

Have Some Madeira, M'Dear

WILL LYONS



The Madeira Wine Company

A Blandy's coastal vineyard

When it comes to wine, Madeira is unique. This tiny volcanic island, which lies to the west of Morocco, began producing wine at the end of the 16th century, less than 200 years after the Portuguese first inhabited its shores.

Ever since, its wines have charmed their way into the cellars of successive generations. Madeira was sold in the very first Christie's sale in 1766, was served to toast the U.S. Declaration of Independence a decade later and endured the ravages of the mid-19th-century vine-eating aphid phylloxera.

Drinking Now



Three Madeira wines to inspire the taste buds.

History is central to understanding this underappreciated fortified wine. In the mid-17th century, English law ruled that any European wines shipped to the colonies had to go via British ports. Madeira, being closer to Africa, circumvented this and instead became a popular tippie in the Caribbean and North America. This popularity soon spread to the Far East, where it was noted the wine had improved immeasurably on its long, hot journey in cask.

<http://online.wsj.com/article/SB10001424052970204712904578094933291333160.htm?KEYWORDS=madeira+wine>

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Today, this result is emulated by either heating the wine to between 45 and 50 degrees Celsius after fermentation in stainless steel vats, or placing it in casks that sit on the top floor of wine cellars to bake in the heat for two years. It is this exposure to heat that partly allows Madeira to age properly.

For this is a wine that really only gets going at around 20 years in the bottle, hits its stride at 30 and can go on drinking for well beyond 100. It isn't unreasonable to suggest that Madeira is probably the only wine in the world that can live forever.

Its central trick is achieving a gracious rapport between acidity and sweetness. The best examples disguise themselves and startle the taster. Depending on style, a first sniff of this bright, golden wine can reveal a pungent range of flavors, from dried figs or salted almonds to dark raisins or caramel. But overall, the impression is one of sweetness.

Once sipped, the picture changes completely. Despite their hefty amount of residual sugar, these wines can taste dry because of their vigorous, enlivening acidity. In some cases, the sensation is like biting into a lemon and ingesting a handful of freshly cut peppermint leaves at the same time. In short, it is incredible. This energy, which has been described as bottled electricity, is what makes Madeira such an interesting wine to appreciate. Appreciate is the operative word, as Madeira isn't an everyday wine—it is a niche product to be enjoyed when the mood permits.



Direcção Regional do Turismo

Ilha, S. Jorge, Santana in Madeira Island

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Everything about Madeira is tiny. Wine production is limited to around 1,800 hectares of patchwork vineyards dotted around the island in various small pockets. These vineyards sell their grapes to a handful of major producers: Vinhos Barbeito, the Madeira Wine Co., Henriques & Henriques, H.M. Borges Sucrs, Pereira D'Oliveira, Vinhos Justino Henriques.

There are five major grape varieties—Sercial, Verdelho, Bual, Malmsey and Tinta Negra Mole—each producing a particular style. Sercial produces wines that are dry or extra-dry; Verdelho, medium-dry; Bual, medium-rich; and Malmsey, rich and concentrated. Tinta Negra Mole is principally used to make basic Madeira.

Those in the know have been drinking and collecting these wines for decades. But for the novice Madeira drinker, when to serve such a wine needs further exploration.

From my experience, it is wonderful enjoyed at the end of the evening, especially after numerous courses, when its energy revives the palate like no other. It can pair superbly with richer desserts, such as fruit pudding or, indeed, fruit cake. Personally, I am not a fan of serving it as an aperitif as I find it too sweet; moving on to a dry white or red afterward just isn't comfortable. But when it really shines is on those rare occasions when one can serve it mid- to late afternoon, as a convivial reviver. Imagine arriving at a friend's house after a long journey on a hot day to be greeted with a slightly chilled glass of Madeira. A rare, indulgent treat.

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