

Chatting with Rupert Symington

"Port didn't get popular by accident—it got popular because it's good."

By Lana Bortolot

If you have a hard time placing Portugal's Douro Valley on the map, you'll have an even harder time getting there in person. An hour east of Oporto, the road to the heart of Port-making is not only winding, it's also switchback turns for much of the way.

For this journey, you'll need Dramamine, a guide and a camera, because it's not only one of the most dangerous routes, it's also the most gorgeous in all of Portugal. In fact, the entire Douro Valley is a UNESCO heritage site, as much for its beauty as for what goes on in the terraced slopes that bank the river.

Families with British origins have been making Port here since the late 19th Century, and none has been longer at it than the Symington family, which traces its Port roots to 1652. The family has been Port shippers in Portugal since 1882 and boasts the claim as the only major Port company owned by one family. Today, it's in the hands of the fourth generation.

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The scenic Douro River Valley

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Rupert Symington and Chili

The very public face of the company is Rupert Symington, 47, who handles the U.S. and Canada and who jointly manages the company with his cousins, Paul and Johnny (his father, James, who expanded the business in North America, retired as chairman in 1998).

Other Symingtons are involved in winemaking and sales. The company owns 24 *quintas* or wine estates and legacy brands such as Graham's, Dow's and Warre's, plus the recently acquired Cockburn's.

This legacy ensures that Port from the Symingtons will endure. The stuff just runs in their blood. But as much as the current generation embraces its heritage, it also looks to the future. They've invested in innovative research, sustainability and designed a proprietary robotic treading lagar (foot treading is still done at Quinta do Vesuvio, the family's signature historic estate). They've branched into table wines with a partnership with Bordeaux winemaker Bruno Prats, and they're looking at emerging markets with an eye towards educating consumers who have the money to buy Port, but not necessarily the know-how.

But lest you think Port is your grandfather's dowdy drink or a special-occasion sipper, Rupert and his kin will have you think again. *Sommelier News* visited the Symington Family estates just as harvest was winding down in the Douro and spent some quality time with Rupert, his French Spaniel, Chili, and many bottles of Port.

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SN: *What are the biggest challenges in selling Port?*

RS: To most people, Port is just a drink in a glass, and there's so much more to it than that. If people knew how difficult it was to produce a glass of Port, they'd have a lot more respect. The other thing we want to get across is the variety. For some people, Port is homogenous—it's just a rich, sweet drink that they [think] they don't really like and they don't really give it the benefit of the doubt because they have preconceptions about what it is. Paul was saying at the fancy food shows, people come along and you reel them in with dark chocolate and you say, "If you like that, why don't you try this," and people will say, "Oh, I don't really like Port." So, there's a lot of fear that we have to overcome.

SN: *Are you launching an all-market blitz to communicate that?*

RS: Not all markets have the same potential ... somewhere like China, for instance, they have no tradi-

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Symington Ports

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tion, whereas in the U.S., people perhaps look back to their European roots, and they consider Port to be part of the old good life, and they enjoy that. In China, there is no old good life with Port, so we're starting from scratch.

SN: *How are you preparing yourself for that?*

RS: The messaging of Port—the complexity of the range. What you can't do to a new consumer is say "standard, LBV, tawny," because then people only hear white noise. What's Port 101 to a Chinese person? They want to know when to use it, how to use it and how much to drink. You have to start from the premise that people know absolutely nothing. Choose your best Port that's easy to communicate.

SN: *What about in on-premise accounts where people need guidance?*

RS: We built our accounts based on restaurants. We went to them and said very clearly, "This is an opportunity for you to improve the dining experience for your customers." Most people might have a glass of the house white and have a nice bottle of red with dinner. When they finish the red, they don't really want to go back to another inexpensive red by the glass. They want to complete the experience. So we identify the period between finishing the red wine and signing the check as a time when people aren't ready to go home. There's no point in going out and say-



Forbidding Douro slopes

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ing my wine goes well with pork chops and black truffles, because what's right for you isn't right for me.

SN: *What about at home—how do you communicate to people who don't have the benefit of a sommelier to guide them?*

RS: We're trying to give hints of what the experience with [our] "Six Grapes" could be: its hints of black-berry, its layers of ripe, red fruit and try to make the associations of when you use it ... when you're sitting at the end of the day, the relaxation moment. We say Champagne is the celebration wine and Port is the relaxation wine. It's for *those* times—not the beginning of the meal when you're full of anticipation. That helps people get it. Port, I think, has a very clear moment, which helps enormously in trying to communicate.



Symington table wines

SN: *Is there a perception that it's outdated or arcane?*

RS: People always ask, "Aren't you worried about Port?" I don't think the "outdatedness" has bothered people at all—frankly, mead is outdated. There's always going to be enough people out there looking for the Port experience. I always describe Port being rather at the end of a learning curve. A typical adult consumer will come into beverage alcohol—typically through beer. Once they're familiar with

the major wine regions of the world, they'll start experimenting —perhaps a village Rhône wine. But Port is something people come to if they have sufficient interest in wine. Port didn't get popular by accident—it got popular because it's good.

SN: *If you could say only one thing about Port, what would that be?*

RS: This not just a glass of sweet red liquid—it has layers of flavor. It offers, very simply, more flavor in a glass than any other wine—simply put. It's more concentrated, it's more complex and it also offers a completely different aging experience because, being a fortified wine, it ages in a totally different way than most wines. We're getting better now at communicating what these wines taste like. 🍷