

The Portuguese Cork Harvest: A Story of Culture, Nature and Future

The wise country folk of Portugal have a saying; “Plant a cork oak forest for your grandchildren.” They know that their future and the future of their descendants are dependent not only on the harvesting of cork, but also on maintaining the amazingly rich environmental biodiversity of the cork forests and the balance of the climate itself. Besides its capacity to produce oxygen, the cork oak has a unique cell structure that enables it to retain carbon dioxide, the principle cause of global warming.

In Portugal, the *montado* (cork oak forests) are protected natural treasures and the harvesting of the cork bark is strictly regulated, does not harm the tree and actually helps support and extend the natural habitat, vegetative growth, and wildlife. Home to an interminable variety of animal and plant species, the *montado* contributes to both regulating the hydrological cycle and soil protection, avoiding desertification. The forests provide vital habitat for a range of flora and fauna, ensuring a rich biodiversity and are home to some of Europe's most endangered species including the Iberian Lynx, Barbary Deer and Imperial Iberian Eagle.



Cork is the bark of the cork oak (*Quercus suber* L), a noble tree with very special characteristics that grows in Mediterranean regions such as Spain, Italy, France, Morocco, Algeria and, most particularly, in Portugal. It is an astonishing tree, very long-lived and with an enormous capacity for regeneration.

The life cycle of cork as a raw material starts with the extraction of the bark from cork oaks - the harvesting or stripping which is carried out during the most active stage in the annual growth of the cork, from mid-May or early June to the end of August. It takes 25 years for the cork oak trunk to start to produce cork and be profitable. Each trunk has to reach a circumference of more than 27.5 inches when measured at nearly 40 inches from the ground. From then on, the cork can be harvested from the tree for an average of 250 years at nine-year intervals.



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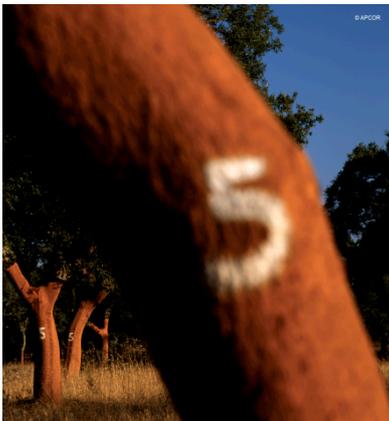


The stripping of the cork oak is an ancient process that can only (and should only) be done by specialists, the 'debarkers', since much manual skill and experience is required in order not to harm the tree.

The first stripping, which is known as "desbóia", produces cork of a very irregular structure which is too hard to be easily handled. This virgin cork is usually used for applications other than cork stoppers (flooring, insulation etc.), as its quality is far from that necessary to manufacture stoppers.

Nine years later, the second harvest produces material with a regular structure, less hard, but still not suitable for cork stoppers – this is known as secondary cork.

It is from the third and subsequent harvests that the cork with the best properties is obtained, suitable for the production of quality corks, since its structure is regular with a smooth outside and inside. This is the so-called "amadia" or reproduction cork. From then on, the cork oak will supply good quality cork every nine years for around a century and a half, producing, on average, 15 to 16 bark strippings throughout its life.



Once the bark has been stripped, the tree is marked, using the last number of the year in which the extraction took place.

From there, the cork planks are seasoned – stacked in planks either in the forest or in yards at a factory for a minimum of six months, so as to allow the cork to stabilize. The planks are boiled in order to clean the cork, extract water-soluble substances, increase thickness, reduce density and improve flexibility and elasticity.

Once this stage of preparation is complete, the cork bark is ready to be used in the creation of cork stoppers. All the waste following the production of stoppers is used for cork granulate to manufacture cork agglomerate products such as flooring, wall coverings and other materials. From the planting of the seed to the end of the manufacturing process, the bottom line is this – Portuguese cork makes for authentic, high quality and eco-efficient cork products that are created with true craftsmanship and care.

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