

1945 Vintage Port: Age has not withered them

Axel Probst celebrates a “truly great” year for Vintage Port, tasting across some 20 of the wines on the 70th anniversary of this legendary year

May 9, 1945: Peace—the first day after six long years of war in central Europe. Meanwhile, roughly 1,200 miles (2,000km) to the west, the grapes in the Douro Valley are flourishing and will make for one of the 20th century’s most spectacular vintages.

May 9, 2015: Some 70 years later, these Ports show an unbelievable freshness and youth, so that tasting them blind, one would never guess their age. A group of 14 Port lovers—among them British, Portuguese, and German—are enjoying more than 20 different Ports from the 1945 vintage. Though the top houses do not fail to impress, the smaller houses are not far behind, also having produced breathtaking Ports.

The climatic conditions in 1945 made for perfect grapes. After an averagely cold and wet winter season and a somewhat mixed spring, the Douro Valley experienced one of the most evenly warm growing seasons on record, with only one notably wet period at the end of August—heavy enough to moderate the sugar levels in the grapes, but not so heavy as to cause any serious damage. The average yield was only 2lb (0.9kg) of grapes per vine, and the continuing high temperatures necessitated an early *vindima*, which was finished by the end of September.

1945 is a “generally declared year,” meaning that at least half of the Port houses registered a Vintage Port. Single-quinta Vintage Ports (such as Graham’s Quinta dos Malvedos) hardly existed at the time. The most famous houses not to declare a Vintage Port in 1945 were Cockburn and Quinta do Noval in respect of its Nacional. Cockburn just missed the time frame for approval

at the Port Wine Institute but did, nevertheless, bottle a small quantity of 1945 wine. (If the declaration procedure is not properly followed, it cannot be called Vintage Port.) Noval’s Nacional was not produced, probably because the Van Zeller family who owned it at the time had the same opinion as Noval’s current managing director Christian Seely today: “If the Nacional does not sing, it is not bottled.”

The seven ages of a Vintage Port

A Vintage Port normally evolves through several stages. During its first ten years, it seduces with its generous fruit and stimulates with its noticeable tannin and acidity. Like other “big” wines, it then closes down, “sulking” for some 10–20 years, when it should be left well alone or it is likely to disappoint. During this awkward adolescent phase, it may appear facile or prickly, hiding its true potential. It normally attains maturity after a couple of decades but may occasionally need as long as 30 years, Fonseca’s 1985 being a good recent example. During its “drinking window,” which may be open for some 70 years, a great Vintage Port will remain a dark but still transparent red, showing abundant fruit and chocolate notes early on. As it approaches 50 years of age, the color begins to turn toward medium red, and the flavors change to malt, honey, and spice. Between now and the close of the “drinking window,” the fruit gradually subsides and the wine acquires ever-greater elegance and finesse, until finally it narrows to too sharp a point or splits into separate strands. After a century, the greatest Vintage Port can still be drunk with great enjoyment but more for

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intellectual curiosity than sensual pleasure, since they are normally past their prime by this stage.

The 1945s in context

1945 is a truly great Vintage Port year, maybe comparable in quality to 1912, 1927, or 1955. Whether years like 1963, 1966, 1970, or 1994 will live up to this quality only time will tell, since some of the ‘63s already show more signs of age than many of the ‘45s. Most of the latter will still be in their prime in one or even two decades.

If you ever have the chance to taste a 1945 Vintage Port, do not let the opportunity pass, whoever the producer may be. Though most of the Douro Valley still had no electricity (that arrived as late as 1963) and the production process was far less scientific than it is today, it is still brilliantly clear what a talented enologist was able to do with perfect grapes 70 years ago. And while a bottle of great Bordeaux of the same age would almost certainly command more than £1,000, a 1945 Vintage Port might be found at auction for a lot less.

Right: Some of the 20 1945 Vintage Ports assembled for a memorably special 70th-anniversary tasting.



Andresen Century Port 1845–1945

Current owner Carlos Flores dos Santos said that this is supposed to be a 10 Year Old Tawny with a lot of bottle age. Light brown, transparent color with a noticeable rim. Dusty honey and malty notes on the nose. For what it is supposed to be, the palate is rather convincing: structured malt and fresh honey. Medium length. Drink up. | 17

Veludo 1945 Tawny Port

This was probably bottled in the ‘70s. Medium-brown color. The bouquet reveals honey and walnuts. Lots of acidity, herbs, and honey. Medium-long on the finish. Drink up. | 17

Cockburn 1945 Crusted Port

Transparent medium-red color. The nose offers elegant notes of chocolate, with some residual fresh fruit (raspberry). Balanced, intense palate, with chocolaty-fruity notes and very good, well-integrated acidity, which lasts into the persistent aftertaste. Now to 2040. | 18

Croft

This legendary Croft presented a deep red color. Coffee, malt, and raspberry on the bouquet. An almost creamy texture and a very intense and structured palate; breathtaking complexity, with intense honey and coffee. Long, persistent aftertaste. Now to 2060. | 19

Dow

One of the darkest red colors on the night. Fresh and complex coffee and fruits on the nose, fading residual fruit. A very balanced palate, with a noticeable acidity and a strong aftertaste. Now to 2040. | 18

Eira Velha

Sitting on the very top of the hill and overlooking Pinhão, Quinta da Eira Velha produced occasional Vintage Ports. Though the grape composition has not been recorded, this would today fit into the single-quinta category. Transparent medium-red color, with mint, coffee, and herb.

The elegant palate shows cherry and herbal notes and a distinct sweetness. The aftertaste is rather short, indicating that this may be about to fade. Now to 2020. | 17

Ferreira

Medium brownish color, still with some red tints and a transparent rim. Slightly sweet on the bouquet, with butterscotch and a herbal background. Soft palate, chocolate, crème brûlée, and a medium-long finish. Now to 2030. | 18

Feuerheerd

The bottle at the tasting was faulty, so I am consulting a tasting note from 2011 with Sophia Bergvist (a direct descendant of the family) and Fonseca’s chief enologist David Guimaraens at Quinta de la Rosa. Surprisingly young red color, with an orange rim. Toffee, coffee, and chocolate are dominating the bouquet. Strong coffee and milk chocolate on the palate. Complex, long aftertaste, with a slight hint of bitterness. Now to 2035. | 18

Fonseca

Very deep dark red in color. The bouquet shows minty, chocolate, and herbal notes; very balanced. The palate continues the chocolate-mint touch; very precise and balanced. The long aftertaste adds some malt. Now to 2050. | 18

Graham

Like the Fonseca, a very deep red color, with an even more intense core. Complex chocolate and red-berry fruit on the nose, very strong but well balanced. The palate reveals coffee, raspberries, and milk chocolate, slightly medicinal. Strong, long, and persistent aftertaste. Now to 2050. | 19

Kopke

One of the big surprises of the tasting, since Kopke is known for colheitas rather than for big Vintage Ports. It was one of the darkest, with an opaque, dark red color. Full, strong nose, with slightly overripe fruit, coffee, and cherries. Surprisingly little developed; one would easily have guessed this Port to be 25 years younger. Chocolate and some herbs on the fresh palate, and a medium-long finish. Now to 2050. | 18

Morgan

Deep dark red. Elegant bouquet, with mint and chocolate notes and some raspberry in the background. Too much acidity on the palate, but underneath very elegant and balanced. The aftertaste was also slightly dominated by acidity. Still pleasant to drink, though. Now to 2020. | 17

Niepoort

The darkest Port of the tasting: an opaque, deep red color, with an even more intense core. Balanced, complex bouquet, still with strong fruit, a surprising freshness, and herbal notes in the background. Licorice, cherries, and raspberries on the palate; a strong structure and a perfect balance. Many layers of aftertaste, long and balanced. Now to 2060. | 20

Noval

Dark red in color. Fresh chocolate on the nose, tobacco, raspberry and coffee. Fruity and herbal on the palate, milk chocolate, very well-integrated and supporting acidity, which also stabilizes the medium-long finish. Now to 2040. | 18

Offley

Dark red color, with more concentration to the core. Herb, coffee, and floral notes in the bouquet. A complex palate: jammy fruit, coffee, herbs. The aftertaste is clearly dominated by herbal and tobacco notes. Now to 2025. | 18

Ramos Pinto

Very dark red core, with a much lighter rim. Elegant, fresh nose, with strong milk chocolate.



Strong, balanced palate, with intense cherry-chocolate and a perfect, supporting acidity. Complex aftertaste. Now to 2040. | 18

Rebello Valente

Deep red with a light rim. A fresh and elegant bouquet, with some herbal notes. Chocolate, mint, and a very good supporting acidity. Medium-long finish. Now to 2025. | 17

Royal Oporto

The only 1945 Port at our tasting where the quality did not support 70 years of evolution in the bottle. Orange color with brown reflections. A balanced bouquet, with herbs and coffee. Very elegant on the palate, but too light. Short aftertaste. Not unpleasant but well past its prime. Drink up. | 16

Rozes

Another pleasant surprise, since this was on no one's radar before the tasting. Rozes is best known for elegant Vintage Ports, but its '45 did not fail to impress. Deep dark red color. Floral and herbal notes and much coffee on the bouquet. The palate shows a very balanced combination of licorice, strong fruit, and coffee. A long and complex finish. Now to 2040. | 18

Above: The wax was crumbling, but the 1945 Fonseca under it would have lasted another 30 years or more.

Sandeman

Unfortunately, the Sandeman 1945 Vintage Port was a bit oxidized, so again I offer a tasting note from 2011. Medium red color with a light rim. A very elegant nose, butterscotch and some floral notes. Honey and malt on the balanced palate. Medium-long aftertaste. Now to 2030. | 18

Taylor

Due to the shortage of glass at the time in England, Taylor's 1945 Vintage Port was all bottled in Portugal. This became the rule throughout Portugal some 29 years later, in 1974. Very dark red color. A fresh, intense, and complex bouquet, with tobacco, herbs, coffee, and still some residual red-berry notes. A complex and balanced palate, with soft tannins and a perfectly integrated acidity, coffee, and fresh herbs. A multilayered, very long, but balanced finish. Now to 2050. | 20

Warre

Unfortunately, there was some bottle stink at the beginning, which did not totally disappear. Tasting note from 2013: Medium orange-brown color, with a remarkably deep core. Malt, honey, and butterscotch on the nose. A balanced and structured palate, without being overly intense; honey, butterscotch, and mint notes. A bit sweeter than you would expect from this producer. A very long and balanced aftertaste. Now to 2040. | 19