

Port wine usually retains more of the classic flavor of a bold, red wine than Madeira wine or Sherry wine. Port wine is fortified with neutral grape spirit, usually very early in fermentation.

The general factors which create different characteristics in Port wine are usually whether-or-not the wine is oxidized, whether-or-not it is barrel-aged, and for how long it may be barrel-aged. Port wine being left in the barrel for too long in the barrel is considered ruination, due to oxidization and wood-flavor replacing too much of the brighter flavor of a much younger wine. That is why late-bottled vintage Port wine sells for only a fraction of the price of a wine of the same vintage that wasn't left in the barrel for too long. Reserve Port wine is essentially Ruby Port wine that has likewise been over-aged, in my opinion.

Also, whether-or-not the wine is bottled with sediment is an important matter of difference in Port wines. Wines bottled with sediment included will further mature in the bottle. Vintage Port wine is bottled with sediment. Late-bottled Vintage Port wine does not contain sediment. Crusted Port wine is bottled with sediment, even if not from a vintage year.

Most Port wine is red, and non-oxidized. Ruby Port wine is stored in steel, or concrete, vats to prevent oxidization. Smaller amounts of white Port wine have been produced from 'white' grapes since at least the 1930's. White Port wine is produced and stored much the same as for Ruby Port wine. Tawny Port wine is produced using methods that are a little more like those used to produce Madeira wine, or Sherry wine, and is the only type of Port wine that has flavor that can be compared at all to those other types. Because Tawny Port wine has such a different character, it stands up to barrel-aging much better than more normal types of Port wine.

Since the middle of the nineteenth century, some years have been declared as vintage years for Port wine. When a producer considers their wine from a particular year to be of exceptional quality, it will declare that year to be a vintage year. Some producers declare almost every year to be a vintage year, while others are better at restraining their declarations to only those years in which exceptional wines were produced. 1945 is considered by many to have been the best vintage year for Port wine of all time.

PORT WINE VINTAGE YEARS OF HIGH REPUTE: NINETEENTH CENTURY	PORT WINE VINTAGE YEARS OF HIGH REPUTE: TWENTIETH CENTURY	PORT WINE VINTAGE YEARS OF HIGH REPUTE: TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY
1851	1904	2003
1863	1908	2011
1868	1912	2017
1878	1945	
1896	1955	
1900	1963	
	1970	
	1977	
	1985	
	1994	
	1997	
	2000	

Notice, in the chart above, the absence of widely-reputed vintage years between 1912 and 1945. The majority of Port wine has, since the beginning, been shipped to, and consumed in, the English-speaking world. Being that the majority of the English-speaking world resides in the USA, where alcohol sales were prohibited from 1920 through 1934, the growers and producers in Portugal watched their sales decline throughout those years. Declaring a vintage year could not have fix that problem for them. The Second World War also preoccupied the entire English-speaking world, and surely depressed demand. These facts undoubtedly influenced the history of Port wine vintage years.