

## How to become a Vintage Port connoisseur

As with other classic wines, the first principle is to identify the top producers - those with a track record of consistently producing top rated wines – as these can be relied on to produce wines of excellent quality whatever the vintage. Each producer will, of course, have its own particular style and a connoisseur may in time develop a preference for the wines of particular houses. The variety of different house styles is, however, one of the great pleasures of Vintage Port.

It is helpful to have some knowledge of the declared vintage years. In the last five decades the general declarations were: 1960, 1963, 1966, 1970, 1975, 1977, 1980, 1983, 1985, 1994, 1997, 2000, 2003 and 2007. 1991 and 1992 were also among the finest of recent declarations but the producers were split, with some declaring 1991 and others 1992 depending on the location of their estates. Going further back in time, the greatest vintages of the 20<sup>th</sup> century include 1912, 1927, 1945 and 1948. These older vintages are now extremely rare and are no longer available from the producers themselves.

Vintage Ports will continue to gain in complexity as they age in bottle. However the question of when to drink a Vintage Port is very subjective and personal. Many fine wine connoisseurs prefer to drink Vintage Ports when they are young, powerful and vigorous. Others prefer the more nuanced and complex character of maturity which comes after two or three decades in bottle.

There are many traditions associated with Vintage Port. None of them are essential to the appreciation of the wine. However they can enhance the enjoyment of this most majestic and sociable of all wines.

One custom, followed by Port lovers, is that the decanter should always circulate clockwise round the table. This way everyone has a chance to taste the wine. The reason for the clockwise direction is simple. For most people it is easier to use their right hand to pick up the decanter and fill their glass and then pass it to their neighbor to the left, rather than the other way round. It is of course important that the decanter keeps moving and is not 'hogged' (held back) by anyone. To prevent this, there is a special kind of Port decanter called a 'hoggit' which has a round bottom and cannot therefore be put down until it reaches the wooden base placed beside the host.

One of the finest traditions of Vintage Port, still widely followed in Britain, is that of putting aside (or 'laying down') some bottles of Vintage Port for a child when it is born. This is a superb gift as the wine will provide pleasure and fond memories of the giver well into the child's old age.

