

1927 FINE DOURO PORT wine

-- Larry Moore

Club members lucky enough to attend the board meeting at Lee and Joan Peterson's home in April, 2011, were treated by Lee to a 1927 Fine Douro Port. The bottle was in pristine condition with the seal intact, a 6¢ tax sticker, and a near perfect label. After some problems removing the cork (as it came out in pieces) Lee poured samples of the delightfully aged and very tawny port for all to sample.

Here is a description of the bottle: Top label base of neck says GENUINE PORT Imported from Portugal. The main label says FINE DOURO PORT, 2nd line - FIVE CROWN 3rd-Port of the 1927 vintage 4th-Grown only in the finest vineyards of the Douro valley (oporto) 5th- shipped by C.DA SILVA alcohol content 20% volume cont. 1 pint 7 oz. level corked and back label intact as well states C.DA SILVA Oporto Portugal Imported & Distributed by Judge & Dolph Ltd. , Chicago, IL.



I found it for sale on line for \$628.10 from a vintage wine seller in Hessen, Germany if you're looking to buy one. The condition of the label is very important to the value of the bottle. Apparently the bottle came in a basket weave configuration originally. Don't know what happened to the basket. Of all the bottles I saw on line, none had a label in as good a condition as this one. Most labels looked like cellar rot had affected the label, making it hard to read. For those that missed out on seeing this rare bottle of port, you will get a second chance by attending

the board meeting at the Moore's in May. We were honored to have been given the (empty) bottle to display in our wine cellar by Lee.

In an effort to educate our members I did a little research online about the history of Port wine. The following is an article on the history and current condition of the Port industry, by William Lyons. It appeared in the Wall Street Journal's Life & Culture section on February 18, 2011:



The Douro Valley, The Port Wine District, Vineyards And The Douro River At Pinhao.

In the remote upper reaches of the Douro Valley, the early morning fog sits in the basin, hugging the terraced vineyards that form a natural staircase down to the water's edge. As the morning gives way to afternoon, the anemic, late-winter sun burns through, lifting the heavy mist and exposing the dramatic steep-sided canyon. It is here, on top of a thin layer of flaky ocher-colored rock, known as schist, that the vine is at its most unexpected.

In the summer, temperatures can reach more than 40 Celsius before plunging to around minus 4 Celsius in the depths of winter. Then there is the location. The valley sits 100 kilometers inland from the city of Oporto in the northwest of Portugal and a journey to the vineyards takes more than three hours, crossing the Serra do Marão mountain range. Stubbornly, amid this dramatic landscape, the vine thrives, producing perhaps one of the last affordable fine wines available in the marketplace: port, a warm, spicy, fruit-driven wine.

At around £35 for a bottle of the most recent vintage, it is vastly under-priced given the cost of production, quality of the wine and ageing longevity, says Mark Bedini, chief executive and founder of wine brokerage Fine + Rare Wines Ltd. "Those who do like buying port are hugely relieved that they can still buy it at relatively reasonable prices," he says.

Winemaking equipment at a Quinta in Pinhao, Douro region.



But despite its affordability, sales only rose a modest 3% in 2010, while falling 6% in 2009 and 5% a year earlier, according to figures from the Instituto dos Vinhos do Douro e Porto. At a time when fine wine is achieving record prices in the Far East, with some First Growth Bordeaux selling for more than £3,000 a bottle, there is a feeling that port has been left behind.

Amid this, the valley is changing. A new road is presently under construction that will cut through the Serra do Marão, reducing the journey time from Oporto to less than an hour and opening up the valley to the prospect of more development. The motorway will also provide easier access to a string of new luxury hotels that are cropping up on the terraced slopes of the Douro. Meanwhile, a slew of traditional port winemakers are branching out, producing unfortified wine alongside port.

A valley that has changed very little since the mid 18th century is now embracing the modern world, fueled by Portugal's burgeoning urban middle class, who have developed a taste for the Douro's unfortified wine.

Dirk Niepoort, proprietor of Niepoort wines, first experimented with the production of Douro wine in 1990. Today his white, rose and red wines are some of the most sought-after in Portugal. "Port is a very special wine that should be cherished," he says. "The amount of time and effort that goes into making it means it should be more expensive than it already is.

"In the past, the priority was to make port but now we know we have the expertise and quality to make great still wine."

Boats in a river, Dom Luis I Bridge, Duoro River, Porto, Portugal.



There is an old British naval tradition for serving port wine. The decanter is placed in front of the host, who proceeds to serve the guest to his right, before passing the decanter to his left. The decanter should circulate, always to the left, until it is finished. If at any point the decanter stops, the host is expected to ask the individual nearest the decanter if he knows the "Bishop of Norwich" (or whichever city you happen to be in). When the individual replies no, the host says: "He's a terribly nice chap, but he never passed the port." This is a comment meant to provoke the individual into realizing his faux pas.

It is quaint traditions like these that some fear could disappear as port is served less and less. With the emphasis shifting toward unfortified wine, where does this leave this sweet, dark, rich, spicy wine?

"The port trade is undoubtedly tough," says Paul Symington, joint managing director of the Symington Family Estates, a company that owns and produces, among others, Graham's, Dow's, Warre's and Quinta do Vesuvio port. "It's not easy. Port has everything in terms of quality, prestige and collectibility. It is served at Buckingham Palace for every state dinner, but unlike other fine wines, we haven't cracked growth markets such as the Far East. When I see what Bordeaux does there, I feel, where the hell did we go wrong?"

Part of that prestige is down to port's history, which dates back to the late 17th century, when English wine merchants flocked to Portugal as a result of prohibitively high taxes on imported French wines due to the trade wars between England and France.

It is said that two young wine merchants from Liverpool began exporting a wine from the town of Lamego, where an abbot was adding brandy to wine during fermentation, killing off the yeasts and, as a result, producing a beverage that is sweet and high in alcohol. Given the lineage, it is unsurprising that famous port houses have English or Scottish names such as Cockburn's, Croft, Sandeman and Taylor's.

The Old Quarter in the city of Porto



Today, port is made by running off half of the fermented red wine while it still contains half of its grape sugar into a container filled with a little brandy. This stops the fermentation, but to gain color, the grape

skins have to be trod. Humans are ideal for this, as a foot tread is gentle and doesn't break the pips, whose natural tannins would add an unpleasant bitterness to the wine.

Traditionally, around September, one could hear the echo of the treaders in the many *quintas*, or wineries, that line the banks of the Douro as they sang, standing in lines with their arms locked around each others shoulders, crushing the grapes in open stone tanks. But as labor costs have risen, much of the treading is now completed by robotic *lagares* that replicate the action of the human foot.

Perversely, it is advances in technology such as the electronic lagares that have not only improved the quality of port but have also enabled port wine producers to exploit their vineyards and produce unfortified wine.

Richard Mayson, author of "Port and the Douro," who now makes wine in the Alto Alentejo region, says: "The quality of vintage port has vastly improved. There is no doubt about it, between 1970 and 1994, vintage port went through a bad patch. It really came back on form again in 1994. It was a good vintage and the shippers had put their house in order by embracing modern technology.

"Before temperature control and stainless-steel fermentation tanks, you couldn't really make decent unfortified wine in the Douro," he explains. "Now, nearly everybody has that and, after a rapid learning curve, they are making good wine."

It is precisely because of this upsurge in quality that Adrian Bridge, chief executive of the Fladgate Partnership, which produces Taylor's and Fonseca ports, says that vintage port does have a future.

"Table wine production is still relatively small," says Mr. Bridge. "There has been a lot of PR noise surrounding it, but most of what is produced is consumed locally. To put it into perspective, the Douro wine market is worth around €60 million, while the vintage port market is worth around €360 million."

Mr. Bridge argues that sales at the commodity end of the port market are under pressure. He is referring to the cheapest port, which is aged for less than a year in a cask and sold soon after bottling. Although attractive in its distinct pepperiness, unlike vintage port, which is only made in the very best years, it doesn't improve with bottle age. Much of this basic port is drunk as an aperitif in France.

"Interest in quality port will continue," Mr. Bridge says. He points to the potential of markets such as Brazil, where a burgeoning middle class has a strong affiliation with Portugal due to a shared language and culture.

"A few years ago I would have said it would take a generation for port sales to take off in the Far East," says Mr. Bridge. "Now the time frame is shorter, perhaps we are looking at five to 10 years across the board."



The Symington family at Quinta dos Malvedos which is associated with the Graham's Port brand.

It is a view echoed by Mr. Niepoort. He sees a bright future, where the Douro is big enough to produce three wines: port, vintage port and unfortified wine, with all three feeding off each other.

"We have 85 different grape varieties in the Douro, in an area that has many different soils, microclimates, altitudes and aspects. On top of this, we now know which vineyards are best for making wine and which have the best potential for port."

Back in Oporto, a short walk from the iconic bridge and just across the water from Vila Nova de Gaia, where the port lodges age their wine, stands the neo-Palladian façade of the Factory House. Built by the British shippers in the late 18th century, it stands as part chamber of commerce for the trade, part meeting place for a body of traders. Traditionally, every Wednesday, the port shippers would meet for lunch to discuss business, drink port and play "Guess the Vintage." Presently, only three founding companies survive: the Symingtons, the Taylor-Fladgate group and Churchill.

A monument to the past (the library has recently been reinsured, as it contains a first edition of Charles Darwin's "On the Origin of Species"), it is nonetheless modernizing. "It is," says Mr. Symington, "learning to adapt." The lunches are less frequent and the rules have been dramatically revised—there are now as many women on the board as there are men and soon it will have a female treasurer.

"The days of the long lunches and meandering back across the river to your lodge to do a bit of tasting have gone," he says. "It is much more used now not as an exclusive club but as a place to promote port."

But the pace of change hasn't reached everywhere. At the Sao Bento station in Oporto, trains still depart for the 203-kilometer journey up the valley, hugging the banks of the Rio Douro, cutting through a prehistoric landscape cloaked with a layer of vines.

It was noted that in sharing this wine, Lee failed to follow traditional protocol for serving port wine as was pointed out in the article above. Despite this *faux pas*, we all want to thank Lee and Joan for the opportunity to have tasted a Port made in 1927, an opportunity that comes along seldom in one's lifetime.