

# PENFOLDS FORTIFIED WINES





**OVERVIEW:** Penfolds has a long tradition of fortified wine production going back to its origins in the mid 1800s. Then, fortified wines were extremely fashionable throughout the world with Sherry, Madeira and Oporto (Port) enjoying considerable fame in the 19th and early 20th centuries.

Wines are 'fortified' when grape spirit is added. This addition contributes significantly to wine stability. Yeasts and bacteria cannot live in solutions of more than around 18% alcohol. The practice of fortification was a practical method of wine stabilisation in many wine producing countries. Sherry and Port style wines were particularly suited to the climate and frontier culture of Australia in the 1800s. Indeed, by 1881 Penfolds was responsible for one-third of South Australia's wine production and almost all of it was fortified wine.

Penfolds continues to have a remarkable share of the Australian fortified (specifically tawny-style) wine market. Penfolds Club Tawny began life in the 1940s as Penfolds Five Star Club Tawny Port. The term 'Port' is no longer used by Penfolds, in keeping with international standards and trade agreements. The Penfolds tawny range comprises: Penfolds Club, Penfolds Club Reserve, Penfolds Bluestone 10 Year Old Tawny, Penfolds Grandfather Liqueur Tawny and Penfolds Great Grandfather Liqueur Tawny.

These wines are all aged in small old oak casks at Penfolds' Kalimna Cellars in the Barossa Valley. All are multi-regional blends, a key feature of the Penfolds house style. Max Schubert's idea of being able to make an 'all-round' table wine is partially a reflection of Penfolds winemaking culture during the 1940s and 1950s. Winemakers were able to source fruit of specific quality and character from several different vineyards and growers.

Classification, batch vinifying and barrel maturation play an important part in Penfolds Tawny production. Fruit richness, grape tannin balance, the 'maturation effect' (from aging in old oak hogshead casks) and grape spirit/brandy character are essential elements of the Penfolds style. Indeed, selection for style is the crucial factor.

The Riverland and the Barossa Valley are the principle sources of Penfolds' fruit for these wines. Club, Club Reserve and, to a lesser extent, Bluestone 10 Year Old Club Tawnies, have a significant

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Riverland component. Grandfather and Great Grandfather Liqueur Tawnies are largely Barossa Valley wines. They are all based on Shiraz, Mataro (Mourvèdre) and smaller percentages of Cabernet Sauvignon and Grenache – grape varieties introduced to Australia during the very early 19th century. While the tawny wines differ in concentration, richness and complexity, there is a continuity of house style based on rich, full-bodied fruit. Selection of fruit begins in the vineyard. Winemakers are looking for optimum ripeness, a combination of flavour composition, vitality and potential alcohol levels of around 14–15 Baumé. The various Penfolds Tawnies are differentiated by overall structure and weight. The style of fruit used for the Grandfather and Great Grandfather Liqueur Tawnies is similar to the requirement for St. Henri and Bin 389 with their pristine fruit dimension.

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Vinification takes place in small, stainless steel fermenters and each style component is batched. During fermentation the wine is regularly pumped over to extract colour and flavour. Fortification takes place towards the middle stages of fermentation. Fruit and sugar sweetness is a key element of the Penfolds tawny style. The choice of fortification spirit is an important one. Apart from adding the style and quality of spirit, complexity and mouth-weight can also be affected.

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The Penfolds Tawnies are all aged in Solera Systems at Penfolds' Kalimna Cellars maturation shed. The wines are all aged in 280 litre hogsheads, averaging between 20 and 60 years old! The maturation process deliberately takes place under corrugated iron roofing. At the height of summer the temperatures on the top



stack can be as high as 55°C. In winter the temperatures can fall below 8°C. These cyclic swings in temperature are vital to the maturation process – evaporation, concentration and controlled oxidation all play their part in the complexing of aromas and flavours.

The Solera is a fractional blending system which develops a continuity and consistency of style. The Penfolds Club wines use a modified Solera System for early release with an average age of around three years. The Reserve and Bluestone spend a longer time achieving more complexity and richness.

Penfolds Grandfather Liqueur Tawny is batch aged in old oak hogsheads for an average period of eight years before it enters the six-stack known as ‘Grandfather Solera’. During this initial period these batches comprise the components of a single vintage, grape variety and vineyard. At the end of this initial maturation period the components are classified and blended to achieve the style required to maintain consistency of the Solera. This is a complex selection process because each of the components ages slightly differently. Shiraz, for example, with its overall opulence and fruit density, ages more slowly. Mourvèdre matures more rapidly and provides enhanced complexity. Cabernet (used to a lesser extent) contributes mouth-feel and yet another layer of fruit intensity.

Each year winemakers draw one twelfth of the Solera’s volume from the sixth stage, the lowest and oldest level of the Solera. This sixth stage is then topped from the fifth, the fifth from the fourth, and so on. The process is completed when the first stage has topped up the second. The first stage is then itself topped up with the blended eight year old Grandfather Liqueur Tawny.

Theoretically, the wine drawn from the oldest level (sixth stage) of the Solera is 20 years of age, having been in the fractional blending system for 12 years. During the entire maturation process the wines become more concentrated and complex. Opulence, weight and sweetness are intertwined and balanced by the alcohol, acidity, oak nuances and volatility. The highly evocative term, ‘rancio’ is used by tasters to describe this character. The wine has a dense tawny colour with a green patina, seductive rich spicy/nutty/paneforte aromas and extraordinary intensity and viscosity on the palate.

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Joanna Simon comments that the Penfolds Grandfather Liqueur Tawny, “Has classic sweet dried-fig, rancio fruit and a sweet, full, lush, ripe palate finishing with a VA spirit lift”. Huon Hooke describes the wine as, “Superb, an incredibly complex, rich wine with walnutty, dried peel aromas and layers and layers of flavour”.

The Great Grandfather Liqueur Tawny (first release 1994) was introduced to celebrate Penfolds’ 150th anniversary. Blended from exceptionally aged Solera material and “other great stuff lying around the cellar”, the wine has an average age of 30+ years. It is immensely complex and powerful. Huon Hooke describes the Series I release as, “An extraordinary wine, wonderfully nuanced and full of twists and turns”. James Halliday notes the Series IV release is “An intensely spicy wine with great life and length – a classic tawny style”. Great Grandfather Liqueur Tawny is Penfolds’ rarest wine. While only 1,994 bottles were released in 1994, 2,500 are now produced with each release. The latest release was Series IV in 2003.