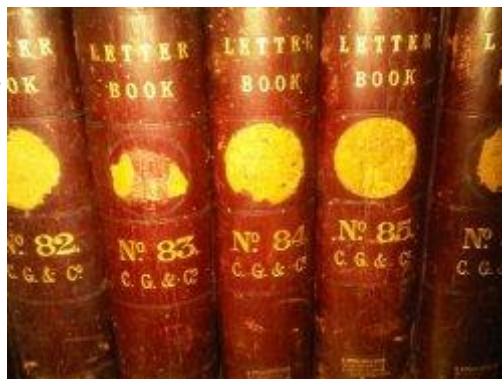


The Great Island Madeira Tasting

5 May 2010 by Jancis Robinson

These pictures show just part of the archive of sales ledgers bequeathed to the Madeira Wine Company by Noel Cossart, author of one of the most authoritative books on the wine (along with Alex Liddell's more recent work). They date from 1774, 21 years before the oldest wine we tasted was made, and seem to me to illustrate most appropriately the historic nature of this extraordinary drink.



The notes below on 43 of the finest madeiras back to 1795 were taken at an extraordinary tasting on the island last week described in [The miracle of madeira](#) and [What a tasting!](#)

The notes are presented in the order the wines were served, which was dictated strictly by age rather than sweetness level. In fact one of the more extraordinary things about these wines was how few of them tasted particularly sweet. Presumably the explanation lies in these wines' exceptionally high levels of acidity.

Most of the wines were labelled with the names of the four best-known classic grapes of Madeira - Sercial, Verdelho, Boal and Malvasia - but we also tasted four Terrantez, which demonstrated just how very firm and long-lived wines made from this variety are, and a Bastardo.

One of the younger Blandys is planting Terrantez once more. Barbeito made a few hundred litres of Bastardo in 2007 but in 2008 yields were almost non-existent. 'I'm learning', said Ricardo Diogo Freitas. 'At the beginning, everything is bad with Bastardo.'

My suggested drinking dates are even more speculative than usual in these tasting notes, not least because madeira lasts so many decades, and many of the wines are just so old.

See also my tasting notes on [More madeiras](#) (many of them much more commercial and easier to find) and my [overview](#) in Free for all.

Barbeito, 10 Years Old Reserve Sercial NV Madeira 17.5 Drink 2010-2030

A blend from three different lodges.

Pale rich tawny with a hint of pink. Very light and racy. With real purity and energy. This tastes SO interesting and vital! Some sweetness on the front but no caramel or heaviness. This wine is a great kickstarter and would make a superb appetite stimulant. Lovely balance and not too demanding dry. There's still some slight tannin on the finish.

Blandy's, Sercial Colheita 2001 Madeira 16.5 Drink 2008-2025

Bottled Nov 2009. 1,224 bottles from a single cask.

A little smudgy and indistinct on the nose. Light and soft and a little whisky-like on the nose. Bone dry so a bit more challenging than the Barbeito 10 Years Old Sercial tasted immediately beforehand.

Barbeito, VB Reserva Lote 2, Casks 12D & 46A NV Madeira 18 Drink 2012-2035

Bottled Jun 2009. 2,118 bottles. Verdelho 2002 with some – about 40%? - Boal 2003. The prototype, from the late 1990s, was a 50:50 blend and Ricardo is not nearly as enthusiastic about that earlier wine. Still a little astringent on the finish.

Bright tawny. Deep yellowish tawny with some Lucozade hues. Dark rosy hints on both eye and nose. Lots of depth and great richness on the front palate. The Boal is clearly here for the weight and spice. An attractive blend. But with lots of freshness from the Verdelho. A most intriguing wine that is truly satisfying. Very clean and fresh.

Blandy's, Verdelho Colheita 2000 Madeira 17.5 Drink 2008-2025

Bottled Nov 2009, 1,210 bottles from a single cask.

Pale tawny. Smoky nose, a little indistinct. Open and developed. Walnuts. Very clean and pure on the palate. Satisfying palate with great balance. Quite delicate. Bracing.

Barbeito, Historic Series Special Reserve Savannah Verdelho NV Madeira 17.5 Drink 2010-2025

One of several blends made especially for the Rare Wine Co in the US, designed to be of Vintage character, incorporating some wine as old as 50-60 years.

Deep greenish tawny. Complex nose that's already pretty subtle. Treacly, greenish (veggy/leafy), rancio aromas. Rather light and delicate. Quite developed on the nose, although it's still a little chewy on the finish. Real punch. I wonder how much this is..?

Barbeito, Casks 48 & 84 Boal Colheita 2001 Madeira 17.5 Drink 2010-2030

Bottled Jun 2009, 1,722 bottles.

Pale tawny. Very pale for a young Bual! Intense and meaty on the nose. And then lots of sweetness and roundness – not to mention a bit of alcohol. Relatively full and beefy for a Barbeito wine.

Blandy's, 10 Years Old Bual NV Madeira 17.5 Drink 2008-2025

A 10-year-old blend of canteiro (naturally heated) Bual wines. Francisco Albuquerque is asked why his wine is so much darker than the Barbeito ones and says it's because the wines were fully macerated on the skins so the oxidation potential is greater. He says he used some enzymes too.

Very dark brownish tawny, with greenish rim. Very rancio, very flattering. Already lots of fun. There's a nice freshness on the finish here even if it's heavier and nuttier than most.

Blandy's, Single Harvest Malmsey 2004 Madeira 17+ Drink 2012-2025

Bottled Mar 2010, 1,764 bottles. Michael Blandy: The Madeira Wine Co fought quite hard to have this category allowed, which it was eventually from 1994. The idea is to have a dated wine that is released quite young. It has been a very popular and successful innovation.

Full and a little dusty and heavy. Big and powerful and aggressive. Lots of alcohol. Chewy finish. This doesn't have the refinement of some other wines.

Barbeito, Cask 40A Malvasia Colheita 2000 Madeira 18.5 Drink 2010-2035

Bottled Sep 2009, but the printer forgot to put this on the back label while winemaker Ricardo Diogo Freitas was away on a spiritual retreat. 825 bottles from a single cask.

Bright, light Lucozade orange. At first there seemed to be a metallic note on the nose, but it dissipated. There is lots of really vital freshness on the palate that is not heavy at all. Real race. This is an extraordinary style – so full of life. Lovely on the palate – truly energising and transparent. Such energy and briskness.

Blandy's Bual 1993 Madeira 18 Drink 2007-2030

Bottled 2009. 1,500 bottles from a single cask.

Mid rosy tawny with lots of green on the rim. Suddenly, for the first time in this array, we seemed to be encountering a wine with lots more age on the nose. Great toasty fun with masses of rancio and acidity. Real freshness and length. Only medium sweet, with a super subtle finish. A very good wine. Very neat and complete.

Blandy's, 15 Years Old Malmsey NV Madeira 17 Drink 2010-2028

A blend made from canteiro Malmseys.

Dark brownish with yellow-green rim. Heavy, almost medicinal nose. Very sweet and syrupy start, then spicy and then with masses of acidity and green vegetation flavours. Treacly and broad on the palate and a little astringent on the finish.

Barbeito, 20 Years Old Lote 7199 Malvasia NV Madeira 18.5 Drink 2007-2030

Bottled Jan 2007. 1,272 bottles.

Pale tawny/lion colour. Really very old sort of nose, but with great dynamic fruit underneath. Then broad and dense and so long and energetic! No hint of caramel; so transparent. Bone dry, clean finish. Very fine indeed.

Barbeito, 30 Years Old Lote Especial Malvasia NV Madeira 19 Drink 2005-2025

Bottled Apr 2007. 1,500 bottles in homage to Ricardo Diogo Freitas' grandfather.

Bright dark orange with a greenish rim. Very dense and heady and interesting. Such 'twang' – very tense

and reverberant. So complex! So intense and nervy yet with lots of richness. Like a palate scrub. A very exciting wine indeed.

D'Oliveiras Sercial 1989 Madeira 17 Drink 2000-2016

Bottled 2009. 5,800 litres produced in the high, Jardim da Serra part of Estreito de Câmara de Lobos.
Mid-depth orange tawny with a greenish rim. Lots of development on the nose – full and rich. Then amazingly dry on the finish. Fades just a little fast. All in all not one of the most intense.

Barbeito Sercial 1988 Madeira 18.5 Drink 2005-2030

Bottled Sep 2009, 600 bottles.

Light tawny. Lots of richness and rancio and depth – clearly lots of reduction but it's not uncomfortable to taste. Very pure with a fair amount of sweetness. At the limit of sweetness for a Sercial. Ricardo says it's 'for my pleasure'. A purist's dream.

D'Oliveiras Malvazia 1987 Madeira 19 Drink 2004-2028

Bottled 2009.

Dark tawny with a livid yellow rim. Wonderful stuff at the peak of its powers. Extraordinarily rich and intense. Probably the sweetest-tasting wine in the range so far. Wonderful stuff now, though I wouldn't like to taste it with another 20 years' cask age... Very rich and well balanced.

Blandy's Malmsey 1985 Madeira 17.5 Drink 2000-2020

Bottled Sep 2009. 1,420 bottles.

Mid orangey tawny with a green rim. A bit cheesy on the nose. Then lots of sweetness and alcohol. A bit of astringency on the finish. Very slight syrupy quality. A rather wild – less pure than the Barbeitos – sweet wine.

Barbeito Verdelho 1981 Madeira 17.5 Drink 1995-2015

Bottled May 2005. 900 bottles.

Not quite bright – slightly cloudy greenish tawny. Light bodied, lots of lift. Off-dry palate entry and then it tastes completely dry and very slightly medicinal on the finish. A little demanding drying and reduced (ie concentrated). Pure style but I don't think there is quite enough fresh fruit left.

Blandy's Bual 1977 Madeira 17.5 Drink 1990-2015

Bottled 2009. 1,241 bottles.

Deep yellowish tawny. Very developed, almost 'old' aromas. Masses of acidity and rancio. Quite a challenge to decide how to drink this wine. It could even be an aperitif because it's so high in acidity. Dry, not to say drying, finish. Not that much richness in the middle.

D'Oliveiras Terrantez 1977 Madeira 17.5 Drink 2000-2030

Bottled 2009 and made in a vintage that was particularly good for Terrantez.

Dark jewel brown. Spicy, feral sort of nose with real depth and reward. Coconut and richness and really quite dry on the end. A curiosity. Interesting but a bit challenging. Some astringency – the inherent dryness of Terrantez presumably. Very firm. Very slow maturing.

Blandy's Terrantez 1976 Madeira 17 Drink 2007-2030

Bottled Mar 1997. 5,829 bottles.

Dark brown. Greenish rim. Jewelly and rather sweet on the nose. Very sweet start and then still remarkably chewy.

D'Oliveiras Verdelho 1973 Madeira 18.5 Drink 1990-2025

Bottled 2008 and produced in Seixal and São Vicente.

Healthy glowing dark fox red. Nice balance. Good energy and richness. Neat and fresh. Complete. Though the start is pure crème caramel. Well balanced. Zesty yet full and satisfying. Long.

D'Oliveiras Boal 1968 Madeira 17.5 Drink 1980-2005

Bottled 2009. One of D'Oliveiras' best sellers, produced in the south west of the island.

Reddish orange – very clear. Cheesy nose with real depth and vibration. Slightly bitter and austere on the finish though with strong treacle toffee essence notes. Just a bit too reduced (ie concentrated) for me.

Barbeito Boal 1957 Madeira 18 Drink 1992-2012

Bottled 1992. 1,200 bottles.

Pale greenish tawny. Sweet and smudgy nose. Lots of delicacy and rose petals and then smoked meat and acidity. There's certainly a lot here! Undertow of richness. A subtle wine, although there's a little bit of astringency on the finish.

Blandy's Verdelho 1952 Madeira 17 Drink 1980-2000

Bottled 1973. 2,500 bottles. Bottled before revolution in Portugal (which eventually had some at least 'mental effects' on the island, I was told).

Deep rich fox red. Sweet and caramelly on the nose. Very high volatility! Rather hard work. Funny to think this had a mere 20 years in wood. Francisco Albuquerque told me that VA is 2.3g/l! Too much for me, the combination of the VA, sweetness and astringency.

Blandy's Malmsey 1952 Madeira 18.5 Drink 1990-2020

Bottled 1973. 2,500 bottles.

Deep fox red. Cheesy nose. Scented and sweet and together and complete. Very rich and fruit-cake-like. Fun and very easy to like, even if perhaps not the most complex wine in this collection. Fermented Christmas cake.

D'Oliveiras Sercial 1937 Madeira 18 Drink 1960-2020

Bottled 2008. 3,700 litres available.

Very pale orange. Rather occluded nose but then delicate and lively and still with lots of punch and excitement. Very pure and vibrant. Appetising. Long and reverberant.

D'Oliveiras Bastardo 1927 Madeira 17.5 Drink 1950-2010

Bottled 2006. Only small quantities of this rare grape variety available. Matured in Adegas do Torreão.

Deep greenish tawny. Very rich and creamy and caramel. Sweet and polished. A little bit dusty on the finish. Not as pure as some. But still very lively in a treacly way.

D'Oliveiras Boal 1922 Madeira 17.5 Drink 1950-1980

Bottled 2003 with some still in cask.

Dark brown. Cheesy and creamy on the nose. Very dark and reduced (ie concentrated). Quite hard work! But there is some richness here. Very long.

Barbeito Malvasia 1916 Madeira 16.5 Drink 1940-1970

From a demijohn in Ricardo Diogo Freitas' grandfather's collection.

Reddish tawny. Rich and old and vibrant. Mahogany. So reduced (ie concentrated) and relic-like. So much acidity! Made during the first world war! But almost painful to taste because of the extreme acidity.

D'Oliveiras Verdelho 1912 Madeira 18 Drink 1940-2030

Bottled 2005 with some still in cask in their Rua Visconde do Anadia warehouse.

Dark mahogany colour. Good fruit and richness. A complete treat still. Well done! Dry finish but with lots of nutty secrets to divulge. Off dry but with an undertow of nutty richness. Lots of almost painful acidity.

Barbeito Sercial 1910 Madeira 18 Drink 1950-1990

'The last two bottles of this wine from my grandfather's collection', Ricardo Diogo Freitas. His grandfather died in 1985. Bottled 1982 or 1983.

Pale transparent tawny. At first a little rank on the nose. Then treacly and very rich and almost austere. Hard work but admirable. I think at this age, you need a bit of sweetness to compensate. Ricardo knows this wine in cask and this bottled version is much better apparently.

D'Oliveiras Boal 1908 Madeira 17.5 Drink 1930-1970

Bottled 2008. Still commercially available.

Dark brown. Fox-red rim. Super rich and so concentrated. A little painful to taste at this not-so-ripe old age. But it does show the possibilities. Burnt caramel. Somehow this tastes, as well as looks, black!

D'Oliveiras Malvazia 1907 Madeira 17 Drink 1930-1970

Bottled 2003 from 'a particularly good year for Malvazia'.

Very dark and brown. A bit syrupy and with masses of acidity. Maybe better bottled a bit earlier before all this reduction? Tastes like a very reduced (ie concentrated) black caramel. Quite painful on the gums.

Blandy's Sercial 1905 Madeira 17.5 Drink 1930-2030

Bottled 1970.

Transparent orange. A completely different animal from the D'Oliveiras wines. Much more delicate. Smells of orange peel and it's much lighter and fresher than the super-reduced (ie concentrated) late-bottled D'Oliveiras wines. I think it was at this point that I checked, as diplomatically as possible, that one could trust these vintages. Still an attractive drink.

Blandy's Malmsey 1880 Madeira 20 Drink 1920-2040

Bottled 1921.

Very dark brown and with such a powerful aroma I could smell it from an arm's length away! Concentrated and rich and so youthful! So creamy, sweet, concentrated and youthful! Great balance. No painful reduction and as clean as a whistle. Long. Wonderful stuff.

D'Oliveiras Moscatel 1875 Madeira 19 Drink 1920-2020

Bottled 1975 after a century in cask.

Dark fox red. After 135 years, I'm not sure I would guess it was Moscatel, though it is more luscious than most of these other wines. No Muscat nose but very round and very clean. Treacle but rich. Dentists would not approve of the sugar and acid.

D'Oliveiras Malvazia 1875 Madeira 19 Drink 1900-2040

Bottled in the 1970s. 'Our oldest Malvazia available for exportation'.

Big and round and with lots of acidity. Beefy and almost like beef extract with richness on the finish. Actually, the more I think about it, the more like a beef consommé that is slightly sweet because so reduced (ie concentrated) it is!

Blandy's Bual 1863 Madeira 18.5 Drink 1900-2020

Bottled 1913 and the remains were put into demijohns to be bottled in 1978.

Dark fox red. Tangy nose. Very, very sweet and intense but – just – sweet enough to cope with the concentration, A bit tough and hard. But also great richness of a treacle toffee sort. Well done! 18 g/l total dry extract, RS 42 g/l. Very chewy finish but with great rich fruitiness too. Neat and long.

Blandy's Terrantez 1862 Madeira 17 Drink 1900-1980

Bottled 1913.

Dark brownish. Prunes on the nose. A bit burnt. Very reduced (ie concentrated) and hard work. Alcohol and astringency on the finish.

Vasconcelos Boal 1862 Madeira 17 Drink 1920-2000

This wine, of which only one bottle is known, came from the Vasconcelos collection since the son of this sugar-cane family was married to the daughter of Barbeito's Ricardo Diogo Freitas. Grapes grown on the Quinta da Piedade.

Pale greenish tawny. Light and flirtatious on the nose. There's a slightly odd note on the nose but it is so much more delicate than most – no caramel presumably. The odd note the local experts think is due to the Cape brandy used to fortify it. It did actually smell like a touch of bleach! Shame because so much else was great about this wine.

D'Oliveiras Verdelho 1850 Madeira 18.5 Drink 1919-2030

From the firm's foundation year and bottled in the 1970s.

Dark brownish. Really quite blackish. Dense and rich and thick and very much alive. A little bit syrupy and

certainly reduced (ie concentrated) but amazingly long and fruity. So rich and look at that drinking window! Very perky indeed for a 160 year old.

Barbeito Terrantez 1795 Madeira 18.5 Drink 1918-2020

'From a small demijohn of my mother's collection', Ricardo Diogo Freitas.

Fox red. A little severe and dry, but very rich and spicy. The sensation of tasting it reminds me of the grape name Esgana Cão (a synonym for Sercial) that I think translates as 'dog strangler'! Lots of fruit – the best Terrantez here! Long and vibrant - alive and racy. Quite amazing.