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The Symingtons at Dow's Quinta do Bomfim. From left to right: Charles, Rupert, Peter, Johnny, Paul, and Dominic

QUINTA KIN: THE SYMINGTONS

Richard Mayson profiles the remarkable family whose deep roots have allowed it to acquire seven Port firms and lead the market in seven categories

“Is there anything more enduring or universal than a family business?” asks Professor William O’Hara, author of a recent book on the subject entitled *Centuries of Success* (Adams Media, Cincinnati; 2004). The answer from many a scion of the wine trade would be an emphatic yes! Family fall-out, the Napoleonic code, hostile takeover, and inheritance tax, to name but a few issues, have all conspired to bring down some of the most cherished family firms. But as O’Hara reminds us, “before the multinational corporation, there was family business. Before the Industrial Revolution, there was family business. Before the enlightenment of Greece and the empire of Rome, there was family business.”

One family in Portugal has endured the onslaught of the multinationals, revolutions (industrial and political), and the fall of an empire but, at the start of the 21st century, is seemingly stronger than ever, with a presence that is not quite universal but certainly worldwide. The Symingtons may not be the oldest family in the Port trade, but they are largest and arguably the strongest, with seven different firms under their wing, collectively known as the Symington Family Estates.

Deep roots and revolutions

The Symingtons can trace their Oporto ancestry back to the mid-17th century, a time when foreign merchants made the very first

shipments of Port. But it is toward the end of the 19th century that the Symington story takes off, with the arrival of Andrew James Symington in Oporto. “AJ,” as he is affectionately known by the family, started from scratch. He hailed from Glasgow and began working in the textile business belonging to the Graham family. Information about his early years is sketchy, but he was clearly attracted by the wine trade and soon left to become a Port shipper in his own right.

Symington must have been a “canny” Scot, for in 1894 he was asked by the Portuguese government to manage the sale of 20,000 pipes of Port that had been taken as surety from the Burnay family when their bank failed. Nine years later, AJ became a partner in the firm of Warre, and within a few years he was the sole owner. This led to a confusing and contradictory situation where the Warre family were the owners of Silva & Cosens (better known after the Dow’s brand name) but no longer had any interest in the company bearing their own name. In 1912, the senior partner in Dow’s, George Warre, decided to return to England, and he invited AJ to run the three vineyards in the Douro and the lodges in Vila Nova de Gaia. George Warre died a year later, and a share swap took place that gave AJ a 30 percent stake in Dow’s while retaining his partnership in Warre.

AJ Symington’s rise coincided with a particularly turbulent time for Portugal and a downturn in the Port trade. An outstandingly good and well-received vintage declaration in 1896 (see *Winemaker’s Choice boxes*) was followed by a virulent outbreak of plague, which left the Port shippers confined to Oporto. The political situation also took a turn for the worse, and Portugal suffered nearly three decades of extreme instability, leaving the Port shippers to cope with rampant inflation and wildcat strikes.

AJ Symington married in 1891 and had three sons—Maurice (born 1895) and twins John and Ronald (born 1900)—all of whom joined the family firm. When war broke out in 1914, Maurice left to fight in the trenches, and after Portugal entered the war on the side of the Allies two years later, he became part of the “British Mission—Portuguese Corps.” Although shipping became increasingly hazardous due to the threat from enemy submarines, Port grew steadily in popularity. In Britain, gin and whisky were taxed to such an extent that many people gave up spirits in favor of Port. Despite the loss of the lucrative Russian market following the 1917 revolution, Port enjoyed a decade of steady growth. At this time, Dow’s reputation had never been higher, with Professor George Saintsbury writing in 1920: “there is no Shipper’s wine that I have found better than the best of Dow’s 1878 and 1890 especially.”

Identical twins Ron and John Symington joined their father in the business in 1919. John eventually took charge of the production of Warre Port, while Ron took responsibility for Dow from the mid-1920s, including the remarkable vintage declarations of 1927 and 1945. Although the brothers were identical in many respects (sometimes even arriving at work wearing the same neckties), John would drink Warre at home, whereas Ron always drank Dow’s.

The power of the established shippers was greatly reinforced by the creation of the *entrepoto*, or *entrepôt*, in the spring of 1927, whereby all Port destined for export had to be shipped through a tightly delimited area where the lodges are situated in Vila Nova de Gaia. This provoked a wave of protest from growers in the Douro, but the shippers in the *entrepoto* continued to hold a

virtual monopoly on exports, to the detriment of independent quintas, until Portugal joined the European Union in 1986.

The good times came to an abrupt end, however, in 1929, with the Wall Street Crash. A number of weaker Port shippers failed, and the Symingtons in Oporto and the Warres in London had to steer a tight course in order to keep their company afloat. For the first time since the 1870s phylloxera epidemic, overproduction became a problem. The Portuguese government, now under the autocratic control of Prime Minister António Salazar, stepped in to create the Casa do Douro, the Instituto do Vinho do Porto (Port Wine Institute), and the Grémio dos Exportadores do Vinho do Porto (Port Exporters Guild)—three institutions that survive, more or less intact, today. Maurice Symington was one of two British shippers to be appointed as a director of the new Grémio, forerunner of today’s Port Wine Exporters Association.

As a result of the worldwide slump in sales, the Symingtons (like most other shippers) did not declare the extraordinarily fine 1931 vintage. However, ten pipes were shipped to the Army and Navy stores in London and, as was the custom, a few bottles remained in Oporto. These were later “liberated” by Amyas and Bob Symington, family members who both shared their birth year with this fabled but undeclared vintage. No bottles remain.

Prospects for the Port trade improved briefly in the mid-1930s, helped by the lifting of prohibition in the United States and the growing penchant for Port in France. Dow’s was particularly strong in continental European markets, especially France, Belgium, Switzerland, Denmark, and Germany, where Count von Ribbentrop (German ambassador in London before 1939) acted as the company’s agent. Reinforced by an advertising campaign on the side of London buses (which attracted the disparaging term “omnibus Port”), Britain continued to be by far the strongest market, accounting for around half of all shipments.

When war broke out again in September 1939, the Port trade effectively came to a standstill. AJ Symington died in the same year. Acting on the guidance of the British government, all British families were advised to leave Oporto, and a destroyer was sent to the port of Leixões to oversee the evacuation. Maurice Symington stayed behind to look after the company and, as senior director of the Grémio, went to London in 1942 to negotiate the first annual Port quota with the Minister of Food, Lord Woolton (of Woolton pie fame). The quota system divided Port into two grades: grade one for inexpensive Ports, and grade two for “superior wines” like old Tawnies. The latter represented just 5 percent of annual shipments (compared with 18.3 percent in 2005).

There was the expectation of a boom in sales as soon as trade restrictions were lifted, but unlike in the period that followed World War I, there was no immediate recovery, and the Port trade remained in the doldrums. Despite the quota system that remained in force until 1949, Dow and Warre declared both the 1945 and 1947 vintages. On tasting the former, both Ron and John Symington agreed that it would be a “crime not to declare,” given the outstanding quality of the wine. At this time, just 2 percent of all Port was bottled in Portugal, but due to shipping restrictions, 100 pipes of Dow’s 1945 Vintage Port (out of a total declaration of 125 pipes) were bottled in Vila Nova de Gaia in 1947, with the caveat that if the wine didn’t find a market it could always be uncorked and blended into good ruby! Anyone lucky enough to have tasted Dow’s 1945 will know that it is undoubtedly one of the great Vintage Ports of the century.

Photograph by Rui Cunha

John Symington's son Ian, who joined the company in 1949, remembers the long, lean years that followed the war. As many smaller Port shippers either merged or went under, it became a fight for survival. Ian Symington recalls that there was a critical quantity of Port that had to be sold each year—"about 3,000 pipes"—adding that "we only survived by the skin of our teeth." To help keep the company afloat in the mid-1950s, two historic quintas acquired by the Warres in the 19th century—Senhora da Ribeira and Zimbão—had to be sold. Even Quinta do Bomfim, the Symington's single remaining vineyard, only narrowly escaped.

The sudden imposition of the so-called *lei do terço* (law of one third) inflicted a huge burden on an already beleaguered industry in 1959. This obliged all Port shippers to maintain stocks amounting to at least three times their annual sales, giving them just four months to put their house in order. At the time, most shippers were living from hand to mouth, buying in stocks of wine from farmers and brokers to fulfill large orders. The Symingtons were greatly helped by the Seródio family, until recently owners of Quinta do Bom Retiro Pequeno in the Rio Torto, who placed a large amount of stock in Dow's and Warre's name. The Seródios sold their property to Warre in 2006 and continue to work closely with the Symingtons today.

Following AJ Symington's example, Maurice Symington retired in 1960, and Ron's son James joined the firm. This formalized what has now become a family rule: that all members

retire from active responsibilities at the age of 65, no matter how useful they are to the company. This has undoubtedly played a major part in the company's continuing success, allowing younger members of the family the opportunity to take their share of responsibility rather than sit on the sidelines. As a result of the turnover of family members and the injection of young blood, the Symington family companies have never been known to stagnate.

Changing fortunes

The fortunes of Port slowly began to revive in the 1960s. "We began to realize that things were picking up when we sold more 1963 Vintage Port in the UK than we had the 1896, making it the most successful declaration for over 60 years," said Michael Symington. But for many family-owned shippers, it was already too late. Of the 83 registered Port shippers at the end of the war, there were just over 50 remaining in 1970. The Symington family stood firm against a wave of mergers and takeovers that saw Croft, Delaforce, Cockburn, and Sandeman (all family firms in their day) become part of much larger multinational organizations. In fact, over the course of the 1960s, the Symington family managed to turn the situation to their advantage. In 1961 the Warre family sold the last of their shares and the Symingtons took complete control. Nine years later (the same year that Warre & Co celebrated its tercentenary), the Symingtons bought the Port shippers W&J Graham, along with its sister company Smith Woodhouse, from the Graham family—with which, ironically, AJ Symington had begun his career nearly a century earlier.

The 1960s also marked the start of a long revolution in Port winemaking technology. The time-honored method of treading grapes by foot in stone *lagares* became increasingly impractical as the Douro suffered from depopulation and labor costs rose. The Symingtons have always been innovators and were among the first to install the autovinification system, building a brand-new central winery at Quinta do Bomfim. The 1963 vintage was one of the last to be fully foot-trodden, though since 2000 an increasing quantity of top-quality Port has been trodden in fully automated robotic *lagares*, a system developed by the Symingtons.

By 1970 most Vintage Port was being bottled in Vila Nova de Gaia, and in 1973 a law was passed making it obligatory for all future declarations to be bottled at source. James Symington (who was responsible for blending the excellent 1966 and 1970 Vintages) recalls that the move toward Oporto bottling was also accompanied by a much more active approach to the marketing of Port. This was greatly helped by improving travel to and from Oporto. The opening of the airport greatly cut the journey time to London—from three days to three hours! Thereafter, all the major decisions affecting the worldwide distribution of the Symington's Ports were taken by the family in Vila Nova de Gaia, enabling them to take a much more personal approach to customers.

With the postwar slump ebbing away and sales once more showing a steady increase, the Port shippers were dealt a shock by the military coup d'état that overthrew the Salazar regime on April 25, 1974. After nearly 50 years of dictatorship, pent-up frustrations exploded on to the street with revolutionary force. A huge swathe of the Portuguese economy was nationalized, and the Port trade itself only narrowly escaped being taken over in the summer of 1975. Michael Symington recalls a *plenário* (plenary meeting) at which the Port trade employees voted for an all-out

Winemaker's Choice: Peter Symington's Favorite Ports

Dow 1896

Drunk on the occasion of Dow's bicentenary. In classic Dow style, this wine was still massive after 102 years.

Warre 1900

Drunk in 1980 on the occasion of my Uncle Ron's 80th birthday. Again, all present were stunned by this wine's youth and vigor after 80 years.

Warre 1912

I have many memories of this wine, which I drank so frequently with my father in the '50s and '60s. Marvelous balance of fruit, mint, and walnuts.

Graham 1948

One can just go on dreaming about this amazing wine. Can't imagine anything better.

Graham 1970

So difficult to choose between the '70s, since the Warre and Dow are so magnificent, but the Graham has a special finesse. A fantastic year.

Dow 1980

Now 26 years old but looks massive—and here to stay for many decades yet.



Photography: (top) Rui Cunha, (middle and bottom) Miguel Potes



The house at Quinta dos Malvedos

Winemaker's Choice: Charles Symington's Favorite Ports

My favorite Vintage Port is the Graham 1970. I think this wine has all the characteristics of a great Vintage Port and combines balance and elegance with power. This wine has a classic Graham nose with mint and eucalyptus, and yet still plenty of fruit. On the palate, its fine flavor persists endlessly.

Of the old Vintages, the one that most impressed me was the Dow 1896. This was incredibly lively for such an old wine, and it shows just how long great Vintage Port can last. It's amazing that a wine that is more than 100 years old is fresher and more attractive than many wines not even 20 years old.

Another of my favorites is the Vesúvio 1994, for several reasons. It was the first Vintage Port I ever blended, and what a wine to start with; the year was truly magnificent and the selection of wines from Vesúvio was impressive. I think the end result was something very special; this huge wine, with ripe fruit aromas and *esteve* [gum cistus] on the palate, is both juicy and firm. Enjoyable now, it will improve for many years to come.

I think aged Tawnies are often underappreciated. The Graham 20 Year Old is definitely one of my favorite wines, which I enjoy most days at lunch. It is a lovely, velvety, complex wine that, no matter how many times you have drunk it, is always interesting, due to its subtle aromas and elegant flavor.

For many of the same reasons, but mainly on a hot summer's day, I enjoy Warre's Otima 10 Year Old, which is wonderful chilled.

Of our DOC Douro wines, my favorite is the Chryseia 2001—a powerful yet balanced wine, with good wood integration and a very soft but firm finish.

strike. The Symington's staff voted against the strike, but the family advised them to mount their own picket line outside the lodges to prevent the Communists from marching in and seizing control. In the event, only one shipper, Royal Oporto, was occupied. Up in the Douro, it was clear that the Port firms would be unable to conduct a normal vintage. Nevertheless, the Symington family announced that their winery was open to all their regular growers, and that title to the wine would remain with the farmers until the situation became clearer. All the regular growers delivered their grapes, and within a few months the Symingtons were able to buy the wine as normal. The 1975 vintage was subsequently declared by most shippers.

After two years of instability, Portugal settled down in 1976 with a democratically elected government—the first for more than 50 years. In the same year, the Symington family purchased John E Fells Ltd, an old-established British wine merchant, which has subsequently become the company's own UK distributor. This was followed in 1985 by the establishment of Premium Port Wines Inc in the United States. Together these two companies have enabled the family to consolidate their position in the two most important quality-driven markets for Port.

The current generation

In marketing terms, the seven members of the Symington family currently working for the firm now divide the world among them. The company has a young and forward-looking management team, headed by three managing directors. Michael's son Paul Symington (52), who joined in 1979, is the senior managing director, marketing director, and responsible for the UK market. Ian's son Johnny (46) is joint managing director and also sales director, with responsibility for a number of key European markets. Rupert Symington (42), son of James, is also joint managing director and is responsible for financial strategy as well as the North American market. Paul's younger brother Dominic (49) looks after Scandinavia, Germany, Switzerland, Brazil, and the family's Madeira interests (*see below*). Clare Symington (based in the UK) keeps track of Vintage Port sales worldwide. The all-important winemaking is the responsibility of father-and-son team Peter and Charles Symington. Peter (son of John Symington) is now semi-retired, with 42 vintages under his belt, but he continues to oversee the tasting and blending in Vila Nova de Gaia. Charles (37) looks after the vineyards and winemaking in the Douro. Overall decisions are taken on a partnership basis, with all the family members involved in tasting when important issues need to be resolved—such as a vintage declaration or the blending of a new LBV.

In line with their long-term strategy to increase sales of premium-quality Port, the Symington family built up their vineyard holdings in the Douro. Quinta da Cavadinha was acquired for Warre in 1978, followed in 1982 by Quinta dos Malvedos, the property that has traditionally been the backbone of Graham's Vintage Port. In 1989, the Symingtons bought the stately 400-hectare (988-acre) Quinta do Vesúvio from the Ferreira family, a property that has now been established as a company in its own right. Quinta Nossa Senhora da Ribeira was bought back for Dow's, coinciding with the company's bicentenary in 1998; Quinta da Madelena was bought for Smith Woodhouse; and Quinta do Bom Retiro Pequeno, an important source of Warre's best Ports, was acquired for the company

earlier this year. The family now owns more top-quality vineyards than any other shipper, with 19 quintas covering 1,300ha (3,212 acres) and more than 600ha (1,482 acres) of vines. Eight of these properties belong privately to members of the family—a situation unique in the Port trade, which, Paul Symington says, “demonstrates our commitment and love for the Douro.”

Working in such a challenging but undeniably beautiful part of the world, there has always been a natural tendency for Port shippers to suffer blinkered vision. But over the past 15 years the Symingtons have lifted their horizon beyond Port. In 1988, they entered into partnership with the Blandys family on Madeira, taking a shareholding (eventually the majority) in the Madeira Wine Company. The Blandys and Symingtons have always had the highest regard for each other; as the late Richard Blandy (chairman of the Madeira Wine Company at the time) pointed out: “There is an identity of interests between us: We are both family firms; we both have the same outlook on life and the same way of doing business.”

A decade later, having invested heavily in a brand-new stainless-steel winery at Quinta do Sol, the Symingtons decided to extend their range, producing unfortified Douro wines alongside Port. “We made red wine in the Douro for years,” said Paul Symington, “[and] in 1998 we set ourselves up to make really serious wines.” The first Douro wine to be launched was a good everyday red named Altano, followed by the bigger, more concentrated Chryseia, the latter with some French influence thanks to the partnership with Bordeaux enologist Bruno Prats. The decision to diversify into Douro wines has raised a few eyebrows, but Paul Symington points out, “We sincerely believe that the Douro can produce outstanding red wines. The Douro produces between 250,000 and 300,000 pipes of wine each year, of which 130,000 pipes are Port. The remaining wine needs to find a market [...] and if farmers cannot get a decent price for their grapes, they will abandon their vineyards—or not look after them properly, which is not good for us.”

Facing the future

After three decades of steady growth, there is talk, once more, of a looming crisis in the Port trade. The multinationals, having been held up as white knights in the 1960s, have by and large turned their backs on Port, leaving their companies underresourced and seemingly unloved. In the corporate revolving door of the past decade, more than half the trade has changed hands, leaving three family-controlled groups in control: the Fladgate Partnership, Sogrape, and the Symington Family Estates. As the leading producers of premium Port in no fewer than seven different categories (Vintage; LBV; 10-, 20-, 30-, and 40-year-old Tawny; and Crusted), the Symingtons are extremely well placed. Paul Symington comments: “Personally I think that only the best companies will survive. The very good companies who have invested in the best vineyards, invested in new and better wineries, invested in stock for aging, and have the sales and marketing skills will survive. We are very confident in the future. We are continuing to invest heavily in the Douro, in Port, and [unfortified] DOC wines. We are aware that a unified family business is very strong.” With a proven capacity for innovation, investment and, when necessary, retrenchment, the Symington family deserve a few more centuries of success. ■

Photography: Claudio Capone

Time Line

- 1670 Warre & Co established in Oporto
- 1798 Silva & Cosens, better known as Dow's, established in London
- 1784 Smith Woodhouse established by Christopher Smith
- 1820 Graham's Port house established
- 1863 AJ Symington born in Scotland
- 1882 AJ Symington begins working for Graham's textile firm in Oporto
- 1890 Silva & Cosens buys Quinta Senhora da Ribeira
- 1896 Silva & Cosens buys Quinta do Bomfim
- 1905 AJ Symington becomes a partner in Warre & Co
- 1908 King Carlos I assassinated in Lisbon
- 1910 Portugal declared a republic
- 1912 George Warre invites AJ Symington into partnership in Silva & Cosens
- 1919 AJ Symington acquires Quarles Harris
- 1926 Military regime established in Portugal
- 1932 Salazar becomes prime minister
- 1939 Death of AJ Symington
- 1954 Quinta Senhora da Ribeira sold
- 1961 The Warre family sell their remaining shares to the Symingtons
- 1970 The Symington family buy Graham, Smith Woodhouse, and Gould Campbell
- 1974 Military coup overthrows Salazar's Estado Novo (New State)
- 1978 Warre buys Quinta da Cavadinha
- 1982 Graham buys Quinta dos Malvedos
- 1988 Partnership with the Blandys family as owners of the Madeira Wine Company
- 1989 The Symington family buy Quinta do Vesúvio
- 1996 Quinta do Sol winery built
- 1998 Quinta Senhora da Ribeira repurchased, and first trials of robotic *lagares* at Quinta do Sol
- 1999 The Symingtons launch their first Douro wine, Altano
- 2000 Partnership with João van Zeller of Quinta do Roriz, while Prats and Symington (joint venture with Bruno Prats) launches Chryseia
- 2006 Warre buys Quinta do Bom Retiro Pequeno