



Madeira – a drop in the ocean, but increasingly well worth seeking out

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It's been a bad hair day on the technology front. I've been unable to add this long report to my Portugal regional report page so, for now, it's a super-chunky blog post reporting on:

- A visit with Blandy's
- The Annual Madeira tasting in London
- A food and Madeira matching session hosted by Humberto Jardim of Henriques & Henriques

There's no denying Madeira wine is a niche product. Like the island itself, a drop in the ocean. But it's increasingly well worth seeking out because, as Blandy's CEO Chris Blandy puts it, when you make so little, "*you can't afford to make a product which isn't quality focused.*" Henriques & Henriques' Humberto Jardim agrees saying, even for three and five year old volume blends, "*we are into volume with immense quality.*"

Happily for me, given this quality focus, October might just as well have been christened Madeira month. Now that would be a nice tradition. Perhaps not quite as civilised as Michael's Broadbent's daily Madeira at elevenses – he plainly has a stronger constitution than me!

Not only did I spend three days on the island itself with The Madeira Wine Company's leading marque, Blandy's, shortly after my return, the Madeira Wine Institute hosted its annual London tasting, featuring an excellent masterclass by Portuguese wine writer [Rui Falcão](#). Then just in case the island's wines faded from my consciousness, yesterday I was invited to join Humberto Jardim of Henriques & Henriques for a Madeira and food matching lunch.



Below you'll find notes on my stand out wines plus food matching tips. First, some key points about Madeira that I'd not appreciated before, or which the visit/tasting really reinforced:

Extreme viticulture



Madeira is a small island, only 732 sq km, of which the vineyards occupy about 500 square km. Each and every opportunity is taken to shoe-horn in a vineyard, even if it's thimble-sized, off the beaten track or seemingly in competition with a profusion of ferns or banana or vegetable crops where the volcanic soil is high in organic material and very fertile (yields are typically 20-25t/ha).



Falcão says one grower in Madeira has just one vine! For The Madeira Wine Company's winemaker Francisco Albuquerque, some of the smaller plots are less viticulture, more *"a garden with grapes"* with *"houses growing like mushrooms in the middle of a vineyard."*



All grapes are handpicked and, where pergolas (or latadas as they're known in Madeira) remain common (and the best method for some grapes/sites), it can be back-breaking work.

Growers

Only Henriques & Henriques currently owns any vineyard, though Andrew Blandy's (privately owned) one hectare quinta, Santa Luzia, finds its way into his family's Madeiras and Blandy's are in the process of renting a sizeable 10ha vineyard planted to Malmsey, Sercial and Verdelho (pictured below).



Growers vary enormously in size, some cultivating only a few vines, others much more sizeable (estates are divided between siblings on death, which explains the patchwork of ownership). At Blandy's, grapes are sourced from around 400ha, and its 800 growers' contributions range in size from just 16kg (yes kilos) to 32 tons of grapes. The average is around 1t.

The Madeira Wine Company employ 4 agents, "*its eyes and ears*," spread across the island, who liaise with growers, advise them and analyse sugars/baume in the run up to harvest. Each harvest, winemaker Francisco Albuquerque drives around 2000km to ensure that, by the time the grapes arrive in Funchal, they accord with basic quality parameters. This analysis forms the basis of Blandy's vineyard grading system (A to C), which allows them to keep tabs on best performing sites/growers. Says



Albuquerque, pH is very important and should be no higher than 3.4 if the island's wines are to have the acidity to age (also for stability).

Harvest

Located closer to Africa than Portugal, Madeira's overall climate is mild and sub-tropical. However, the island has distinct micro-climates which allow a diverse range of fauna and flora, crops (and grape varieties) to flourish.



Most strikingly, being virtually cleft in two (north to south) by a mountain, which rises to 1886m, means that the north side is cooler and more humid, because it's exposed to north Atlantic winds. The south, on the other hand, basks in warmer, sunnier conditions because it's shaded from the cool Atlantic winds. Elevation also has an impact on temperature and humidity – the mountain peaks can even be snow-capped. Vineyards range in altitude from sea level to terraces (*"poios"*) located at 800m.

With its range of climates and grape varieties, the harvest is long, usually taking place in the last week of August through to the second week of October. (This year it was early, beginning in the second week of August and finishing in the third week of September).

Red grape Tinta Negra is harvested first. It has its own line at Blandy's because dry and medium dry styles see no skin contact (only sweet/medium sweet styles undergo 100% skin contact).

After Tinta Negra is harvested, the whites grapes come in. Taking care not to over extract tannins and pyrazenes, white wines undergo several hours' skin contact to increase dry extract (remember these wines are built to age). Malmsey from the north at sea level comes in first, then Bual, then the rest of the Malmsey. In the second/third week of September Verdelho is picked and, finally, Sercial. Not what I expected given that Sercial is bone dry! Harvested from the highest sites, this late maturing grape retains its acidity very well (minimum baume is 9 degrees).

At The Madeira Wine Company, the size of harvest crates has reduced from around 50kg to 25kg and 40kg to improve quality. The smaller the crate, the less danger of



grapes being crushed, exposing the juice to oxidation. Or worse still, starting to ferment where journey times from site to press can be up to four hours in temperatures of up to 29 degrees centigrade).

The varieties

Tinta Negra – this red grape variety is the island’s dominant variety which, in 2011, accounted for 86% of the of the vitis vinífera grapes harvested. Made in a range of styles and traditionally the staple of cheaper 3 year old Madeiras, it is increasingly appreciated in its own right and now features in Colheita single harvest wines. According to Rui Falcão, in the past the variety was regularly (and without attribution) incorporated in top wines.

Apparently it will soon be possible to use Tinta Negra on labels (at the moment, only the classic white grapes mentioned below can be mentioned on labels). Describing it as a grape “*which never had an identity,*” Henriques & Henriques Humberto Jardim says the flip side of its anonymity is its stylistic “*plasticity*” – unlike the white classic varieties, its wines can range from dry to rich and sweet. He says this will be retained when the labelling laws change.

Sercial – somewhat irksomely known as “Esgana Cão”(dog strangler) on the mainland, perhaps a reference to its remarkably high acidity. So high that, though residual sugar is typically between 30-40g/l, its wines are bone dry. Vineyards are located only at high altitude in the south, at Jardim de Serra (600-700m) and in the cooler north (Porto Moniz and Seixal), where it can be planted at lower altitude (150-200m). Apparently, the Madeira Wine Company buys 93% (37t) of all Sercial grown on the island.

Verdelho - the most planted of the white grapes. There’s growing competition between fortified and table wine producers. However Blandy isn’t too concerned where table wine producers are competing with mainland producers – he says Verdelho sells for 30c/kg in Alentejo, while production costs in Madeira add a euro to that price. Planted at altitudes up to 400m and located in the north (Ponta Delgada and São Vicente) this late maturing grape is used to produce fruity medium dry styles. For Henriques & Henriques’ Humberto Jardim, the variety’s approachable style sits bang in the middle of the acidity, sugar, alcohol triangle, while Malmsey/Malvasia gravitates towards sugar and Sercial towards acidity.

Bual (Boal) – found mostly in the south (Campanário and Calheta) at lowish altitudes (100-300m). Early maturing and used to make medium sweet wines which, for me, perfectly walk the tightrope between sugar and acidity.

Malmsey (the rare Malvasia Cândida or Malvasia Malvasia Branca de São Jorge) – this, the first grape to be harvested, grows exclusively in the south of the island at lower altitude (150-200m). It is used to make the island’s sweetest, richest style.

Terrantez – with new plantings, this rare grape is on the up, albeit from a teeny tiny base – Blandy’s received just 500kg this vintage and 2012 was a good year for quality and quantity both. Says Chris Blandy, it’s very difficult to grow and favours sites near



the sea where “good hotels take precedence.” Because it needs very low humidity (not so easy on a tropical island), drier sites in the east of the island work best. Terrantez is used to make off-dry wines which I find have a distinct tobacco note.

Other varieties which have been used to make distinguished fortifieds include Bastardo and Moscatel.

Vinification by style

Fermentation is in temperature controlled stainless steel tanks and is arrested by the addition of grape brandy when the requisite amount of sugar has been converted to alcohol (depending on style – dry, medium dry, medium sweet or sweet). Albuquerque aims to ferment the grapes and convert their sugars by one degree of alcohol per day. For sweeter wines, grape brandy is added after 24-48 hours, while for dry styles, after 8 days.

The grape brandy is 96 degrees proof, which is higher than for Port (77 degrees proof). Why? Because less is added than for the more concentrated Port grapes (which are harvested at 14-16 degrees baume versus Madeira grapes at around 9.5 degrees baume). In short, Port grapes can handle more spirit.

Estufagem

This process, which takes place in large concrete tanks, is peculiar to Madeira. It is reserved for entry level Tinta Negra wines and involves heating up the wine via a hot water pipes (pictured) for a three month period.



Traditionally, wines were heated to a maximum of 50 degrees, but Blandy’s have reviewed this practice as a result of a project (one of two) being carried out with the university. As a result of the findings of Impact Project 1, The Madeira Wine Company now heats wines up to a maximum of 45 degrees (and not in one push) to obtain a better result, with less cooked or burned flavours.

These wines are then aged in wooden vats for two years to stabilise.

Canteiro ageing

<http://www.thewinedetective.co.uk/blog/portugal/madeira-a-drop-in-the-ocean-but-increasingly-well-worth-seeking-out/>



Premium madeiras (which for Blandy's means 5, 10, 15, 20 year old and Colheita and Vintage/Frasqueira wines) are canteiro aged, that is to say, aged on ullage in seasoned barrels (averaging 50 years old at Blandy's).



Controlled oxidation is a key part of the Madeira winemaking process, as is evaporation. In stark contrast to table wines, Madeira barrels and casks are stored in warm, light conditions (pictured) in order to concentrate the wines by evaporation (of water). The average evaporation – the so-called “angel’s share” – is 3.5%. Generally wines start off in 600l barrels. Younger wines are housed in the higher, hotter lodge/warehouse floors, which gets the concentration process off to a good start.

It is this process of warming and oxidation – whether by estufagem or canteiro which, combined with Madeira’s signature high acidity, accounts for Madeira’s indestructibility/remarkable ageing capacity – as Falcão puts it, *“you do all the harm you can do to the wine at the beginning.”*

Canteiro-aged Colheitas must be aged at least five years and for up to 18 years (usually in barrel, though the legislation doesn’t require it). Vintage/Frasqueira wines are aged for at least 20 years in barrel; there is no maximum limit – Blandy’s still has barrels which have been ageing since 1920.



With its own cooperage (pictured), barrels are fastidiously maintained and cleaned to remove tartrate build up (pictured) and the bacterial spoilage risk and volatile acidity



which comes with it. Albuquerque says he doesn't want to see fenugreek or a touch of "vinagrinho" in future wines, because these characteristics reflect high volatile acidity. For Falcão, low pH (3.4/3.4) together with relatively high volatile acidity (1.1 to 1.2) "drives Madeira" – a touch of "vinagrinho" "is a compliment, not a fault."



The second Impact Project is studying the impact of barrel-ageing wines in two different places. This project is ongoing but winemaker Francisco Albuquerque anticipates that, as a result of this study, it will be possible to make very good Vintage Madeira in the future without waiting 20 years (the current minimum period for this category).

Recent developments

Madeira may have a stuffy reputation, but in common with the Port industry, producers are keen to introduce a new generation of consumers to Madeira.

With input from former majority shareholders (between 1989-2011) the Symingtons of Port fame, Blandy's pioneered Colheita Madeiras in 2000 which, Chris Blandy likens to Port's Late Bottled Vintage category, an analogy I'd not previously made. However, similarly, they're premium single vintage wines which can be consumed relatively young.

Meanwhile at Henriques & Henriques, saying "we need to move up," Jardim recently launched the first 20 Year Old Madeiras, a Terrantez and Malvasia (click [here](#) for my notes), which have now been joined by a Verdelho (see below). Barbeito, Blandys and Borge have also launched 20 Year Old Madeiras (and Barbeito, a 30 year old). Though wine bottled thus could instead be bottled as Vintage Madeira and command a higher price, Jardim says the market expects Vintage Madeiras to be significantly more than 20 years old on releases – "young vintage doesn't work." Making the case for blending, he adds "if we're blending, we are concentrated not on vintage, but on pleasure." It's hard to argue with that!

Henriques & Henriques are also experimenting with barrels seasoned by whisky and bourbon producers and/or seasoning new barrels for whisky producers. Ageing



Madeira for just 18 months in these barrels “*creates different influences in the wine [and whisky],*” says Jardim.

A more controversial development is the arrival of a new player in the market which, says Jardim, is aimed at addressing the government’s concerns about surpluses (this year volumes are up 25%). For the first time this year, the Cooperativa Agricola do Funchal (hitherto focused on selling agricultural products) bought grapes. Since it has no old stocks, its Madeira wines will not enter into the market for a few years.

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Tasting highlights: The Annual Madeira tasting

Barbeito Malvasia Reserve 5 Years Old

A smoky, nutty nose with peanut brittle intensity and sweetness to the palate, ripe bruised cinnamon-edged apples too. Approachable and generous without sacrificing freshness. Very well done.

Barbeito Sercial Reserva Velha 10 Years Old

An expressive Sercial, smoky, nutty, almost coconutty with mirin and jasmine lift; savoury nam pla hints too.

Henriques & Henriques Sercial 15 Year Old

Lovely intensity with delicacy and purity to this mineral-laced Sercial’s pithy orange and grapefruit. Long and pure.

Henriques & Henriques Bual 15 Year Old

Mocha and cafe crème lend a delicious savoury balance to its richer panfort/dried fruit. A well-focused beam of acidity lends line and length. Tight and long. Very good.

Henriques & Henriques Verdelho 20 Year Old

Intensely fruity on nose and palate with fabulous concentration and pithy pungency to its smoky guava and salted limes, hints of green tomato and brine too. Satiny tarte tatin caramel balances/calms its frisky acidity. Wonderful balance, purity and penetration makes for a very long, reverberating finish.

Barbeito Single Harvest 1999 Medium Dry

Juicy, tight and nutty, with a subtly smoky backdrop; love the juiciness. Very good.

Justino’s Madeira Colheita 1996



Tinta Negra with a dash (5%) of Complexa, another red variety, this is a surprisingly primary, youthful wine, sweet, round and honeyed with caramel, almonds, orange peel and toffee apple notes. Very moreish; good purity.

Barbeito 2000 Malvasia Colheita Single Cask 721 d +e

A hint of leafy, lifted pyrazene to the nose. The palate is very intense, racy too with a nutty spine fleshed out with caramelised oranges and milk chocolate; woody and just a touch dusty going through.

Pereira d'Oliveira Colheita Malvazia 1992

A sweet, toothsome wine with toffee, pecan pie and a rich woody timbre, which lends balance. A touch of “vinagrinho” and spice lends lift and length to the finish.

Pereira d'Oliveira Sercial 1989

Youthful tight, firm, long and precise with a pretty but intense ring of mirin.

Pereira d'Oliveira Verdelho 1981

A lovely concentration of tangy, juicy, super-spicy chutney-like fruit to this Verdelho. Youthfully firing on all cylinders.

Pereira d'Oliveira Terrantez 1977

Described by Rui Falcão as a funky style with “bottled acidity,” this has a touch of “vinagrinho” and a sulphurous volcanic pungency to nose and palate. An enervating brine-washed palate is multi-layered with a bitter (phenolic) radicchio, clove, cardamom and coffee edge to its dried chutney-like fruits and slated green olives. Visceral, characterful stuff and I love it!

Henriques & Henriques Bual 1957

A wonderfully composed Bual, with soft, seamless layers of dates, clove, caraway and sweeter cinnamon spice, which melt into its rich dates and dried fruits. Tangy acidity extends and carries a long, lingering finish. An absolute treat.

Food & wine matching highlights: Henriques & Henriques

Keen both for you to match Madeira with food rather than incorporate it in dishes and to offer contemporary menu suggestions, **Barbeito** ([here](#)) and Blandy's ([here](#)) have food and wine matching sections on their websites.

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Source: <http://www.thewinedetective.co.uk/blog/portugal/madeira-a-drop-in-the-ocean-but-increasingly-well-worth-seeking-out/>

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