

# 2008 Vintage Port Review



**Roy Hersh © June 2011**

Cask sampling of the 2008's began in Portugal as early as May 2010 and were tasted again during my subsequent visit to Portugal in October. As much as those "preview" examples provided a worthy introduction to the nature of the 2008 Vintage Ports, in reality they only afford a "snapshot" view. Whenever possible, I try to be more thorough in assessing a new vintage and prefer to spend a few days with each of the Ports in order to fully observe their performance and gauge qualitative characteristics.

It was an intentional decision to wait until I was able to procure and evaluate *finished bottles* of the 2008s, with only a very few exceptions that were sent as cask samples (noted below). For all of the Ports with tasting notes included, the bottles were tasted single blind, with corks and capsules removed. My regime for the 2008 Ports did not change from the 2007s except that I did not visit Portugal specifically to spend a week tasting through the lineup and instead, did it all here at home, over the course of several flights. The reveal did not take place until distinct notes were written on each of the Ports, tasted over four consecutive days.

## **GROWING SEASON**

The year began with cool weather and it proceeded into the late spring, with significant rainfall in April and to a lesser degree in May as well. This had an effect on flowering which took place a few weeks later than normal. The crucial growing period between June and the end of August was somewhat similar to 2007 in that temperatures were cooler than average and the summer months remained quite dry as well. The moderate temperatures in the summer had growers concerned whether the weather would cooperate the rest of the way and allow the grapes to reach their phenolic ripeness.

The mild summer temperatures with cool nights enabled the grapes to achieve excellent levels of acidity, which is a significant strength for some of the 2008 Vintage Ports. Steady rains over a couple of days in early September revitalized the vines and were followed by relatively warm, sunny and windy days that helped dry the grapes. Unfortunately a number of growers decided to pick early, not only for their Douro wines but grapes used for Port. The early pickings did not provide enough time for the grapes to properly ripen, nor attain the requisite Baume necessary for Port production. Some producers waited out the early September rains and watched things firm up and the vines responded positively, with greater concentration and sugar levels rewarding those that were willing to gamble.

There were a couple of days of significant rainfall at the end of the third week of September. Some of the most evenly ripened grapes in the Douro were picked between the latter part of September, and the middle of October. I remember one day while we were in the Douro that year, it rained hard (during the end of the first week of October) but by then lots of the best grapes had been picked and the weather turned slightly cooler, but quite dry too. The longer hang time, for those that chose to wait to pick, provided greater concentration of flavors and more even ripening. The Douro realized yields that were relatively low and given the overall lack of precipitation, it was most fortunate that the summer was not very hot, as temperatures rarely breached the low 30 degree C. mark.



## VINTAGE OVERVIEW

My general impression of the 2008 vintage is that the Port trade made a very sound decision in declaring 2007's over the 2008 vintage. Moreover, there are several extremely well made 2008's, but across the board the overall quality was more on a par with 2005, than 2007. The majority of the 2008's possess great color extraction. The best however, exhibit finely tuned tannins, crisp acidity and fresh, concentrated wild berry flavors.

The average Port in 2008 was good, but seemingly not as impressive as the average of the 2007's which by comparison, seemed more *complete*, with greater structural material for longevity although equally as idiosyncratic. Additionally, there was a higher percentage of 2007's than 2008's that earned scores above 92 points.

There are several bottlings of the 2008's that I tasted for this report, which really distance themselves from the rest of the pack. Not surprisingly, there are a few really small producers that were adept in expressing the essence of the 2008 vintage, and I am proud to present them along with the larger and medium sized producers.





## **2008 VINTAGE PORT TASTING NOTES**

**2008 ~ Croft's Quinta da Roêda ~ Vintage Port** (Cask sample) – Evocative notes of brambly purple fruits, fresh floral scents and overtones of stemminess with similar hints of esteva that I found in cask samples of the 2007 Croft. Dense, sweet, minty and slightly hot in the mid-section with dominant red fruits. The 2008 Roêda improved considerably over four days, adding weight but remaining rather straightforward. It is a big-boned and rich Port with powerful granular tannins that emerge late and lead to a long but spirit laden finish. It has solid potential for cellaring up to two decades and may take several years for the spirit to fully meld with the fruit. **86-88+ points ~ 5/28/11**

**2008 ~ Dow's Quinta Senhora da Ribeira ~ Vintage Port** – Upon first whiff, the spirituous nature emerges prominently, followed by a swirling array of floral scents, spicy briar patch, pine, grenadine and tar. Juicy, medium-bodied, silky smooth and sweet upon entry. Ripe black and blueberry fruit flavors crush the palate, though a bit too much spirit pokes through. Soft and juicy initially, tannins make their way to the foreground leading up to a medium-long and dry finish with tar and warming characteristic on the aftertaste. Drink now through 2025. 300 cases produced. **88+ points ~ 5/28/11**

**2008 ~ Duorum “Vinha de Castelo Melhor” ~ Vintage Port** – José Maria d’Orey Soares Franco is best known for his nearly three decades as winemaker of Portugal’s first “cult wine”, Barca Velha. Several years ago, a partnership was forged in conjunction with J. Portugal Ramos, arguably the most famous winemaker in the Alentejo, with wineland holdings in four other regions across Portugal’s countryside. Their joint venture aptly named (“from two” ... which translates to) **Duorum**, is J. Portugal Ramos’ first foray into the Douro. With 150 hectares purchased in the far eastern area of the Douro Superior in a small village near Foz Coa, very close to Crasto’s new vineyards; these two renowned oenologists have negotiated their property, (the parcels of which had belonged to sixty individual land owners) Quinta de Castelo Melhor, with 45 ha currently planted to vine and lots more of the 150 ha. will eventually come on line in the future. The aromatics of this 2008 Vintage Port are exotic, with sweet and fresh scents of magnolia blossoms, along with expressive black cherry and blackberry preserves. Medium-full bodied with a juicy briar patch of black and boysenberry fruit flavors and a warming sensation due to its youth, (not from any disjointed aguardente). Prominent ripe tannins arrive late on the set and are grippy, not astringent. The 2008 is the second consecutive vintage of Duorum Vintage Port; it proves to be immediately approachable and shows great prospects for long term drinking pleasure, between two and three decades. **91+ points ~ 5/13/11**

**2008 ~ Fonseca’s Quinta do Panascal ~ Vintage Port** (Cask sample) – I’ve had this 2008 a couple of times, the first was a year ago, served non-blind. This latest bottle expressed the finest young Panascal in my tasting experience, my notes gushing with superlatives. Full opacity with an inky color, slightly darker than most other 2008 samples. The nose was purely purple with fresh crushed grapes, lilacs and plum, highlighted by anise and esteva which provided extra character to the aromatics. The palate proffered primary plum, figs and spicy licorice, soft and juicy, smooth and seductive with loads of black pepper in the middle and dark cocoa powder later on. Medium in weight, and blessed with solid structural components and excellent balance in terms of the vigorous acidity and ripe, yet soft tannins (much riper the 2<sup>nd</sup> day open) but truly harmonious overall. A shining cellar worthy SQVP in possession of an extra long finish with a hint of warming spirit on the end. A beautiful Panascal Port that should reach 2035 without even trying. **92-94+ points ~ 5/28/11**

**2008 ~ Niepoort’s Bioma Vinha Velha ~ Vintage Port** – Niepoort’s VP formerly known as “Pisca” was renamed by his sister Verena, when they found out that “Pisca” was already a registered wine name. I remember tasting the two distinct barrel samples with Dirk and Luis very early on, but this finished and **organic** bottling is in now in synch. Dirk sent me an email and wrote: “It is the first year that we really do everything the way I want and I’m looking forward to its evolution particularly from a year like 2008. It will be interesting to see how they will age. It is not a monster year but it could well evolve like some 1967’s - sexy, elegant and keeping freshness.” Next year, he plans to bottle an organic red table wine also named Bioma. Tight aromatically for the first day and thereafter, fine plum notes along with a floral scent, spicy wild berry and cocoa powder. Lithe, fluid, rich and medium-full bodied, dense, blackcurrant fruit and concentrated with lots of acidity and medium dusty/chalky tannins that sneak up on the long finish. 22-28 years. An elegant Niepoort and softer than usual, but the seamless balance and symmetry will allow this to age beautifully for at least two dozen years; albeit, it’s enjoyable now with an extended decant. Bioma is aged for 3 years in wood, vs. Niepoort’s usual regime of two years. 3,500 bottles produced. 22 grape varieties included. **92+ points ~ 5/28/11**

**2008 ~ Porto Quevedo's Quinta Vale D'Agodinho ~ Vintage Port** – As the fruit comes from the Quinta's main vineyard, Quevedo considers this their *Single Quinta Vintage Port*, although it actually could be called a Single Vineyard Vintage Port too. Offering an expressive nose of wild cherry and blueberry, baking spices, lavender and freshly crushed grapes. Very distinctive. Full-bodied yet it seems soft, lithe and fluid in the mouth. Claudia Quevedo deserves credit for producing a massively concentrated and smooth Port of this nature, neatly balanced and structurally near perfect with stunning levels of acidity and mouth puckering tannins. The density factor here is ratcheted up to a notch above the vast majority of the other 2008's, with an appealing purity and silky texture. Easy-to-drink-now but cellar a case to enjoy during the next three decades. When the bottle was "revealed" I was surprised, having believed it to be Quinta do Noval. A distinctive, excellent young Vintage Port. **93+ points ~ 6/2/11**

**2008 ~ Quinta do Crasto ~ Vintage Port** – Lovely scents of lavender, eucalyptus and figs, with a bit of aguardente adding some heat on the nose. Bright red fruits, mostly raspberry, but with a dollop of boysenberry and bittersweet chocolate flavors, supported by mild mannered tannins and zesty acidity. It is quite accessible and can be enjoyed today, though it will be at its best in another fifteen years. If you'd like to own some Vintage Port that won't require two to three decades in the cellar before being worthy; the 2008 Quinta do Crasto will fill that niche nicely. It finishes dry and long with a sense of warmth, but not overtly hot. 8,400 bottles of 750 ml. were produced. **88+ points ~ 5/13/11**

**2008 ~ Quinta da Gaivosa ~ Vintage Port** – Made with Touriga Franca, Touriga Nacional and Souzão grapes, vinified in both stainless steel and lagares, then blended. Ripe scents of briary blueberry and violets, clean and refreshing aromas. Very approachable and seemingly picked very ripe or the fermentation was shut down a bit early, as this is about as sweet as Vintage Port gets. A mélange of wild berries and an intriguing fennel character and just enough acidity to carry the RS. The tannins are soft and refined and the long finish is one for the highlight reels. 4,000 bottles made. **90+ points ~ 6/2/11**

**2008 ~ Quinta do Noval ~ Vintage Port** – It was my third time trying this Noval, the other tastes were from barrel samples during visits to the Quinta. This bottle was wound way tight early on and was hard to decipher until days two and three. Loaded with spicy, peppery accents, and inviting notes of fragrant flowers, blackberry, blackcurrant, herbs and cinnamon. The 2008 put on weight after 48 hours and showcased seasonings of black pepper and tar, complementing the dark fruits and cinnamon. The density was far more noticeable by day three and yet it was still quite a different beast than their 2007. This Noval displayed more exotic spice and was drier in style, with powerful chalky tannins that coated my tongue and teeth after the swallow. Powerful, smooth and with a vestige of elegance, this lacks the pure blackstrap character of the previous vintage that was one of the all time great young Noval's in my opinion. It'll age effortlessly over the next 3 decades. The 2008 Quinta do Noval is amongst the very finest Ports of the vintage. 18,000 bottles were produced. **94+ points ~ 5/28/11**

**2008 ~ Quinta do Portal ~ Vintage Port** – Atypical for Portal and just their fourth release of a SQVP; wherein they purchase no grapes from other properties and release a VP in a non-generally declared year. The nose is a bit strange with vitamin pill aromas, (think “One-A-Day”) a tanky-violet essence and plum/boysenberry notes. Soft and easy to approach, but it provides the heavy-weight density one expects from this shipper. It gained intensity and complexity by the third day it was open. Tasty and well-structured with ripe tannins that exude grip, this 2008 would have scored higher, but there’s a disconnect between the aromatics and palate that remained for all four days. **89+ points ~ 6/6/11**

**2008 ~ Quinta da Romaneira ~ Vintage Port** – Fragrant rose petals, milk chocolate, blackcurrants and citrus provide an intricately woven tapestry of aromas. The palate is the polar opposite, with sweet cassis and grenadine flavors, a warming trend in the mid-palate and a sense of ripe, almost jammy fruit here. But fortunately there’s plenty of acidity to provide harmony, and tannins that are kept hidden for the first 48 hours then emerge with powerful grip. I liked this Port quite a bit and my only quibble is that the heat never fully dissipated, but that’s more about youth than disjointed aguardente in this case. The Romaneira offers a very long finish and possesses the requisite structural components to improve for several decades, yet with a long enough decant, this would be enjoyable today. 5,900 bottles were produced. A very solid and age worthy VP. **93+ points ~ 6/2/11**

**2008 ~ Quinta do Vale Meão ~ Vintage Port** – After a string of fine Meão Vintage Ports, this one was a bit of a letdown, mostly because it followed the superlative 2007 VP. The bouquet was exotic and dare I say, profound. Enticing perfume of violets, anise, a lifted note of menthol followed by a dark char and graphite scent. It was certainly unique and after remaining open a couple of days, the violets changed to a tanky, resinous essence. A brawny ooze-monster of a Port stuffed with grapy, boysenberry, tar and black licorice flavors with a mildly bitter aftertaste of medium length. Structurally it simultaneously delivered power and balance, with astringent tannins early on that settled down a few days in. Idiosyncratic to be sure, nonetheless the overall impression was better than the individual components. I’ll need to try this one again. 9,000 bottles produced. **88+ points ~ 6/6/11**

**2008 ~ Quinta do Ventozelo ~ Vintage Port** – Real Companhia Velha purchased Ventozelo late in 2008 and the Port making is now under the careful watch of Jorge Moreira, although I am not sure who made this particular VP. Medium dark garnet color with fine aromas of violets, tar, prune and cocoa powder. Ventozelo has yet to make a stellar Vintage Port, but I liked this one and it evolved nicely, and it was even better a few days after it was open. Primary blackcurrant fruit, dry stylistically and a really sensuously smooth texture. Medium-bodied, with crisp acidity and mild dusty tannins. It is a tad warm in both the middle and finish, the latter of which is of medium length. The 2008 shows well, is approachable now and offers mid-term aging potential of fifteen years. **87+ points ~ 6/2/11**

**2008 ~ Quinta do Vesuvio ~ Vintage Port** – For me this had one of the finest, freshest and most intense perfumed profiles of any 2008 VP. Accessorized by ripe plum, prune, char, tar and a bouquet of just picked lilacs. Full, smooth and ultra-sweet with vibrant cassis and blackberry flavors. A bit of gentle spirit exists in the mid-palate ... not too distracting and by the third day open, it had decreased significantly. Sumptuous and surprisingly soft for a young Vesuvio, the sheer elegance is evident with refined, mild mannered tannins; a departure of sorts. 2008 delivers a suave, approachable Vesuvio that will drink well at any point during the next fifteen years. 70% of this blend came from Touriga Nacional grapes, with 600 cases produced. **91+ points ~ 5/28/11**



**2008 ~ Quinta Nova de Nossa Senhora do Carmo ~ Vintage Port** –

This little known producer is gaining traction, especially with their table wines. Established in 1764 and today owned by cork giant, Amorim; the property boasts vineyards comprising eighty five hectares. The nose typifies what I refer to in table wines as “black on black” with blackcurrants, blackberries and black licorice along with kalamata olive, and smoky notes of tobacco leaf, creosote and tar. Cherry berry filled on the palate and so much more enjoyable three to four days open, than when tasted on days one and two. Smooth and rich, gaining viscosity with more air time, though it never quite reached full-bodied, good balance between the sweet fruit, ample acidity and mild, refined tannins. The finish was medium in length and refreshing. Drink now or over the next dozen to fifteen years. **88+ points ~ 6/6/11**

**2008 ~ Real Companhia Velha ~ Vintage Port** – One of the best RCV VP’s I’ve tasted, along with the 2007. Things seem to be improving, which is good for this large producer that has never been known for its Vintage Ports. The bouquet lies within the blue and purple fruit realm, with mocha and esteva adding attractive high notes. Filled with jammy blackberry and cassis flavors and chocolaty throughout, this 2008 is concentrated and deftly balanced. The tannins are mild and chalky with the palate offering a tart essence, very long finish and overall harmony. Drink through 2026. Impressive! **91+ points ~ 6/6/11**

**2008 ~ Taylor’s Quinta de Vargellas ~ Vintage Port** (Cask sample) – Austere and awkward early on, the nose improved as did the palate, but it took several days. I did not like it initially, proving that a pop and pour impression of this particular Vintage Port would yield a poor result and an inaccurate assessment. There’s great purity of boysenberry and cassis fruit, crushed dried violets and an herbal/pine streak along with spicy scents of black licorice. Full, rich and voluptuously smooth with dark plum and blackcurrant flavors along with some warming spirit that became far more integrated by day three. The 2008 is an unexpectedly powerful Vargellas, focused, intense and seemingly off-dry in style. Seamless, ripe and velvety tannins appear late in the game. At its best on day three and four, it exhibited greater balance between acidity and fruit, with greater complexity on the full length finish. Very tasty, big yet elegant overall and it should drink well for the next quarter of a century with ease. **92-94+ points ~ 5/28/11**



I also tried the following Vintage Ports last year in a “snapshot” pop n’ pour scenario while visiting the properties in Portugal, but have only listed those which are not duplications from above:

**2008 J.H. Andresen Vintage Port – cask sample. 86-88+ points ~ 10/3/10**

**2008 Fonseca-Guimaraens Vintage Port – cask sample. 93-95+ points ~ 5/16/10**

**2008 Taylor’s Quinta de Terra Feita Vintage Port – cask sample. 89-91+ points ~ 5/16/10**

**2008 Dalva Vintage Port – cask sample. 90-92+ points ~ 5/16/10**

**2008 Quinta do Tedo, Touriga Nacional, Vintage Port – cask sample. Not rated ~ 10/3/10**

