

Birth of a Vintage Port

The top Port houses source their Vintage Ports from their own estates or ‘quintas’.

On many estates, the traditional method of treading the grapes by foot is still used. On others this has been replaced by mechanised robotic systems, or by a combination of the two. Whatever the system, however, the principle is the same.

The grapes are placed in wide tanks, usually made of granite, called ‘lagares’. Here they are crushed to release the juice and allow fermentation to start. Once fermentation has begun, the grapes are macerated – by treading or a mechanical system – to allow their skins to release their colour, tannins and aromas into the wine. When about half the natural sugar of the grape juice has been turned into alcohol by the fermentation, the fermenting wine is drawn off into a vat. At the same time a neutral grape spirit is added and this stops the fermentation, preserving much of the natural sweetness of the grape in the finished wine. This process is known as ‘fortification’.

Early the following year, the young wines are evaluated. The finest will be identified as potential Vintage Port. However no final decision is made. The wines are simply put aside as a reserve.

In the spring of the second year after the harvest, after they have stood the test of two winters in seasoned oak vats, the wines are tasted again. This is when it is decided whether they have sufficient quality and stamina to be bottled as Vintage Port.

If the wine is of absolutely exceptional quality, consistent with the house style and judged to be capable of improving for many decades in bottle, the decision may be taken to ‘declare’ the vintage. Declared (also known as ‘classic’) vintages are the most valuable and highly rated. Historically, only about three vintages have been declared in each decade. When all the houses declare together it is known as a ‘general declaration’. When houses declare different years, as happened in 1991 and 1992 for example, it is known as a ‘split declaration’. Declared Vintage Ports are usually blends of the produce of more than one ‘quinta’ to ensure that the wine is balanced, complete and capable of developing complex multi-dimensional aroma with age.

If the wines are judged to be of very good quality but relatively early maturing, a house may decide not to declare but to bottle one or more ‘single quinta’ Vintage Ports. In this case the wines of each ‘quinta’ are bottled individually under the property name. ‘Single quinta’ vintage ports represent excellent value, particularly for early drinking.

