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1966 Vintage Port: Sleeping beauty

The wines were long overshadowed by those from 1963 and 1970. But as they reach their first half-century, Axel Probst reveals, their freshness, finesse, and future potential are finally shining through

The 1960s are probably the best ever decade in the Douro Valley. Vintage Ports from 1960, 1963, 1966, and 1967 never fail to impress and are, today, some of the pinnacles of mature Vintage Port. Among those, the 1966s are emerging as the jewels in the crown. All of the big houses impress at a very high level, and even second or “baby” brands are astonishing this vintage. There are also some very fine colheitas this year.

After an extremely wet winter, groundwater levels were topped up and helped sustain the vines through a very hot late spring and summer, with maximum temperatures around 113°F (45°C). Fall temperatures decreased to a more “normal” 86°F (30°C) and provided perfect harvest conditions as moderate rain set in for three consecutive days in mid-September. The results were healthy grapes with perfect sugar and acidity readings.

Only three years after electricity entered the region, most 1966 Ports were made as they would have been a century earlier. The only help in the vineyards

came from horses and donkeys, and all high-level Ports were foot-trodden in granite *lagares*. Due to the very poor infrastructure at the time, a journey from Porto to the Douro Valley took almost a day, and all Port was shipped from the Douro Valley to Vila Nova de Gaia on special boats, the *barcas rabelos*, which took a minimum of two days—sometimes a week—to get downstream.

While houses like Dow, Graham, Fonseca, and Sandeman have a long history and show consistently high quality in the decades prior to 1960, Quinta do Noval is very special that decade. Not only are the “regular” Noval Vintage Ports a very fine drink nowadays, but the Nacionais of this decade are the holy grail of Port. The grapes for Nacional come from a distinct *zha* (5-acre) block of the famous quinta and are among the very few from vines that are not grafted on to American rootstock. The 1960 is outstanding, and the 1963, 1966, and 1967 are nothing short of spectacular, rivaling all major houses in those years and normally going straight to pole position.

Overshadowed by the declared vintages either side of it—1963 and 1970—the 1966s were not initially very seductive, on account of their abundant tannin and a certain roughness. In the first 20 or 30 years of their life, 1963 or 1970 Vintage Ports were always the preferred choice. But over the past ten to 15 years, the 1966s have begun to shine through, their strength now tempered by growing finesse while retaining unbelievable freshness. The 1966s will outlast all of the decade’s other vintages. All of them—except Taylor’s—have now reached their prime drinking phase, but the top wines will stay on their high plateau for another three to five decades.

Whereas the Portuguese houses have reached their plateau and will not improve, the English houses should hold well for another three decades or so. Only a few wines, like the Flagman or Hutcheson, should be consumed immediately. Although prices rose as the wines reached their 50th birthday, most are still quite affordable. This will change over the next ten years.



TASTING

COLHEITAS

Taking their name from the Portuguese word for harvest, these are Tawny Ports from a single year that spend their whole life in 550-liter casks called *pipas*, whereas Vintage Ports are bottled after two years and age in the bottle. Colheitas are bottled for immediate consumption and normally lose some freshness and intensity once bottled. The bottling year is always noted on the label and should be checked before purchasing. Old colheitas are bottled on demand, so there are normally several bottling years for any given wines—for example, the Dalva 1966 colheita was bottled in 2003 and in 2014.

Dalva (bottled 2014)

Bright red color, with green reflections on the rim. Sweet, concentrated nose of coffee, honey, walnut, and dried fruits. The palate shows a certain sweetness, along with white pepper, raisins, and strong supporting acidity. Long on the finish. | 94

Kopke (bottled 2013)

Dark red color, with a brown rim. The bouquet is concentrated, revealing milk-chocolate and

fruity-caramel notes. A fresh palate with nuts up front and honey in the background. Long and balanced aftertaste. | 94

Krohn (bottled 2013)

Dusty, dark red in color. This has quite a rustic nose, with nuts (almonds) and a hint of acetone. Dried fruits, malt, and coffee on the palate, which also has noticeable acidity. Long and authentic on the finish. | 94

Niepoort (bottled 1985)

Clean and bright red in color. There are small hints of “bottle sickness,” the wine having been stored in the bottle for some 30 years. Dried fruit such as apricot, as well as some smoky notes on the nose. A dry palate, with raisins, almonds, and dried dates. Medium length on the finish. | 90

VINTAGE PORTS

Andresen

Transparent, medium red color, with a thin brown rim. Elegant bouquet, with honey, malt, and coffee. The palate shows acidity, a certain sweetness, and coffee again. Drink to 2025. | 90

Barros

A transparent rim on the very light red color. Honey and white pepper on the nose. Creamy, balanced, and elegant on the palate, with tobacco and herbs. Rather short to finish. Drink up. | 88

Cálem

Old Cálem Vintage Ports always impress. Less sweet than most Portuguese houses, with a strong, fruity body. Dark red, appears to be much younger than it is. Strong, fresh palate, with pepper and milk chocolate. Long and fruity finish. Drink over the next 25 years. | 94

Cockburn

Never officially declared, and officially labeled as “private reserve.” Dark red color, with some violet reflections. Malt, coffee, and butterscotch on the nose. Balanced palate, with malt, bitter chocolate, and toffee. Long finish. Drink to 2040. | 94

Constantino

Unfortunately, this brand no longer exists for fine Vintage Ports. It belonged to the ancestors of Quinta do Crasto, nowadays famous for their red wines. Light brown color, with a red rim. Smoky nose, with herbs and tobacco. Balanced palate, with smoky notes and caramel. Short finish. | 88

Croft

Dark red color. Intense notes of coffee, honey, and malt. Balanced but concentrated palate, with acidity, coffee, malt, and honey. Long, spicy aftertaste. Drink to 2050. | 94

Delaforce

Medium red color. Elegant bouquet, with orange, mint, and malt. The palate is also elegant, with spicy orange and butterscotch. Medium length on the aftertaste. Drink to 2020. | 90

Dow

One of the superstars of 1966. Unbelievably fresh and youthful color. Balanced, spicy palate, with some residual fruit, chocolate, and great complexity. Precise palate, mineral, with milk chocolate and red-berry fruit. Long, multilayered finish. This will easily see its 100th birthday. | 98

Flagman

This was a brand name used by Barros for the Scandinavian and German markets. Dusty brown with a broad rim. Some volatile acidity on the nose, with a spicy background. Malt on the balanced, elegant palate. Short finish. Drink up. | 88

Ferreira

Transparent dark red. Fully mature nose, with plum and honey. The palate shows too much acidity, along with toast and minty notes. This Port is leaving its prime plateau. Drink up. | 88

Fonseca

You would never guess that this Port was celebrating its 50th birthday. Still some opacity to the dark red color. Complex, integrated bouquet, with honey, spices, and chocolate. Intense chocolate and malty notes on the palate, too. Long and spicy finish. Drink to 2066+. | 94

Gould Campbell

One of the Symingtons' spectacular "baby brands." Intense red. The nose reveals pure acacia honey and caramel. Balanced palate, with a very good structure, malt, and honey. Drink to 2040. | 90

Graham

Bright red color. Complex bouquet, with red berry fruits and chocolate. Structured palate, with chocolate, cherry, and the first hints of toffee and malt. Long finish. Drink to its 100th birthday. | 98

Messias

Although Messias produces Vintage Ports more often than most other producers, the big years are well made. Dark red color. Malt and honey, with some tobacco in the background. Sweet and balanced palate, with chocolate and malty notes. Medium length. Drink over the next 10 years. | 90



Niepoort

Transparent dark red color. Balanced, complex nose, with butterscotch, coffee, and chocolate. Crème brûlée and herbs on the balanced palate. Long, multilayered finish. Drink to 2066. | 94

Noval

The "regular" Noval Vintage Port shows some bottle variation. The last bottle was the best of the dozen I have tasted so far. Very dark red color. Fresh, herbal bouquet, with chocolate and mature red-berry fruit. Very balanced on the palate, with pepper and chocolate. Long finish. Drink to 2040. | 94

Noval Nacional

A head-to-head race with Dow for pole position in 1966. Dark red color. Complexity on the nose, with huge finesse and intensity. Structured, intense palate, with honey and a very good supporting acidity in the background. Long, multilayered finish. This Port will easily outlive all readers of this magazine. | 98

Offley

Medium red. Still fruity, elegant bouquet, with herbs and mint in the background. Soft palate, elegantly matured, green tea, toffee, peppermint. Medium length on the finish. Drink to 2025. | 90

Quarles Harris

The second very good "baby brand" of the Symingtons. Transparent, bright red. Floral bouquet, chocolate, and peppermint. Soft, integrated palate, with cherries, chocolate, and blackberry. Medium length on the finish. Drink to 2035. | 90

Rebello Valente

Medium brown color. Some sweetness and toffee on the nose. Acidity, butterscotch, and sweetness then follow on the palate. Medium length on the aftertaste. Drink to 2020. | 88

Sandeman

Bright red, with a thin rim. There is still some residual red-berry fruit on the nose: spicy notes. Balanced palate, with black cherries and milk chocolate. Medium length on the aftertaste. Drink to 2025. | 90

Smith Woodhouse

The last but certainly not the least of the Symington baby brands. Deep medium red in color, with a broad rim. A fresh bouquet, with some sweetness and chocolate. The wine is also quite sweet on the palate, with cherries and raisins. The finish is of medium length. Drink to 2030. | 90

Taylor

Clean, dark red color. Complex nose, still not completely evolved, with coffee and chocolate. Fresh, well-structured palate. White pepper, chocolate, and red-berry fruit. Long, complex aftertaste. Leave for several more years and drink from 2025 to 2066+. | 95

Warre

Dark red color. Intense but balanced bouquet, with subtle fruit and malt. The palate shows chocolate and red-berry fruit of very high intensity without being too concentrated. Long, elegant, and multilayered on the finish. Drink to 2050. | 98