

# 2009 Vintage Port Report

**Article by Roy Hersh © December 2011**

In the autumn of 2011, the new release of 2009 Vintage Ports began to reach global markets and the rollout will continue throughout all of 2012. It was not your typical year for grape growing in the Douro. Coming on the heels of two extremely dry growing seasons (2007 and 2008); 2009 also suffered from a lack of rain which resulted in yields that ranged between 25% and 40% lower than the norm, depending on vineyard location.

The Baixo Corgo for instance, (the westernmost of the Douro's three sub-regions) was wetter than both the Cima Corgo and Douro Superior; albeit still extremely dry overall. It wasn't until June that any serious rainfall arrived and water tables remained rather low. The summer began with cool days and nights in July but that quickly changed in August with intensely hot days and that heat continued through September too and was exacerbated by the lack of precipitation for nearly ten weeks leading up to the beginning of the harvest. In fact, September had the lowest amount of rainfall in nearly a quarter of a century.

Nearly thirty Port houses declared 2009 overall and last time I checked the IVDP had approved thirty eight Vintage Ports overall; compared to more than seventy in 2007. The vintage of 2009 created a schism between two of the most powerful forces in the Port trade: The Fladgate Partnership (TFP) and Symington Family Estates (SFE). The former chose to declare Croft, Fonseca, Taylor and the rare Quinta de Vargellas Vinha Velha (old vines); while the Symingtons decided they would only produce small quantities of their SQVP's (Single Quinta Vintage Ports), with Warre as the only Symington Port house to fully declare their classic Vintage Port.

Paul Symington, Joint managing Director of the SFE wrote to me: "My family, with more than 5 generations here in the Douro (13 if you count my great-grandmother), declare a Vintage when we have a truly outstanding wine that will earn the respect of the wine trade and consumers around the world. We will not declare for any other reason." And in a press release from Paul: "A Declaration for us is only about the wines, not about joining a rush for the stage or any other consideration. A declaration is our decision, a family one, and done with all the experience and care of quite a few generations. We are led by the vineyards and the wines, no other consideration whatsoever."

Adrian Bridge, CEO of The Fladgate Partnership wrote, "Such colour intensity and tannic structure have not been seen for over twenty years. However, the wines also display crisp acidity and wonderfully pure, vibrant fruit. Although they are built for long term ageing, like the great landmark vintages of the past, the 2009s are capable of delivering hedonistic pleasure even at this early stage in their development."

David Guimaraens, Technical Director and head winemaker for TFP stated, “In 2009 the choice of harvest date was critical. We had to ensure that the wines had both phenolic maturity and fine and complex aromas. Our decisions have been rewarded with fabulous wines which are capable of long term ageing but already give great pleasure.”

This essential difference of opinion exemplifies the independence involved in the decision making process of each Port house. Whereas in the past, these two particular Port dynasties typically agreed far more often than not on which vintage declarations were made (with some notable exceptions). Therefore, 2009 was a distinct departure from tradition for The Fladgate Partnership. They, like the Symingtons, had already declared three vintages during the past decade: 2000, 2003 and 2007 and I am not aware of any time in the past two centuries, where the Taylor Fladgate group had declared four times within ten years. Other declarations of note: Niepoort, Quinta do Vale Dona Maria and Quinta do Crasto.

Having visited Portugal three times during the 2009 growing season, I found it to be “uneven” with bursts of heat, followed by cool weather and an extraordinary storm at the end of the first week of October, experienced while visiting Quinta do Crasto. Actually, that was the hardest rain I’ve ever encountered while visiting Portugal, and that is saying something as I’ve seen some pretty crazy storms over the year. I thought we’d need the 2<sup>nd</sup> coming of Noah’s ark to save us and the grapes.

I’ve now tasted Vintage Ports from fifteen distinct producers overall, the majority\* of which were evaluated for four days at a clip, (\*see note below) and I have been pleasantly surprised by the fine prospects across the board. The overall quality of 2009 has been higher than what I found with 2007 VP’s at the same point in time, and definitely more consistent. That may be an unpopular view back in Gaia; nonetheless, the innate quality of the 2009’s was apparent to me in nearly every one of the Ports I’ve tried to this point, all of which earned at least 88 points.

The hallmarks of the 2009 vintage, although I am loathe to generalize an entire vintage with such a sweeping assessment is that the depth of extraction from nearly every wine I tried was remarkably dense and fully opaque. Describing the variants of the inky nature of the extract, with just minor fluctuations heading towards purple rather than the darkest magenta or garnet, was pointless in my tasting notes. Another character that was a common thread through nearly every 2009 Port I tasted was the tannic nature of the wines. Although not as punishing as what I found with the 2003’s at the same stage, I did notice more grip from the Ports of ’09, and although ripe tannins were commonplace, next to none were as astringent as some even from 2007.

There were several spectacular Vintage Ports made in 2009 and although I must admit to being fairly clueless about the pricing of these Ports, the across-the-board quality and character was far more impressive than I had expected given the small number of shippers that declared their classic Ports, opting instead for producing their Single Quinta VP’s.

I can’t determine at such an early stage whether 2009 was worthy of a broader declaration, but for example the four Ports I’ve had from the Fladgate Partnership allowed me to understand why they did declare their first tier Vintage Ports, as each was at least as good as their 2007’s. Many of the other Ports I evaluated showed their age worthiness and balance. I came away from my tastings rather inspired by the overall quality and character.

## **2009 Vintage Port impressions and ratings:**

*\*Unless noted in blue; the rest of the Vintage Ports were all bagged and evaluated single blind, over four days and nights, tasted once every 24 hours with separate tasting notes and ratings written for each assessment, which helped me to gain a time-elapsd understanding of the Port. These multiple impressions were then condensed into a single note, a regimen that I find to be far more thorough for me, than just tasting a bottle of Port which has just been opened and trying to evaluate it over a five or ten minute time frame.*

*When I notice how much the 2009 Ports changed from day one to the second, third and fourth day, I have to wonder if those who just do pop and pour impressions of these Port are doing justice to the Ports. Rarely if ever do such young Ports depict their true character as well on the first day as they do on the subsequent days of tasting.*

*None of these bottles were decanted, but all had their corks initially pulled six hours prior to tasting the first day and two hours ahead of time, each of the three remaining days, and they were immediately re-corked afterwards. All were finished bottles unless otherwise noted below.*

*When tasted in the Douro at a Quinta in a pop-and-pour scenario (or even if decanted), scoring ranges were given rather than an exact rating and that fact is disclosed at the end of the TN in blue. There are a few cases in which (e.g. Quinta do Crasto), I was able to taste a sample at the Quinta and also had a bottle to evaluate in a small blind flight as well. In that case, both tasting notes appear in order of when they were tasted. Dates are included for all notes of course.*

Here now, the reviews in alphabetical order:

**2009 Croft Vintage Port** – Exquisite purity of grape essence, tar and rich chocolate notes. Drier in profile than the nose proffers with lip-smacking blackcurrant juice, ample acidity and powerful, intensely grippy, yet non-astringent tannins, (nearly off-putting, but I “respect” them at this early stage). It all bodes well for the Croft’s long term cellaring between 3-4 decades. Comparatively, I prefer 2009 to the Croft’s 2007 Vintage Port and the Roêda’s 2008 SQVP. **92+ points 9/3/11**

**2009 Croft Vintage Port** – Explosive aromas of blackberry, mocha and tar. Big, ripe black fruits, appealing freshness and a viscous presence, nicely structured which finishes long, but quite spicity. I prefer this to 2007 at the same point in time. Possessing solid long term aging potential for 30+ years. **Tasted at Quinta da Roêda. 90-92+ points 10/7/11**

**2009 Dow's Quinta Senhora da Ribeira Vintage Port** – A fine bouquet of grenadine, dark berry fruit and milk chocolate/mocha. Medium weight, rich, sweet boysenberry and blackberry flavors with soft structure. By the third day this put on significant weight, while remaining ripe and primary. It lacked mid-palate complexity and exhibited a persistent hot streak all four days, but offered good length on the finish. 300 cases produced. An easy-to-approach, tasty, mid-term ager of 18-25 years. **90+ points 9/3/11**

**2009 Fonseca Vintage Port** – Qualitatively on a par with 2007, but more reminiscent of 1997 Fonseca at this stage. Fragrant marionberry and blackcurrant preserves with prevalent cocoa powder notes. Rich, smooth and immediately approachable dark briar-berry fruit, tightly knit and well-structured. The '09 Fonseca gained viscosity and expanse in the mid-palate each of the four days, as well as blackstrap nature of the tannins. Drink now or hold for three decades. **93+ points 9/3/11**

**2009 Graham's Quinta dos Malvedos Vintage Port** – Briar patch and floral notes with black licorice scent. Densely packed and sensuously smooth, brambly blueberry profile with good acidity, loads of grip and intensity. Refined, balanced and harmonious at this early stage of development. It showed remarkable consistency for all four days. Excellent prospects for aging between 25-32 years. **93+ points 9/3/11**

**2009 Graham's Quinta dos Malvedos Vintage Port** – Yields were low at Malvedos in 2009. Saturated purplish black. Heady essence of violet, pine and ripe fig. Blackberry and crème de cassis flavors, medium-full weight, and laser focused acidity with soft granular tannins. Featuring a fresh and persistent berry infused finish with sexy smooth texture. It should age nicely for twenty five years or so. **Tasted at Quinta. 91-93+ points 10/5/11**

**2009 Niepoort** – Bottled May 11<sup>th</sup>. Zin-like spicy/brambly boysenberry bouquet and fresh crushed grape essence. Medium-weight and vinous, this VP is infused with tantalizing ripe plum and cassis flavors. Off-dry stylistically, soft and elegant across the palate, with underlying power, grip and extraordinary persistence on the delicious dry finish. Cellar for up to 35 years. 15,000 liters were produced. **93+ points 9/3/11**

**2009 Pintas Vintage Port** – Deeply extracted, with violets and a primary purple fruit fragrance. Dominant plum and boysenberry fruit, loaded with waves of acidity and rip roaring tannins. Wow! Chewy, intense and nicely layered middle, lead to a scrumptious LONG finish. It will easily age for three decades. This remarkably well balanced wine is the finest Pintas that I have had since their voluptuous 2003 Vintage Port. **Tasted after dinner in the Douro. 92-94+ points 10/7/11**

**2009 Quinta do Crasto Vintage Port** – Bottled 3.5 months ago. Tanky, violet and ripe pink grapefruit bouquet. Full-bodied, possessing a solid core of dark red fruits and raisins, finely balanced with chewy and grippy tannins, crisp acidity and medium-long length. The freshness and beautiful structure were significant strengths. Medium-long cellar potential for two decades. **Tasted at Quinta. 89-91+ points 10/5/11**

**2009 Quinta do Crasto Vintage Port** – Sharp spicy scent, esteva, lavender, pomegranate and a sense of earthiness. Medium-full bodied, stylistically dry with a strong minty impression on the palate along with flavors of dark cherry and fleshy redcurrant. This was richer and smoother by the third day open and there was a green and spirituous hot streak in the mid-palate and on the finish. Otherwise, the balance is solid, with plenty of acidity. The tannins were hard and coarse initially and settled down and showed rounder edges by day four, along with a lush lengthy finish. Drink between 2014-2028. **88+ points 11/9/11**

**2009 Quinta Nova de Senhora do Carmo Vintage Port** – Fresh and floral fragrance, with ripe plum notes. Modestly ripe, delicious sweet purple fruit in a soft structured frame, velvety texture, lots of glycerin and excellent depth of flavor. Elegant and approachable now, with an exotic infusion of wild berry on the delicious long and lingering finish. It has solid mid-term cellaring potential for 18-25 years. The 2009 Quinta Nova is a sweet, finely tuned, expressive and sumptuous Vintage Port. **Tasted at Quinta. 91-93+ points 10/4/11**

**2009 Quinta do Passadouro Vintage Port** – Floral notes with bright cherry berry essence. Vibrant, ripe raspberry and boysenberry flavors, dense but slightly hollow mid-palate, with deft balance and finely tuned tannins which will deliver two decades of drinking pleasure. The finish was stunning in its length and creamy texture. A very solid performance by this Passadouro Vintage Port. **Tasted after dinner in the Douro. 89-91+ points 10/7/11**

**2009 Quinta do Vale Dona Maria Vintage Port** – (21.5% alc.) Reticent aromatics the first two days, it finally revealed a bouquet of dried carnations, lavender, raspberry, cocoa powder and a distinctive sense of freshness. Medium weight juice featuring dark plum, boysenberry and fresh fig impressions complemented by a soft and elegant underbelly, but simple core. Balanced by precise acidity and coarse granular tannins, this will take more time in bottle to fully resolve. Pleasant and juicy now with a prolonged finish and hints of spirit, which can't be ignored. I would like to taste it again in six to twelve months in order to provide a better indication of this "backwards" Port's future. **88+ points 11/9/11**

**2009 Quinta do Vesuvio Vintage Port** – The aromatic intensity is off the charts with perfumed floral and bramble berry essence along with graphite and tar. Unctuous, symmetrical and structurally stunning with sublime layered flavors of crème de cassis and blueberry which meld in the mid-palate; ending up in a long, smooth evocative finish. Drink now to witness a star in the making or consume throughout its thirty five to forty years of life. This is one inspired and beautiful Vesuvio Vintage Port! **94+ points 9/3/11**

**2009 S. Leonardo Vintage Port (cask sample)** – Profoundly dark and opaque optic. Smoky and spicy aromatics, with sweet grape notes and anise backdrop. Medium-full weight, a smattering of ripe and primary black fruits with supple roundness, admirably concealing firm tannins which arrive late and then lead to a medium length finish. Drink this while young or cellar it for up to twenty five years. **Tasted at Quinta. 88-90+ points 2/22/11**

**2009 Taylor Vintage Port** – Tight and unyielding on the nose for several days, eventually expressing a bouquet of lavender and violets along with black fruits, anise and tar. It is densely packed and one of the most concentrated Ports of the vintage. Taylor's palate of plum and dark fruits is framed by cutting acidity and supple, ham fisted tannins. A vinous Vintage Port, fresh and masculine with great grape purity, extraordinary balance and a tour de force finish. The 2009 Taylor has the stuffing to go through the midpoint of this century without even trying. **94+ points 9/3/11**

**2009 Taylor's Quinta de Vargellas Vinha Velha Vintage Port** – Reticent nose that finally emerged on day two, exploding on the scene with scents of rose petals and spicy notes of pepper, licorice, mint and an undertone of pencil shavings and char. It is a harmonious, voluptuous, and massively fruited old vine Vargellas with provocative tannins and an enormous, long, smooth finish. This old vines Vargellas is a prodigious and hedonistic young Port, and clearly the valedictorian of the 2009 class. It will develop beautifully and still show its youth at age forty! 300 cases were produced. **96+ points 9/3/11**

**2009 Warre's Vintage Port** – This Port was a standout in its "blind flight" and unquestionably deserved a full on declaration, regardless of the history behind it. Riveting from the first fresh whiff, with a bouquet of rose petals, lavender and kirsch, accented by an herbal essence and pine. Whoa, this got my attention! The palate is equally compelling: full, concentrated, luxurious and harmonious with gobs of glycerin, yet it remains vinous and fabulously intense. Rich and with a mink-like mouthfeel, from the deft balance to the enduring finish, this is class in a glass. Bottled to commemorate the 200<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the "Liberation of Porto" back in 1809 (story to follow). To put the 2009 Warre's in perspective, there only 6,000 *bottles* produced, whereas the 2007 Warre's contained 6,500 cases (12 x 750 ml). A charismatic and seriously fine bottle of Vintage Port with upside cellaring potential for a minimum of four decades. **95+ points 12/27/11**

***Paul Symington sent the following to announce the declaration of Warre's 2009 Vintage Port:***

We are declaring 500 cases of Warre's 2009 Vintage Port as a special bottling to commemorate 200 years since the Anglo-Portuguese Army under the Duke of Wellington liberated our home city of Oporto (each bottle is numbered). This great wine is in very short supply and many of the cases are already spoken for as we have already shown it at a tasting in London.

Quinta da Cavadinha is a higher and cooler vineyard as you know so produced lovely wines in 2009. The Warre's 2009 Vintage Port is a truly exceptional wine.

William Warre, born in Oporto in 1784, played a key role in this great battle in 1809 as a Major in the Portuguese wing of the army. We thought it fitting to make a Warre's 2009. It is important that you should know that we will be donating £48.00 per case (£4.00 per bottle) on every case sold of the Warre's 2009 to a charity for the wounded soldiers in Afghanistan.

We feel that Major William Warre, Oporto born and aged just 25 in 1809 when the battle took place, would have appreciated the fact that we are giving away all our profit to the wounded soldiers of today on a wine that is dedicated to a battle he fought in.

## **1809-2009**

*On the 12<sup>th</sup> May 1809 one of the major battles of the Peninsular War took place, the liberation of Oporto by the Anglo-Portuguese army led by the Duke of Wellington. A young officer serving in this army was Major William Warre, who had been born in Oporto into the Port family of the same name in 1784. This 25 year old soldier had been sent north of Oporto on his own to try and prevent the escape of the French army under Marshal Soult. At the Salamonde Bridge on the Cavado river, William Warre together with a small band of local Portuguese volunteer soldiers and farmers built and manned a blockade on this bridge to prevent the retreat of the invading army. In the words of the great Peninsular War historian, Sir Charles Oman; 'This, unhappily, was not enough to hold back 20,000 desperate men who saw their only way of salvation on the opposite bank'.*

*For his remarkable bravery at this and many other actions, Warre was awarded the Order of São Bento d'Aviz, Portugal's highest military honour.*

