93-95+ points ~ (10/3/06)**

2004 ~ Dow's Quinta da Senhora da Ribeira ~ Vintage Port – Like Quinta do Bomfim, this is one of the properties that provide excellent grapes for the classic Dow Vintage Port. The Symington's sold Senhora da Ribeira three decades ago and were fortunate to be able to buy it back about 9 years ago. It is situated across from Vesuvio, practically next door to a restaurant we dined at that memorable evening! Looking at this inky monster it is hard to discern between a purple and/or black coloration, nonetheless, it is fully opaque. Lush fresh cut flowers, spice and boysenberry compote provide a scintillating nose. The fruit is tart and dry with an early-picked blackberry quality that is refined in its approach and full-bodied in the mouth with some spirit that is not yet integrated. The finish is exceptionally smooth and its round tannins are laced with chocolate, while impressive in terms of its overall length, I would drink this in its prime at around 12-18 years of age. 500 cases produced. ~ **90-92 points ~ (6-28-06)**

2004 ~ Fonseca's Guimaraens ~ Vintage Port ~ Cask Sample – Pomegranate red with a ruby rim. The scents of prunes, blackberry and chocolate notes dominate the nose but there is a touch of alcohol that protrudes too. The '04 provided a light to medium body, with smooth and approachable bright cherry flavors that tend towards the drier side of the spectrum. The ripe tannins sneak up and caught me by surprise and melded into an admirably long finish. The Guimaraens was my second favorite VP within the Fladgate Partnership lineup and is a classy Port which should age well for the next couple of decades. ~ **92-94+ points ~ (8/3/06)**

2004 ~ Fonseca's Quinta do Panascal ~ Vintage Port ~Cask Sample – Opaque magenta color with a scent of black ... black as in pepper, berries and olives with a rare cigar leaf/cedar component. Medium to full-bodied and with more elegance than power on the palate. The Panascal provides a profile of cassis and currants in a soft, approachable style, which is more viscous than the Guimaraens. A persistent, sweet finish with a touch of black licorice and spirit. The second day this shows more of a full body and explodes on the palate with a significantly longer and more tannic finish. Drink this at 10-15 years of age although it will last two decades+. ~ **89-91+ points ~ (8/3/06)**

2004 ~ Graham's Malvedos ~ Vintage Port – The Malvedos has really fleshed out since I first tried it in late June. Having received considerably more decanting time, (I believe I heard 5 hours mentioned) which also helped. This '04 is an inky purple monster that presented spicy and floral notes with the essence of pure blueberry. Ultra-ripe on the palate with prune and juicy blackberry flavors that come to the fore. Good depth and medium tannins show the stuffing is all there, while finishing with a long chocoholics dream of an aftertaste. ~ **93-95+ points ~ (10/3/06)**

2004 ~ Kopke ~ Vintage Port – Scents of blooming rose petals, spice and anise make for a sumptuous bouquet. The '04 Kopke shows a softer, fresh style with spunk; think Reese Witherspoon. Possessing a medium body and really smooth texture for such a youthful wine, it is hard to believe this was just bottled. Sweet very berry and licorice flavors that are full throttle with excellent balance and a very enjoyable finish with virtually no signs of tannins but a touch of alcohol. It was hard to gauge the structure here, even the second day. Drink tomorrow or in 15 years; an impressive effort by Kopke. ~ **91-93 points ~ (8/3/06)**

2004 ~ Magalhães ~ Vintage Port – Opaque black/violet with a dark ruby edge. After the success of their 2000 VP, it was a bold move producing this VP from a mono cépage, Touriga Franca. Surprisingly, after looking at this dark brooding wine, it only showed a light to medium body weight which I believe is due to the Franca character. The '04 shows a very approachable style considering it has not been released as of yet. Soft, ripe and sweet boysenberry flavor is fun to drink, albeit quite straightforward, if not a bit simple. Nonetheless,

the structure is sound with full bore acidity and tannins that are not shy and appear late on the aftertaste, disguised by the overt fruit of this VP. I'd suggest drinking this between 10-12 years old. ~ **88-90 points ~ (6-25-06)**

2004 ~ Niepoort ~ Vintage Port ~ Cask Sample ~ 2004 was the birth year of Dirk's daughter, yet this Port will not be commercially released as Niepoort Vintage Port, possibly in the future though as a "Niepoort Projectos" Port. It is far more approachable than any Niepoort VP that I've ever tasted at this early stage. With an essence of black cherries, it presents boysenberry and ripe plum flavors with moderated tannins. This youngster is nowhere near as powerful as the 2000 or 2003 from cask. It does possess a well knit structure bolstered by zippy acidity and purity of fruit. A mid-term ager that reminds me of the 1985 Niepoort when it was young, although I never had it as a cask sample. ~ **91-93 points ~ (10/2/06)**

2004 ~ Quinta do Crasto ~ Vintage Port – My notes were taken after MANY other Douro and Port wines and were less detailed than I'd have liked as we were heading to dinner. I wish I could have tried this again on another occasion. Too fruity, sweet and "tanky" at this stage. The Crasto VP is medium-bodied and juicy with a core of blueberry flavors to go with the ripe tannins and a somewhat simple, clipped finish. Good, but I certainly prefer Crasto's 2003, the '04 shows mid-term aging potential. (By the way, their 2004 table wines from '04 are killer!) ~ **89-91 points ~ (10/4/06)**

2004 ~ Quinta do Javali ~ Vintage Port ~ Cask Sample~ Jose Antonio Mendes at 34 years old, grows more confident with each new vintage of his Douro wines and Ports. Jose has been the winemaker at Javali for the past two years and his very first effort was a tasty 2001 LVB that I've now tried on several occasions. With 2004, Mendes marks his first foray into Vintage Port with a small production SQVP from Javali's 10 hectares. Fully opaque and offering an enticing floral fragrance with a light pomegranate note. This medium-bodied effort is extremely approachable and open for business with a gentle and smooth mouth watering burst of grenadine syrup and boysenberry juice. Although quite straight forward at this stage, the finish is enjoyable with a chocolate nuance and good length. The tannins are much softer

than I'd expect for such a youngster. At just 28 Euros, the Javali '04 represents one heck of a bargain. ~ **89-91 points ~ (6/21/06)**

2004 ~ Quinta do Noval ~ Vintage Port – Rich magenta color with fine aromas of cassis, tar and cocoa with a backdrop of alcohol. Dense, ripe and chewy with dark berry fruit but lacks some tannins which might be hiding bit I did not sense any present, yet this had not been decanted ahead of time. Softer style for mid-term aging while the 2000 and 2003s stay buried in the cellar. Only 1000 cases produced. ~ **91-93 points ~ (10/6/06)**

2004 ~ Quinta do Portal ~ Vintage Port – Tasted directly after the tannic 2003, this was hard to assess. There was a significant “tanky” smell to this wine along with blossoming violets. Very primary blueberry and boysenberry fruit that is countered by massive tannins. Not up to the greatness of the 2003, but a hedonistic well adorned VP with fine length and promise for cellaring. ~ **92-94+ points ~ (10/6/06)**

2004 ~ Quinta da Romaneira ~ Vintage Port – It is no secret that Christian Seely was looking to acquire a prime location in the Douro to invest in. Earlier this year, Mr. Seely scored a major coup when he found a venerable property in the Rancão Valley. Although Romaneira has made some very fine Tawny Ports in the past, it has never been considered as a serious VP contender. Romaneira consists of 450 hectares and once had around 300 planted to vine. Today it possesses 76 grape laden hectares and boasts an astounding 3 kilometers of Douro riverfront property. This property supplied grapes for Taylor's decades ago. Initially Christian said that he would be producing some Douro red wine in addition to an LBV and VP. The 2004 offered sweet and unctuous grenadine along with sweet blackberry fruit that was of a medium body and initially quite soft. The smooth mouth feel is deceiving as the tannins sneak up on the finish and let you know of their presence. Very tasty and considering this was the first vintage made by Seely, I would suggest keeping an eye on the progress from here on. There are some lofty plans for the property and I have a feeling that sooner rather than later, Quinta da Romaneira will be a name that many more people will be aware of. ~ **91-93+ points ~ (10/6/06)**

2004 ~ Quinta de Roriz ~ Vintage Port – Opaque purple with a garnet edge. The Roriz offers a compelling mix of dark raspberry, minerals and a touch of spirit. Although I found this to be surprisingly approachable with lush, syrupy-sweet red berry fruit, it also provided powerful tannins on the finish and showed potential for long term cellaring. The Roriz VPs continue to improve and impress, even in vintages that possess less panache. 750 cases were produced. ~ **93-95+ points ~ (6-28-06)**

2004 ~ Quinta do Vesuvio ~ Vintage Port – Inky black with a purple edge. A tight and restrained nose withheld any pleasure, even with coaxing. However on the palate, this is far more approachable than recent versions of Vesuvio and it will be interesting to see how the '04 evolves in the near term. The ripe raspberry and boysenberry flavors border on being jammy and show a chocolate note on the medium length finish, which comprises a bit of heat as well. The tannins are less powerful than in either 2000 or 2003 at the same stage. I've tasted the Vesuvio on three separate occasions, (including a vertical of every Vesuvio vinified since the Symington's took the helm in 1989) and although I am typically quite fond of this producer, the '04 lacked the luster I have come to expect from this SQVP. 1,100 cases produced. ~ **90-92 points ~ (10-5-06)**

2004 ~ Ramos Pinto ~ Quinta de Ervamoira Vintage Port – Ervamoira is an integral Quinta along with Bom Retiro for Ramos Pinto's Vintage Port and in some vintages they produce both classic VP and this SQVP too. My score was right on the money with my earlier (cask sample) experience while at their Lodge in June. Showing a purplish-ruby color with full opacity. The nose is intriguing, leaving a spicy impression of mint and an earthy tobacco leaf scent along with some lingering "tanky" note. Ripe, chewy red berry fruit profile with good acidity and drying tannins. There is a really smooth and approachable palate presence with a dry mid length finish. In need of lots more time for the components to come into synch which makes this '04 tougher than most to assess at this point. I look forward to trying this again within the next year as it was bottled very recently. ~ **87-89+ points ~ (10/2/06)**

2004 ~ Ramos Pinto ~ Vintage Port – Offering an opaque magenta color, this was my second experience with the flagship Port from this fine producer. I really enjoyed the

explosive arsenal of aromas from this bottling that showed an herbal quality along with some pine, mocha and plum. Juicy and ultra-smooth, with a medium to full body, the flavors tend towards boysenberry and plum and deliver a well-balanced '04 that is just a bit on the simple side. The alcohol on the finish still needs to integrate quite a bit more for this to reach its full potential. Speaking of which, the tannins have calmed down quite a bit since my experience four months ago. I find that interesting and view this VP with more of a mid-term aging potential. From a non-declared vintage... who needs to wait 30 years? ~ **89-91 points** ~ (10/2/06)

2004 ~ Taylor's Quinta de Vargellas Vintage Port Cask Sample – Tasted on three separate occasions, (two months apart) including a three day affair with one bottle. Vargellas exhibited a dark purple/ruby hue and a violet scented beauty with notes of spice and mocha, followed by a whiff of black pepper. The '04 version is a very tasty crowd pleaser right at the moment, full-bodied and in possession of a smooth mouthfeel that is very approachable. It has gobs of blue and blackberry fruit and plenty of acidity which provided synchronicity along with ripe tannins that added the backbone. This is a cellar worthy effort by Taylor's Single Quinta and a longer finish with less heat, would have really driven up the score a few more points. ~ **91-93+ points** ~ (10/5/06)

2004 ~ Taylor's Quinta de Vargellas ~ Vinha Velha ~ Vintage Port ~ Cask Sample – My second taste of the Vinha Velha (old vines) came two months after visiting Gaia in June, but this time, from a bottle sampled over the course of three days. While the vast majority of the Douro had lower than normal yields the Vinha Velha plot at Vargellas exceeded their 2003 yields, which is worthy of note. This old vine beauty showed an opaque ruby color and initially the nose was not forthcoming. After several hours in decanter it began to deliver intense scents of boysenberry, violets and mocha. Concentrated and blessed with enormous heft, laden with vibrant dark berry flavors ending in a mouth filling bittersweet chocolate crescendo. The structural character is replete with lively acidity and tannins which are more powerful than the non-VV version. There is certainly the potential to age well for three decades, if you have the patience. Without any question, the 2004 Vinha Velha is one of the top wines of the vintage. ~ **94-96+ points** (8/3/06)

2004 ~ Vista Alegre ~ Vintage Port – Medium dark garnet color. An intense bouquet of violets came forth with bright raspberry and a grapey nuance. This VP is easy to approach initially and then changes direction within moments. It has nice and focused flavors of dark berry fruit and plenty of acidity to keep the ripe sweetness in check. It feels smooth in the mouth and with dense, extraverted fruit followed by a tannic finish. Unfortunately much of this pleasure was taken away by the overtly hot palate presence that was even more pronounced after swallowing. I liked this producer's '03 Valle Longo effort considerably more and look forward to re-tasting the '04 Vista Alegre in the future to see how it evolves and whether the spirit integrates with time in the bottle. ~ **86-88+ points** ~ (10/7/06)

2004 ~ Warre's Quinta da Cavadinha ~ Vintage Port – Purplish-ruby and fully opaque. The nectar of ripe Mirabelle plum, grapes and ripe berries come to the fore and make it difficult to remove my nose from the glass. Cavadinha's stylized, rich and full-bodied 2004 VP delivers massive ... if not downright chewy dark cherry and sweet yellow plums. Wow! A well-structured, yet approachable entry leads to tannins which then attack the palate and fortunately there's plenty of luscious fruit here to stand up to them. From my first tasting of the Symington's 2004 cask samples, (in June) this was my clear favorite and still is. My only reservation with giving this a significantly higher score was: the finish was rather clipped and there was a dose of spirit which protruded on the aftertaste. I look forward to revisiting this classy wine, to check on its progress and long term prospects. **If I had to choose only one Vintage Port to buy in 2004, this would be it.** ~ **95-97+ points** ~ (10/3/06)