

# Port Wine

Port is a fortified wine whose making differs from the methods used for table wines because it is only left to ferment and macerate for a very short period of time (2 to 3 days) before brandy is added to prevent further fermentation. Moreover, the brandy added must adhere to certain rules that have been fine-tuned over the years by tradition and practice. According to traditional winemaking methods used for making certain types of Port Wine, after the grapes have been de-stemmed, they are crushed (by treading) in *lagares* (open stone treading tanks with a maximum height of 2 feet). Both men and women traditionally perform this operation, although it may also be done with mechanical devices that simulate the action of the feet. After the first such crushing, the fermenting must is left to rest for some hours, after which it is again crushed until such a time as the fermenting must is separated from the solid matter in the juice (running off) and the brandy is added.

Today, most of these wines are made in highly technical wineries that associate quality with profitability. In these wineries, most processes are mechanized. Once the grapes have been fully, or partially, de-stemmed, the grapes are crushed and pumped into vats where they ferment for 2 to 3 days. During this period the juice is pumped-over several times to extract the maximum of color from the skins. White wines may be made differently. According to the traditional methods, it is made with some maceration and in these cases; it ages in conditions that lead it to oxidize. The time of maceration is reduced for wines in which the winemaker wishes to keep a pale color and the fresh aromas.

Fortifying the wine with brandy, (Beneficio) gives the wine specific characteristics that improve the wine's chemical stability, and at the same time, helps control its final degree of sweetness. Thus, fermentation must continue until the amount of unfermented sugars in the wine gives it the desired sweetness. The fermenting must is then separated from the solid matter (run off) and pumped into vats where the fermentation is stopped by adding grape brandy in set proportions.

It is essential that the type of brandy that is to be added to the fermenting must be very carefully chosen as its chemical composition and aromatic potential are fundamental to making a high quality Port Wine. The Port Wine Institute has a very rigorous system for controlling all the lots of grape brandy that will be used for making Port Wine. Control of the brandy's quality is carried out through laboratory analyses and through various taste tests.

True Port comes from Portugal in the Douro valley, which is split into 3 regions: Baixo Corgo, Cima Corgo, and Douro Superiore. Port production is tightly controlled by the Casa do Douro, who classify the vineyards into 6 grades (A to F, A being the highest rated). The classification of the vineyard determines how much Port it is allowed to produce.

But since winemakers in other countries have taken to producing "Port," Douro Port makers have started to call their Port, "Porto," or "Oporto" (from the city in Douro). There are two main categories of Port: **Vintage** Port and **Wood** Port.

## 1. **VINTAGE PORT** (Single Year Wines)

- a. **VINTAGE PORT** - If the wine is of good quality the house (quinta [KEEN-ta]) may apply to declare a vintage. With the approval of the Port Wine Association they declare that the year is a vintage and the wine is bottled when still young. The bottles are laid on their sides in the cellars and the wine matures in the bottle (~15 years).
- b. **SINGLE QUINTA** - A vintage Port wine from one harvest year, from a single house (quinta), bottled unblended after 2 years in cask. Aged and bottled as a Full Vintage Port the wines are ready to drink on release but will age further in the bottle.

## 2. **WOOD PORT** (Blended Wines)

- a. **Late Bottled Vintage (LBV)** - These are wines from a single year, which were not of good enough quality to be declared a vintage. The wine is left in the cask for 4 to 8 years where it undergoes a process of maturity slightly different to that of bottle matured wines. Over a number of years casks of the wine are brought forward and bottled immediately prior to sale. The intention is that LBV wines should be drunk within a couple of years of being bottled. As the wine is filtered and decanted when bottled there should be little sediment and the wine will not improve from being kept.

## Port Wine

- b. Vintage Character Port - Despite the name these have nothing to do with vintage port. Ruby and some older wines are blended to provide a wine, which has an appearance of depth. Both color and flavor are highly variable depending on the intent of the blender. They are often a worthwhile drink and the only shame is in the apparent deception of the name. In reality it never actually works, and the extra 'premium' price that you pay isn't worth it - spend the same money on a Premium quality Ruby or a Late Bottled Vintage.
- c. Ruby Port - As the wine matures it changes both flavor and color. Ruby ports are young wines, which have not yet had time to lose their original color or fruity flavor. The sense of depth comes from the added brandy and not from the aromatic esters that develop in a matured port. The wine has been filtered and probably chemically cleared prior to the bottle. It will improve little from being kept although standing open for a few days may add quality.
- d. Tawny - The longer the wine is kept before filtering the mellower will be its taste and color. Eventually the strong reds of the grape skins become oxidized to the mellow browns of vintage and tawny port. The tawnies are blended from cask-aged wines and may carry an indication of the age of the wines that have gone into the blend. Like all blended wines they can be enormously variable and only similarity across a single case can be relied upon. As they have been filtered they will not significantly improve with keeping. Unlike the vintage ports, a bottle of tawny has an element of the unknown. Only until opened will the blenders work show its merit.
- e. Colheita [Col-YATE-ta] - Essentially a Tawny Port made from a single specific harvest, unlike the Tawny, which is a blend of several different years harvests. The year of harvest will be stated on the label along with the year of bottling and a statement that the wine has been given extended ageing in wood. If the wine is not bottled as an LBV it may be kept in the cask from 10 to 40 years. When bottled it is labeled as a Colheita.
- f. Crusted - A very small category, named because of the 'crust' of sediment that it forms in the bottle. Invented by the British-owned Port houses predominantly for the British Port drinker, it is intended to be a more economical alternative to Vintage or Late Bottled Vintage. It is a blend of several harvests, which are bottled without being filtered and laid down to mature like Vintage wines. This approach allows the manufacturer to use some of the lesser harvests but still produce a good rich full-bodied wine at an economical price. Usually a year is stated on the label, which is the year in which the wine was bottled.
- g. White - This is actually only a distant cousin of port and is closer in qualities to a sherry. The wine comes from white grapes (commonly Arinto, Gouveio, Malvasia and Viosinho) grown in only a few of the vineyards of the Oporto region of Portugal. The grape juice is drained off the mash as in conventional wine production but fermentation is stopped with brandy. White ports tend to be blended cask matured wines of early or mid age.

First Posted 10/26/2003