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Cockburn's Vintage Port 1908–2007

by Axel Probst

If you are not quite sure how to pronounce Cockburn (*coh-burn*), you might get some funny looks from your Portuguese taxi driver in Vila Nova de Gaia as you make your way to the company's main office. Motivated by the company's extraordinary private cellar, I was very excited to be taking part in one of the largest ever Cockburn's Vintage Port tastings, organized by members of portforum.com and worldofport.de. We benefited from the presence of Cockburn's managing director, Miguel Côte-Real, who provided us with detailed information on the company and its wines.

As old as Waterloo

During the Napoleonic Wars, the regiment of young Scotsman Robert Cockburn was transferred to the European continent. He retired from the army in 1815 to settle in Oporto and established Cockburn, Wauchope & Co. In the early 1930s, the London office opened and Cockburn's became more firmly established in the UK—still the brand's most important market.

When Henry and John Smithes entered the company in the second half of the 19th century, they quickly discovered the importance of blending for the consistency and quality of the Port. John Smithes developed a very detailed system of recording the origin of the grapes and their variety, part of which is still in use today. To ensure consistent grape quality over the years, Cockburn's worked directly with Douro farmers from the start. Many of these quintas were purchased by Cockburn's over the decades, culminating in the acquisition of its "jewel in the crown," Quinta dos Canais, its largest and most beautiful property, in 1989. Canais is named for the canals that transport water from the falls in the north to the Douro River to the south. Situated

approximately 20km (12 miles) east of Pinhão, Canais is north of the river and faces Taylor's Quinta de Vargellas on the south side. The quinta has 150ha (370 acres) under vine and is therefore one of the largest single estates in the Douro valley.

Mr Touriga Nacional

When Côte-Real joined the company in 1978, few people paid much attention to his innovative ideas. He spent his first decade immersed in the demarcated region, where he was in charge of replanting the company's quintas. During this period, he did much to promote a grape variety that was almost extinct in the Douro Valley: Touriga Nacional. Extremely resistant to sunburn and well suited to hot sites, Touriga Nacional contributes deep color, fruity aromas of red berries, ample body, and a persistent finish. The variety is, therefore, ideal for the Douro Valley. Under Miguel's leadership, Cockburn's became the biggest producer of Touriga Nacional, and few Port lovers today could imagine a classic Vintage Port without its distinctive contribution.

Market and reputation

Although it is not one of the big four Port brands, Cockburn's still holds a 4 percent share of the global Port market. More impressively, it holds 20 percent of the UK and 10 percent of the US markets—the two prime markets for "special category" Port (anything above basic Ruby). Cockburn's annually produces more than 4 million bottles, of which only 7,000 cases will be its precious Vintage Port.

Cockburn's Vintage Ports had an excellent reputation until the second half of the 20th century. Its reputation was tarnished, however, by a number of bad declaration decisions; it failed, for example, to declare 1977 or 1980, and declared 1967 over 1966. In the early 1980s, many consumers believed that the company had stopped producing Vintage Port altogether. Only the production of a fantastic 1983 helped restore the company's prior reputation. Despite huge bottle variation, Cockburn's 1983 at its best is a

blockbuster. One would also miss great Port if one overlooked the very well-made years of 1994, 2000, and 2003.

Decanting

Due to the large number of wines, this tasting was split into two sessions, with dinner in between. Côte-Real advised on the decanting—who could know better?—and some tasters who did not know the wines were surprised by the long decanting times he recommended for some of the older vintages.

Conclusions

Most of Cockburn's Vintage Ports are produced with less than 90g of residual sugar per liter and are therefore easily identifiable in blind tastings by their typical grip. In the first half of the 20th century, Cockburn's produced some outstandingly complex Vintage Ports, some of them still capable of lasting for decades more. The third quarter of the past century witnessed some poor declaration decisions and some bottle variation in the 1980s, though the 1983 is outstanding when showing at its best. More recently, under the leadership of Côte-Real and his predecessor Jim Reader, the company has found its way back to its old strength. The 1994, 2000, and 2003 are very strong Vintage Ports, and we can also get excited about the recently declared 2007.

All participants at this event were happy to hear that even Côte-Real, who has been at the company for more than 30 years, was not aware of a more extensive tasting of its Vintage Ports than this one. When asked if Cockburn's had any plans to produce an age-dated Tawny older than their 20 Year Old, he replied with a simple no. He very much enjoys a well-made 10 or 20 Year Old Tawny but believes, along with some other Port producers, that the latter is the optimum age. For his taste, colheitas can be very complex and show great finesse, but he finds it difficult to drink more than one glass of these, whereas, with a good 10 or 20 Year Old Tawny—slightly chilled, as is the custom in Portugal—or with a well-matured Vintage Port, he would always go for a second glass.

2007 (cask sample; Touriga Nacional and Touriga Franca) A Vintage Port can only be named as such when it has been officially declared by the producer and sanctioned by the Port Wine Institute (IVDP) in Oporto. Each varietal cask sample of the 2007 gave every impression of contributing to a decent Vintage Port with all the essential ingredients, but when blended it was even clearer that we can have high hopes for this 2007. **NS** due to not having the final blend

2003 Although not having the same abundance of classic components as the 2000s, the 2003s, this one included, are drinking extremely well right now, just before closing down. Deep black color, with seductive blackberry and cranberry aromas and flavors. A fruity aftertaste, with the dry end note that is the company's signature. **18**

2000 In a reductive phase at the time of tasting. A complex bouquet with blackberries and cassis and, again, a characteristically dry finish. A classic Vintage Port from this amazing year—and one that will reward another decade of cellaring. **18**

1997 A blend of 20% each of Touriga Franca, Tinta Roriz, and Tinta Barroca, and 40% of Touriga Nacional. The first signs of age already apparent. Blackberries and some figs in the bouquet, then a tannic palate with alcohol and some background raspberry. Not yet fully awake. **17**

1994 From an exceptional vintage, this exhibits a surprisingly transparent color but a complex structure. It was far more evolved than I expected, so perhaps there was too much air in this bottle. **NS** (Tasting another bottle at home revealed its full potential: 17)

1991 Declaring the '91 over the '92 may not have been the best decision. This wine does not appear to have the depth of a classic Vintage Port, and there is also some volatile acidity (VA). **NS**

1985 Reddish brown color with a good sheen. There was complexity here, but the wine was again dominated by VA. **NS**

1983 Because Harvey's took over Cockburn's in 1961/62, some of the Cockburn's 1983 Vintage was labeled as Harvey & Sons 1983 Vintage. In either case, it would always be advisable to have a backup bottle of this standing by. In Côte-Real's experience, some 15-20% of this Vintage shows some TCA contamination from infected corks. Our bottle displayed the color you would expect of a 10 Year Old Tawny Port. A spicy nose with traces of sweet cherries, but also some of that TCA in the background. An amalgam of red berries on the complex and perfectly integrated palate, then a long, harmonious finish. **18** (19 at its best)

1977 It is always a special privilege to taste the best of Cockburn's '77 Ruby Ports. As already mentioned, this Port was never declared as Vintage. Instead, the cork says: Crusted 1977. A light-brown color with the typical signs of age. The bouquet offers malt, coffee, and spices. These carry over on to the palate, where they are complemented by raspberries and honey, as well as the typical Cockburn's grip. Long, harmonious finish. Only 2,000 bottles produced. **18**

1975 The '75s never knocked me off my feet, since the declaration was motivated more by political reasons than by the sheer quality of the wines. Toffee on the nose and palate, with some fruit in the background. A lightweight, but for a Vintage Port of this weak year, it is still a pleasant surprise. **16**

1970 A transparent red color with a brownish hue. A fruity bouquet and a palate of red cherry and raspberry. Good complexity and structure and a noticeably dry aftertaste. Drink now and over the next ten years. **17**

1967 This appeared to be younger than expected, with a floral bouquet. The palate was very well structured, with red berries, but also a slight trace of alcohol at the end. Along with the two Novals and the Fonseca Guimaraens, this is the best '67. **17**

1963 A correctly mature but still very intense color. An elegant nose, with toffee and spice, leading into a perfectly integrated palate of mixed red berries, toffee, and caramel. A good aftertaste and moderate length, but this will not live as long as other '63s. **18**

1960 Translucent brown. A surprising mint note on the nose. Harmonious on the palate; a little lacking in complexity and length but still a perfectly pleasant Port. **16**

1955 The bouquet announces that this is a great Cockburn's Vintage Port, while on the palate the typically dry grip is accompanied by mint, cherry, and raisin notes. The well-integrated palate shows excellent complexity and length. **18**

1950 Transparent red with a brownish hue. A fairly closed bouquet, with sweet spices, dried figs, and mint. The palate is restrained, though mouth-filling. It does not show much complexity but is still pleasant to drink. **17**

1947 This bottle was released directly from the company's private cellar. For the company to have declared this vintage over the classic 1945 still makes Miguel a little teary-eyed. A very youthful appearance for a Port over 60 years old: a clear, intense, red and brown. The nose displays an unusual smoky aroma, red berries, and spices; the palate, delicious strawberry jam, pepper, and spice, though the finish is surprisingly short. **17**

1935 This Port was served from two half-bottles, each very different from the other. Both were very youthful in appearance, with great complexity. From the first, raspberry dominated the bouquet, with a spicy background, raspberry again showing strongly on the perfectly harmonious palate. The second bottle was dominated by spice rather than by fruit. Even from half-bottles, this Port did not reveal its age. According to James Suckling of *Wine Spectator*, this is "one of Cockburn's greatest wines"—a conclusion with which I fully concur. **19**

1927 This Port was returned by English merchants due to its lack of intensity when it first appeared on the market. More than 80 years later, this wine is anything but light. A typically dry bouquet, with malt and toffee. The palate is fully mature and complex, with fruit-jam flavors and a good finish. **18**

1924 Lengthy discussions surrounded this bottle, both before and after it was broached. According to the information we were given, no Cockburn's Vintage Port was produced in 1924, but none of us could suggest any other producer, having examined the remnants of the branded wax capsule. A youthful appearance and moderate intensity. Much more opulent on both nose and palate than the other elderly Cockburn's wines tasted so far, but only moderate length. Even the cork did not reveal the producer, saying only "1924 Vintage Port," but the style certainly didn't suggest Cockburn's. **16**

1912 An amazingly intense, youthful color of red and brown. The bouquet offered toffee, caramel, and the typical dry note of the house. An elegant, complex, and fully mature palate, with malt, coffee, and raisins in the background. The aftertaste was slightly acidic. Very close to perfection, and clearly the wine of the night. **19**

1908 Around a century earlier, the grapes of this wine were enjoying the Portuguese sun and breathing air unpolluted by any machinery. Served this wine blind, I would have guessed it to be a Port of the mid-1970s: amazing! The nose is dominated by coffee, with dried figs in the background. Walnuts and a menthol note on the palate, with a strong, slightly alcoholic aftertaste. This wine will remain at this level for quite some time. **18**

1895 This wine was sold to us by others as an 1895 Cockburn's—but again, it never was declared by the company. The color was of a 40 Year Old Tawny, with an excellent intensity. Honey and some acidity on the bouquet. Slight traces of toffee on the palate, again with acidity and a raspberry note in the background. An acidic finish, too. Interesting. Closely examining the cork revealed its true identity: a Taylor's Vintage Port of 1927. **NS**