

Declared wine may be aged no longer than two years before bottling.

Portion Control

EXAMINING THE STRICT REGULATIONS FOR **VINTAGE PORT**

by Allison Levine

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Vintage Port goes through several approval processes before—and even after—it is bottled.

EVERY YEAR, AS HARVEST BEGINS, so does a new vintage. Farmers and winemakers around the world share the challenges they faced during the growing season and their hopes for the outcome while comparing the vintage to previous ones, and we as wine drinkers can taste the nuanced differences between them.

In the world of Port, it is a different story. Though ongoing improvements in viticultural and winemaking practices are increasing its occurrence, Vintage Port is somewhat rare, made only in years when the quality of the harvest is considered exceptional. Only a tiny percentage of Portugal's famed fortified wine is declared as Vintage Port; most Ports—including Tawny, White, Rosé, Ruby, and Crusted Port—are blends of multiple vintages, bottled and released as nonvintage wines that showcase the house style. Also not counting as Vintage Port are three categories that nonetheless include a vintage on the label. Late Bottled Vintage (LBV) Port is a high-quality Ruby Port from a single harvest that's ready to drink once bottled after aging for four to six years. Single Quinta Vintage Port is sourced from a single vineyard (*quinta*) during a single year, typically one in which a vintage has not been declared; in those that have, the wine will usually be blended into the Vintage Port. Colheita, or "Harvest," Ports are single-vintage White or Tawny Ports matured in small oak barrels for a minimum of seven years prior to bottling.

The standard for declaration is extremely high: The producer must believe that the wines produced in any given harvest meet the standard of excellence expected of a Vintage Port. The ability to assess a wine's potential comes only with experience, but criteria include a deeply inky color with hints of violet; intense and complex aromatics;



A Port house in Portugal's famed Douro Valley.

and balance on the palate, with acidity, sweetness, and astringency in perfect complement. Producers must have their vintages approved by the Instituto dos Vinhos do Douro e do Porto (IVDP) between January and July in the second year following the harvest. The wine may be aged no longer than two years; bottling may then take place until July of the third year after samples have been submitted for final approval by the IVDP.

As the regulating body for the Port trade, the IVDP controls and approves all the Port on the market with an eye toward controlling supply. It tracks the quantity of every wine produced, how much is sold, and to whom; it provides the seals of guarantee on every bottle, no matter the style; and it's very active in combating fraud, mislabeling, and misinformation. Of course, it also tests for quality, performing laboratory analysis on all batches produced to ensure they meet all legal requirements as well as blind tasting samples. There are additional tests for Vintage Port; if a batch meets the standards of the category, it is approved for bottling. The producer must then notify the IVDP of the

bottling dates, at which point IVDP inspectors come to the winery and count every bottle, collecting five samples in order to confirm that they contain the same wine that was submitted for approval. Once the bottles are authorized, the front and back labels are checked to ensure they include all necessary information.

On average, only three Port vintages are declared per decade. The decades of 1900 (1900, 1904, 1908); 1910 (1911, 1912, 1917); 1930 (1931, 1934, 1935); 1950 (1950, 1955, 1958); and 2000 (2000, 2003, 2007) each had three declared vintages. The decades of 1920 (1920, 1922, 1924, 1927); 1940 (1942, 1945, 1947, 1948); 1960 (1960, 1963, 1966, 1967); 1970 (1970, 1975, 1977, 1978); and 1990 (1991, 1992, 1994, 1997) each declared four vintages. The 1980s saw six declared vintages (1980, 1982, 1983, 1985, 1987, 1989). In the 2010s, 2011 was the first declared vintage, followed by 2016 and 2017. The declaration of two back-to-back vintages is rare.

While both were indeed exceptional, 2016 and 2017 were very different. Bento Amaral, the head of the IVDP's quality

control department, stated in an email that due to their "good concentration and structure . . . both years were quite easy to be approved . . . compared with other years."

The 2016 vintage was atypical, with a rainy yet warm winter followed by a rainy but cold spring. Summer was extremely hot and dry. The resulting wines are well balanced with good concentration; 63 producers declared in 2016. The 2017 vintage, by contrast, was extremely dry. Several heat waves occurred during the spring and early summer; as summer went on, there were some strong but short thunderstorms. The wines have good aromatic intensity without too much exuberance. On the palate, they show great structure with nice tannins. With 71 producers declaring, 2017 was the biggest year for Vintage Port to date.

"You can say 2017 is more powerful and 2016 is a little bit more elegant . . . with better freshness," concluded Amaral. "Either way, [they] are going to age very well. I would say that they . . . can be drunk probably [until] the end of this century, although they are pleasurable right now." ❧