

The 2003 Vintage Port Barrel Tasting

Samples of the young wines show the latest declared year to be outstanding

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Port houses are lining up this month to declare the 2003 vintage. Just last week, the Symington family--which owns illustrious names such as Graham, Dow and Warre--declared 2003, saying in a press release that the wines from that harvest "will take their place among the classic Vintage Ports of recent decades."

A few weeks ago, I contacted nearly all the Port houses in Vila Nova di Gaia and the Douro Valley and asked them to send me barrel samples to review in a blind tasting at my office in Tuscany. Nearly three dozen samples of 2003 Vintage Port arrived from all the major Port houses, plus some from newer and lesser-known names. Samples of Churchill and Cockburn did not arrive in time, but I will post my notes on them in a few weeks.

Based on the raw, young barrel samples, my overall impression is that 2003 is clearly an outstanding year. The very top wines show excellent concentration of ripe fruit and chewy tannins. They have the stuffing necessary for long-term aging. Most of these Ports should go on sale as futures this spring, and nearly three-quarters of them have the potential to rate outstanding or classic (90 points or better on *Wine Spectator's* 100-point scale) once they are bottled and arrive in the market at the end of this year.

However, I am not sure the vintage is at the same level as 2000 or 1994, though it appears to be better than 1997. The top wines of 2003 do remind me of the 1994s when I tasted them in 1996. They have wonderful aromas of bright fruit and flowers, sweet, rich palates and chewy tannins. But they do not appear to have the power and length of the 1994s, with a few exceptions, such as Croft, Fonseca and Niepoort, all of which I rated potentially classic.

Interestingly, in both 2003 and 1994, many Port shippers began promoting the vintage shortly after the grapes were picked. They knew that they were on to something very special. Usually, Port shippers are much more reserved; they only talk about the quality of a possible Vintage Port year after the young fortified wines have spent their second winter in the cellars.

"It really is a superb vintage," Dirk van der Niepoort said just a few weeks after the 2003 harvest. "The wines have dark colors, and rich fruit and tannins," added Niepoort, an owner of the small, high quality Port house that bears his family's name. "They are massive."

A number of Port shippers have indicated in conversations with me that the summer heat in 2003 was not as record-breaking for the Douro as it was in the rest of Europe's wine regions.

"The heat in August was not excessive," wrote Paul Symington in a fall 2003 e-mail, reporting that the highest temperature at Quinta do Bomfim was more than 107 degrees F, for three days early in the month. "This is not much higher than normal. It did stay hot for longer, but nothing too unusual."

A wet winter helped maintain the vines, as did some rain in June and July, added Symington, a director of his family's Port business. "We had superb luck with rain on the 27th and 28th of August; looking back at the records, this sort of rain has always played a really important role in great Douro years."

The harvest started on Sept. 15, and the weather remained good throughout, if overly warm, which meant the grapes needed to be cooled in the *lagares*. "The must showed really good colors, extraordinary deep rich purple, some of the best I have seen," Symington said.

Most of the houses reported a smaller-than-normal harvest in 2003; therefore their production of Vintage Port is down by 20 percent to 30 percent. This could be good news for them because the market for Vintage Port remains depressed. Prices at auction and from merchants remain stable or down slightly. So the thought of a new vintage for sale is not exciting for many members of the wine trade.

But Vintage Port has never been a market-driven wine. There were vintages in the 1920s, '30s and '50s that were declared simply because the producers believed the wines deserved to be bottled that way--and nearly all of them are lovely-drinking Vintage Ports today. It could be the same with the best of the 2003s. Port shippers know the quality will be in the bottle, regardless of today's market