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Madeira refortified



By Jancis Robinson

'The big surprise was a new range of wines launched by Blandy's, the company that dominates the island's commercial life'



Checking fill levels by knocking on casks of madeira at the Barbeito winery in Madeira

Every now and then I am asked what my desert island wine would be. The answer is, coincidentally, very much an island drink, the eponymous wine of the volcanic Atlantic archipelago of Madeira. This is partly because I think fine madeiras are so distinctively delicious, from the dry apéritif styles right through to rich digestif. But it is also for a succession of practical reasons.

For a start, we don't know what sort of climate this desert island will have. If it is the stereotypical palm-tree-fringed tropical isle, then the high acidity that is characteristic of madeira would always be refreshing. If, on the other hand, it is a chilly redoubt in sub-Arctic waters, then madeira's spiciness and alcohol level of about 20 per cent would help to keep me warm. And, most important, an open bottle of madeira can last almost forever, whatever the ambient temperature, instead of the day or two that most table wines could be expected to keep.

No matter how much of a soft spot I have for madeira, however, my two visits to the terraced green cone in the middle of the ocean that is responsible for it left me with the impression of a vinous backwater. Yes, some miraculously vital, ancient liquids lurk in dusty corners of the lodges in and round the capital Funchal, in battered casks, glass demijohns and even in open bottles. But most of the efforts of those few still working in the wine business here seemed to be aimed at providing simple, unambitious syrups for the tide of cruise passengers that is daily disgorged over the city.

The brightest exception to this rule during my visit in 2003 was John Cossart of Henriques & Henriques, who was busy reinvigorating his family business and enjoying success with a series of 10- and 15-year-old versions of the island's classic grape varieties – Sercial, Verdelho, Boal (Bual in English) and Malmsey, in order of ascending sweetness. But Cossart died suddenly at the age of 53 in 2008 and some of the steam, and fruit, seems to have gone out of the wines.

The obvious bright star among Madeira winemakers during my second visit there two

years ago was a young ex-history teacher with the sort of gleam in his eye that comes from obsession and conviction. Ricardo de Freitas is the grandson of Mario Barbeito and runs the Madeira producer founded by his grandfather as recently as 1946, Vinhos Barbeito. Since de Freitas took over in the early 1990s, he has developed the house's fresh, pure style with more acidity and less sweetness than most – and no hint of the caramel on which some of the cheaper blends depend.

Jancis's Madeira picks



Barbeito 10-year-old Sercial
Barbeito, Single Cask 113
Tinta Negra 1997
Barbeito, Single Cask 119
Verdelho 1996
Barbeito 5-year-old Malvasia
Barbeito Boal Frasqueira 1982
Blandy's Colheita Sercial 1995
Blandy's Colheita Verdelho 1995
Blandy's Colheita Bual 1996
Blandy's Colheita Malmsey 1996
Blandy's Vintage Terrantez 1976
H. M. Borges 20-year-old Verdelho
Henriques & Henriques 20-year-old Malmsey

Madeira can be quite dry and is

I have long been a fan of Barbeito madeiras (imported into the UK by Raymond Reynolds), so it was no surprise to be bowled over by them once more at a recent trade tasting in London devoted to strong fortified wines – even if it was difficult to get a word with de Freitas who was, typically, using his time to taste as many of the fine ports there as possible. The Barbeito madeiras made from the classic varieties on the island have long been superlative, but de Freitas is unusual for the magic he manages to conjure from the much less respected Tinta Negra Mole grape grown in 85 per cent of the island's tiny vineyards. His stunningly satin-textured and vivacious Single Cask 113 Tinta Negra 1997 was my favourite.

But the big surprise was a new range of wines launched by Blandy's, the family company that dominates the island's commercial life and has just celebrated 200 years there. The Blandys own Madeira's most famous hotels, the all-important travel agency, even the local paper. Together with names such as Cossart Gordon, Leacock and Rutherford & Miles, Blandy's constitutes the Madeira Wine Company, whose much-visited cellars occupy part of a 17th-century Franciscan monastery in the middle of Funchal. In 1989 Blandy's called in the Symington port family of Oporto to run the business, an association that never seemed to achieve all that it might. Put it down to culture shock between Portugal's two greatest gifts to the world of wine.

Last year the Blandys regained control of this priceless asset and, to judge from the Blandy's Colheita madeiras I tasted in London recently, a new broom is sweeping through the dusty lodges. Not that the Madeira Wine Company has been short of winemaking expertise. For more than 20 years, head winemaker Francisco Albuquerque has been every bit as passionate – for once not hyperbole – about his company's wines as his friend and contemporary Ricardo de Freitas at Barbeito.

But it now seems as though the company knows what to do

always refreshing. Blandy's delicious new **Colheita Verdelho 1995** is £49.27 for 50cl (vintagemarque.com). Madeira specialists include Patrick Grubb of Oxfordshire, The Madeira Collection (www.themadeiracollection.be) of Belgium and The Rare Wine Co (www.rarewineco.com) of Sonoma.

with the results of his expertise. These new, smartly packaged half-litres of vintage dated madeiras were made by Albuquerque in 1995 and 1996 and are seriously exciting wines by any measure. Brisk and energetic, they have no hint of the tired cheesiness once found in some MWC wines. Each is the produce of a single harvest (which is what colheita means), but none can yet be sold as vintage, or frasqueira, madeira because they have not reached the 20-year minimum age required by Madeira's wine laws.

Not that they lack subtlety. The Sercial 1995, Bual 1996 and Malmsey 1996 are admirable, each displaying the textbook respective qualities of searing delicacy, rich nuttiness and sweet creaminess of these styles. But my favourite by a whisker was Blandy's Colheita Verdelho 1995, which combines to thrilling effect the tingling purity of Sercial with the nuttiness of Bual. According to Chris Blandy, who recently joined the family wine company, they have kept back enough stock of these wines to be able to bottle and release them later as vintage madeiras.

Quite who provided the impetus for the new spirit abroad in Blandy's is not clear, but there is a similar one at the old house of H. M. Borges, which has also realised that it is sitting on stocks of some of the most distinctive and historic wines in the world. Its 20-year-old Verdelho is delightfully tangy and appetising – just the thing for an island, deserted or not.

Tasting notes on Purple Pages of JancisRobinson.com

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