

Madeira Wine

Styles, aging classification, and its history.

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Madeira, the fortified wine from the Atlantic island of the same name, is far less popular than it was a couple hundred years ago, but in the last two or three decades it's undergone a renaissance. Whether it's the dry styles drunk as an aperitif or the sweeter sorts consumed with or after dessert, demand is robust. It's no longer the daily tippie of gentlemen in the American colonies—George Washington was a huge fan of Madeira and American independence was toasted with it—but the future looks bright for this unique wine.

What we know today as Madeira wine began life as an accidental tourist, it could be argued. Starting in the late 1500s, Madeira—a small, rugged island 700 kilometres off the North African coast—was a regular stopover for ships leaving Europe on long distance voyages. They would load up on wine, both for crews to consume (water in barrels fouled quickly) and to deliver to European settlers in North America and the spice colonies of Asia's East Indies. But the Atlantic crossing and the longer voyage around the southern tip of Africa and across the Indian Ocean were rough on wine. The barrels were tossed around in the holds

of ships—where temperatures were often well above 40°C—and much of it reached its destination in poor shape.

Like port and sherry producers, Madeira's wine exporters began to add distilled alcohol to their product to preserve it—the island had large sugar plantations, so the alcohol was essentially rum—and the fortified wine that became known as Madeira quickly developed into a very successful export.

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What Madeira producers didn't realize at first was that conditions in the ships' holds changed the wine dramatically—the wine reaching far-off consumers was not the same wine that had left Madeira. Weeks spent in barrels in the hot holds prematurely aged and oxidized the wine and gave it added pungency. It was only in the 1700s, when one shipment wasn't off-loaded at its destination

but returned to Madeira, that the transformation was discovered.

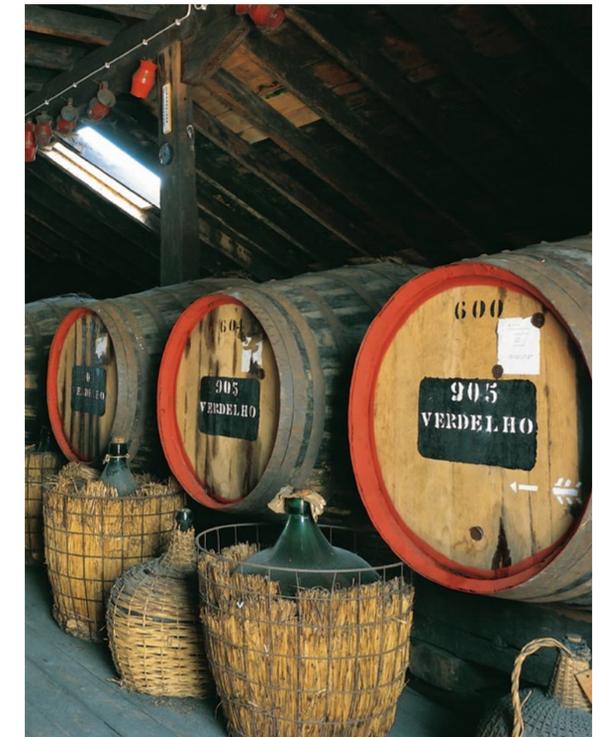
The Madeira in that shipment defined the style that Madeira would take to the present day. At first, producers began to send barrels of the wine on round-trip voyages, with the ships acting as floating ovens, so as to reproduce the style that was evidently popular among Europeans in the American and Asian colonies. Now Madeira's producers wanted to sell to consumers in Europe itself, but the trip from Madeira to Europe was cooler and shorter, and did not have the same effect as voyages across the Atlantic and Indian oceans.

Madeira wines made in this way were called *vinho da roda* ("wine that had made the round trip"). But because the process was expensive, producers looked for an alternative method that would achieve the same result. They began to store barrels of wine in the hot attics of wine cellars on Madeira, sometimes using wood-fired stoves to boost the heat. Some tried to replicate the motion of the waves—at first by having workers rock the barrels back and forth manually, later using steam engines.

Over time, other means of heating Madeira have been used, and now most Madeira is heated in stainless steel tanks, where it must remain at least 90 days at a maximum temperature of 50°C. (The average is a little lower than that.) A smaller volume of fine, high-quality Madeira is heated on the top floors of wine cellars, the original on-island method. Most producers simply use the heat generated by the sun as it beats down on the roof.

After the heating process is complete, Madeira for the mass market can be bottled; finer Madeiras are aged in barrels in cooler conditions for years, sometimes decades. The resulting wines come in many different styles and quality categories, a system complex enough that it probably deters many consumers from buying the wine. But Madeira is so delicious that it's worthwhile knowing how to recognize the best.

Top quality Madeiras are vintage-dated and are often labelled *frasqueira* or *garrafeira*. They cannot be sold until at least 20 years after their harvest, and they must spend a minimum of 20 years in barrel before being bottled. These Madeiras typically show immense complexity and terrific balance that's marked by quite high acidity. (The



grapes used for Madeira originate from both Madeira and Porto Santo Island which is just over 40 kilometres away.)

Vintage-dated Madeiras, which make up less than half of one per cent of Madeira sales, are labelled by the grape variety used, which can be a guide to the sweetness level. For vintage Madeira, the most common varieties (from driest to sweetest) are *sercial*, *verdelho*, *boal*, and *malvasia*. Barbeito Sercial 1992 Frasqueira, for example, delivers rich, deep flavours and has a lovely acid bite that balances the richness beautifully. The Madeira Malvasia 1964 from Justino's, Madeira's largest producer, was bottled only in 2013, after nearly 50 years' barrel aging. It shows remarkable freshness, with pronounced nuttiness in its rich and complex flavours, clean acidity, and a refreshing finish. Even older, Justino's Verdelho 1934 is elegant and delicious. It is dark amber from its long aging and delivers layered flavours, a silky texture, and well-balanced acidity.

A few producers use *terrantez*, a variety once widely used for Madeira, but now rare and reserved for vintage wines. A 1976 vintage *terrantez* from Blandy's, the oldest family-owned and one of the leading producers on the island, is a delicious straw-coloured Madeira with flavours of dried fruit, nuts, and orange, and a refreshing level of acidity. Henriques & Henriques Terrantez 1954, meanwhile, shows

pungent, layered flavours, a touch of viscosity, and good acid bite.

Madeiras in the "second quality" tier are also vintage dated, but are labelled with the word *colheita* (meaning harvest), and they account for almost one per cent of sales. The difference is that *colheita* Madeiras are aged a minimum of five years in-cask, rather than the 20 of vintage-dated Madeiras. Even so, they shouldn't be overlooked. Blandy's Colheita 2002 Bual should taste sweet, given its residual sugar, but it comes across as quite dry because of its acidity. Barbeito Single Cask Malvasia Colheita 2001, in contrast, is sweet and full of dried-fruit flavours, but the sweetness is mitigated, not neutralized, by the acidity.

Other good quality Madeiras are blends of vintages labelled by age: 5, 10, 15, 20, 30, 40, 50, or more than 50 years old. To qualify, they must be found to show the style and quality associated with Madeiras that age. Barbeito Verdelho Old Reserve 10 Year Old, a blend of Madeiras between 10 and 12 years old, is medium-dry with light sweetness in the fruit, a little creaminess in the texture, and a line of clean acidity. The same producer's Boal Old Reserve 10 Year Old is medium-sweet with flavours of dried apricots and other fruits, backed by refreshing acidity.

One notable characteristic of Madeira is that it lasts and lasts because the heating and oxidization processes, along with the wine's

acidity, make it very stable. It's not uncommon to find bottles for sale that go back a hundred years or more, and bottles from the 1700s have found their way to auctions. Not only that, an opened bottle of Madeira has impressive staying power.

Madeira hit its peak popularity in the 17th and 18th centuries, and went into decline in the 19th. For many years, hybrid grape varieties were widely used, quality fell off, and demand followed suit. But in the late 1980s, only 30 years ago, the Symington family, which is prominent in port production, began to invest in Madeira. They replanted with quality grape varieties and gave Madeira a new lease on life.

Yet despite the fact that the fortunes of Madeira wine are on an upswing, it's still a rarity on tables in most of the world. About an eighth of the production is consumed on Madeira itself, thanks largely to tourists, and most of the rest is drunk in Europe. For many wine lovers, it's a wine yet to be discovered in its full range of styles. Like sherry, it has a reputation as an old man's drink, but it deserves wider recognition for its uniqueness, versatility, and sheer drinkability. ●

Photos: Madeira is a fortified Portuguese wine made in the Madeira Islands, an archipelago situated northwest of Africa. The oldest family-owned producers of Madeira is Blandy's.