

(PORTUGAL)

Hard to Port

The flat-bottom-boat race between the major port producers is the highlight of Oporto's annual June festival of Saint John.

By Nick Passmore | Photography by Joaquim Oliveira



"IT'S A RATHER INTERESTING BOAT RACE BECAUSE, ALTHOUGH we are sailing, these aren't traditional sailing boats and it all becomes rather fun. You bump into other boats, which is fine as it's a good way of exchanging drinks."

This is how Robert Bower, of the Fladgate Partnership, describes the unconventional boat race that occurs in the Portuguese city of Oporto on the 24th of June every year. It is the highlight of the festival of São João, Saint John, the patron saint of the city. During the festival, the normally sedate and sleepy town lets down its hair and indulges in an all-night carnival during which celebrants roam the streets hitting one another over the head with soft, squeaky hammers. Don't ask—just know that, as Bower explains, if you are so assaulted "it's considered extremely bad manners not to reciprocate."

Then, the next day, the somewhat bleary-eyed owners and employees of the various port houses—Croft, Warre's, Cockburn's, Calem, Taylor's, etc.—participate in a sailing race featuring the *barcos rabelos*, as these unusual boats are known, the sails of which are emblazoned with the company name and logo. For centuries, these boats were used to bring the new port down the Douro River from the vineyards near the Spanish border to the port lodges opposite Oporto in Vila Nova de Gaia.

Missing the Boats

By the 1980s, there were only two *barcos rabelos* left. So the race was created to preserve this part of port's history.

However, the coming of the railway in the 1890s saw their use decline, and then the damming of the river and the construction of a highway in the 1960s signaled their demise. By the 1980s, there were only two *barcos rabelos* left. So in 1983, Robin Reid, then managing director of Croft, came up with the idea of staging the race as a way of preserving this emblematic part of port's long history.

As Antonio Vasconcelos, a former managing director of Cockburn's, explains, "The first race, we had three boats—two very old ones and Cockburn's new one. Then year after year, more companies were building boats, and last year we had 16 boats. It's a marvellous thing to see."

The race, which is organised by the Confraria do Vinho do Porto, the port wine shippers' fraternity, starts at the mouth of the Douro, proceeds at a leisurely pace upstream for about 6 kilometres and finishes in front of the port lodges. The *barcos rabelos*

These boats were, for centuries, used to bring the new port down the Douro River from the vineyards to the port lodges opposite Oporto.

“They were never designed as sailing boats, but we use them as such and as a consequence sometimes have spectacular accidents.” —DOMINIC SYMINGTON

are about 17 metres long and feature a large, 63-square-metre sail. Toward the stern there is a 2-metre-high platform on which stands the helmsman who attempts to control the unruly boat using a long and extremely heavy oar.

If this is beginning to sound more than a little ridiculous, it is. The situation is further complicated by the fact that the helmsman can't see where he's going because of the sail, so another crew member is stationed at the bow to give directions. As George Sandeman, the current Chancellor of the Confraria, explains, “My role is to be in the front of the Sandeman boat and shout instructions that are usually ignored.”

The boats are flat-bottomed and have no keel. This might have been the ideal design for running the rapids on the Douro, but it makes the boats extremely difficult to control under sail. With a following wind, it's just possible to proceed in a straight line, but without a keel they can't tack against the wind, so they drift slowly in whatever direction the wind decides to take them.

“They were never designed as sailing boats, but we, in our infinite wisdom, use them as such and as a consequence we sometimes have spectacular accidents,” observes Dominic Symington of Symington Family Estates.

If the wind blows from the west, everything goes quite well, but on occasion it veers to the northwest and that causes problems, with some of the boats being blown sideways onto the bank. Alistair Robertson, chairman of the Fladgate Partnership, recalls that “one year the boats were all blown into Afurada, the little fishing village on the south bank, and all the fishermen were standing around absolutely dying of laughter.”

The race continues to evolve, with one of the more interesting developments being the introduction in 2002 of an all-women's boat. Adrian Bridge, the CEO of Fladgate, came up with the idea and suggested it to his employees. At that point, the boat crews were made up of men and women but, according to Ana Margarida Morgado, who became the captain

A Port Primer

Port, a fortified wine, comes in several varieties.



◆ VINTAGE PORT

Made in tiny quantities in only the best years. Bottled after two years in large wooden vats, it then ages for 20, 30, even 50 years.

◆ CRUSTED PORT

A blend of different vintages bottled young enough so it throws a sediment, like vintage port.

◆ TAWNY PORT

Long-aged but in wood rather than the bottle. Nutty, mellow character.

◆ LATE BOTTLED VINTAGE PORT

Single vintage port bottled after four to six years in wood offers some of the character of vintage port at a more modest price.

◆ RUBY PORT

A blend of young vintages. Fresh and fruity, it lacks the complexity of older versions.

◆ WHITE PORT

Similar to ruby but made from white grapes. Best chilled, as an aperitif.

of the Taylor's boat, “He found it quite an interesting idea, and knowing that he has a lot of very determined women in the company, he asked us, and some of us said, ‘Yes! Yes, let's do that!’”

They had only two practice sessions, but despite their lack of experience, they very nearly won. “The race did not start in the best way, as we were bumped by another boat that ripped a bit of our sail,” Morgado says. “But we recovered very well and ran most of the race in first, although in the last metres we were passed by two other boats.”

But their narrow loss did not diminish their sense of triumph. So thrilled were they by their performance that they stayed on the river as long as they could and were the last boat to be towed to the quay.

When asked about the rumour that alcohol was served on the boats, Symington reacted in mock horror and then explained that “you couldn't go sailing in Oporto on a port barge and not have a glass of port.”

“One year I was on the Warre's boat,” he continued, “and we were becalmed and in grave danger of slowly drifting back downstream with the current. Having run out of our own port, I found myself very close to the Cockburn's boat, so we thought that we'd tie ourselves together and have a little party, which was much more fun than trying to sail.”

Everyone involved seems to buy into this “it's just a lark” attitude, but as Vasconcelos points out, “The fact is that once the race starts, everyone wants to win.”

Perhaps the underlying philosophy is best summed up by Symington. “One obviously tries to be as efficient as one can in a fairly hopeless situation, but it's more just a spectacle, recognising the centuries of these people who did this work, and also

it's a good promotion for the image of port.” **4MORE** go to FourSeasonsMagazine.com/IssueTwo2011 for our writer's port picks.

Nick Passmore, artisanal editor, is based in New York and writes regularly about wine, food and spirits.