



The miracle of madeira

5 May 2010 by Jancis Robinson

The week before last, at the top of a cliff running sheer down to the Atlantic, I took part in one of the most remarkable tastings I ever expect to enjoy. The 43 wines included no fewer than seven from the 19th century and one, in absolutely fine fettle, from the end of the 18th. I know of no wine that lasts as long as madeira, preserved by a combination of deliberate oxidation, heat and the naturally high acidity in everything grown on this volcanic island. (Pictured is what visitors arriving at Funchal airport, after one of the world's more nerve-racking landings, see as soon as they pass passport control.)



All of these 43 wines were based on one of the light-skinned grapes Sercial, Verdelho, Boal (to make Bual), Malvasia (to make Malmsey), Terrantez or Moscatel traditionally grown on the island until mildews and the phylloxera louse arrived there in the late nineteenth century and decimated vine plantings. Most growers replanted with the much more robust Tinta Negra Mole vine whose grapes have dark skins and produce rather less refined wines. This vine variety, thought to be identical to the Molar of the minuscule Colares wine region on the Portuguese coast, is responsible for a good 85% of all wine produced on the island, although there is now official financial encouragement for the 1,500 growers to switch back to the classic white grapes. The island's top winemakers are learning to love Tinta Negra Mole, however, and have been producing increasingly ambitious versions such as Barbeito's Colheita 2001.

Perhaps the most cheering thing of all about the historic island tasting was the remarkable quality of the wines made this century that we tasted in the first flight - signalling a bright future as well as glorious past

for this historic wine style. In fact Madeira generally seemed so much livelier, less dusty and decrepit than on my only previous visit seven years ago.

I had been invited to participate in this very special tasting by a new Belgian company, [The Madeira Collection](#). Perhaps cleverly advised by the senior figure in the advertising industry whom they describe as their mentor, the protagonists Bert Jeuris and Ludovic Beun pitched to me playing the sympathy card. Their plan, they told me, was to drum up publicity and sympathy for an island devastated by floods in late February with the most spectacular tasting of its most famous export.

In the event, thanks presumably to sterling work on the part of the dynamic mayor of Madeira, virtually all the damage has already been repaired and I marvelled instead at one Europe's more obvious beneficiaries of EU funds. All that was left to do was sit back and enjoy the tasting experience.

Bert Jeuris, who with his brother Kris had been running Wijnhuis Jeuris, an importer of burgundy and fine Portuguese table wine since 1997, tasted madeira for the first time only a couple of years ago at Hof van Cleve, Belgium's most celebrated new-wave restaurant. He discovered that Belgium's (probably continental Europe's) best madeira collection - around 10,000 of the island's better bottles - was in the hands of an accountant at the Belgian stock exchange who suggested he buy the lot.

Some fancy financial footwork later, he and a TV director friend Beun are the co-directors of The Madeira Collection, supplemented by a few thousand bottles of more commercial madeiras, and, with the conviction and enthusiasm of youth, are convinced that they will open a new chapter in the long history of madeira. Certainly their graphics and their website are the opposite of fusty - and I admired the eclectic group they had assembled for this historic tasting, which included not just their mentor, the sommelier from Hof van Cleve and his counterpart from the equally celebrated restaurant Oud Sluis across Belgium's northern border in Zeeland but also pioneer Belgian chocolatier Pierre Marcolini, who was a madeira virgin but was clearly inspired by the possible, very specific, marriages of madeira and his terroir-driven chocolates he devised.

But perhaps most importantly from my personal point of view was the fact that they seem to have convinced the three madeira producers who are their chief suppliers - Barbeito, D'Oliveiras and Blandy's - that their enterprise was worth supporting to the extent of holding this unique tasting on the island - an unusual setting for a serious tasting of great old madeira. Such tastings as I have heard of seem to have taken place either in the US or in the UK, in each of which there is a handful of madeira devotees.

Barbeito and Blandy's have two extremely committed, thoroughly well schooled winemakers in Ricardo Diogo Freitas and Francisco Albuquerque respectively. And D'Oliveiras has enviable stocks of truly ancient wines (when we dropped in before the tasting we were poured a 1900 and a 1903 as a mid afternoon pick-me-up) and is in the process of renovating an exciting new warehouse, or lodge.

It is the ageing conditions that are vital to fine madeira. Blandy's, or rather the Madeira Wine Company of which Blandy's is the flagship brand, is extremely proud of its ancient attics piled high with what look like dangerously antique casks of wine...

For a madeira primer, see [Insider's madeira](#), and for more on the current state of the madeira business, see my overview on Saturday in Free for all.

See my tasting notes on [The Great Island Madeira Tasting](#) and, from tomorrow Thursday 6 May, [More madeira](#).

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