

Storage, handling and decanting

Most styles of Port are fully aged in wood and are ready to drink when bottled. There is nothing to be gained by keeping a wood aged Port, such as an Aged Tawny or a Late Bottled Vintage, for a long period. Wood aged ports are meant for immediate drinking, not for ageing in the cellar.

Vintage Port, however, is different.

Vintage Port spends only a short time in wood – usually not more than two years – and then continues to mature and improve in bottle for many years or decades in the cellar. Its remarkable capacity to age – the best Vintage Ports can last for over a century - makes it the ultimate collector's wine although Vintage Ports are also immensely enjoyable to drink when young.

Unlike wood aged Port, Vintage Port has a long driven cork and the bottle is made of dark glass to protect the wine from damage from light. Vintage Port labels are usually very simple and understated, as they were traditionally intended merely to identify the wine in the cellar.

Vintage Port should be handled in the same way as any other fine red vintage wine. The bottle should be stored in the cellar lying down on its side in order to prevent the cork from drying out.

When drawing the cork on a very old bottle of Vintage Port it is best to use a corkscrew with a long thread and to draw the cork out very slowly as the corks tend to soften with age. On very old bottles 'port tongs' are sometimes used to remove the whole neck of the bottle.

Before serving, a Vintage Port needs to be decanted. This has two purposes. Firstly, to separate the wine from the natural sediment that will have formed in the bottle. Secondly, as with other bottle aged wines, to allow the aromas of the wine to open up and express themselves to the full. Vintage Port will be at its most expressive on the day that the bottle is decanted.

The amount of sediment can be greater than with other wines as Vintage Port is not filtered. On some bottles there is a white 'splash mark' on one side of the bottle. When the wine is stored in the producer's cellar, this mark is on the upper side of the bottle. By placing the wine in the same position in his cellar, the purchaser will know where the sediment has formed.

It is very important to use a very good quality glass for Vintage Port – such as a Riedel Port glass or a good quality white wine glass – in order to appreciate the development of the complex aromas that the wine will release after it is decanted.

