



Written by Julia Harding MW 10 Dec 2014

Mad about madeira

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It has become almost an annual tradition that the top Madeira wine producers - Barbeito, Blandy's (The Madeira Wine Company), Borges, D'Oliveiras, Henriques & Henriques and Justino's - come to London to show their latest releases and ranges at the Portuguese embassy.

The latest news from the island concerns a labelling nicety that required a significant change in mindset. Tinta Negra, once more familiar as Tinta Negra Mole and known on the Canary Islands as Negramoll, is the most widely planted grape variety on the steep-sloped island of Madeira but until now it has been the grape that dare not label its name. While the varieties previously referred to as 'noble' (the term 'traditional' is now preferred as less grape-ist) - the light-skinned Sercial, Verdelho, Bual/Boal and Malvasia/Malmsey - are displayed on labels, as is the now-rare Terrantez, Tinta Negra has had to remain anonymous, even though it is pretty likely that this dark-skinned variety is responsible for those wines on which the name of one of the Fabulous Four does not appear since it represents more than 80% of the 400 ha of vineyards on the island devoted to madeira production.

This varietal embarrassment seems to have been based on the belief that white grape varieties produced the finest madeira, that Tinta Negra could not produce high-quality wines, but according to Barbeito's fastidious winemaker Ricardo Diogo V Freitas, it can, but it needs to be treated with the same specific care and respect as are given to Sercial, Verdelho, *et al.* Ricardo Freitas is one of those who has campaigned for the rehabilitation of his beloved Tinta Negra but there is general agreement among the producers that this is Good Thing.

At a masterclass that preceded the main tasting, journalist and madeira specialist Rui Falcão reminded us that official age-related terms such as 5 Year Old or 10 Year Old cannot be interpreted in any way literally - they do not even indicate average or minimum age. They are impressionistic terms that describe an anticipated style and flavour profile and are awarded to a wine solely on the basis that the official tasting panel accept that they taste as a 5 Year Old or 10 Year Old *should* taste. And it is not uncommon for a wine to be refused. This may sound arcane or insignificant but it highlights the skill required to blend such wines from a multitude of possible

ingredients of different ages and sweetness levels.

Another little detail that Falcão let slip was that Madeira is the only place where vines grow side by side with bananas, thanks to the near-tropical climate.

Both Jancis and I are huge fans of madeira so it was fortunate for me that Jancis was deeply submerged in 2013s in the Rhône Valley on the day of this London tasting. I found it a huge test of willpower not to swallow some of these stunning wines. In addition to these six producers, there are two others: Madeira Vintners (not yet exporting) and J Faria & Filhos. Artur de Barros & Sousa has been bought by D'Oliveiras and it is not yet clear whether the name will be retained. Only two producers, Henriques & Henriques and the Madeira Wine Company, have vineyards. Most of Madeira's grapes are grown by more than 12,000 growers, some with just a few rows. Just imagine the effort involved in grape purchasing. If you consider the climatic and topographical obstacles involved in making these wines, you cannot help but wonder at their quality.

The most up-to-date and exhaustive coverage of the island and its wines can be found in the new (2014) edition of Alex Liddell's *Madeira: The Mid Atlantic Wine*. I haven't had time to read it yet but I do know that it will be in Paul Doherty's annual round-up of this year's harvest of wine books, to be published here towards the end of this month.

The wines are grouped by producer and then in the order tasted. Note that all the drink dates are 'Drink now'. This is not the same as 'Drink up', which is intended to suggest some urgency. It simply means that, because these wines are so sturdy and long-lived, any time you read these notes, now or in the future, is the time to drink the wine. And they'll keep for several months after opening, so you don't need to wait for the holiday or a celebration to do that initial sip for quality-control purposes.

In one of my notes below, I suggest that a particular wine would be good with food but I wasn't sure what to suggest as a match. Danny Cameron of UK specialist importer [Raymond Reynolds](http://www.raymondreynolds.co.uk/) (<http://www.raymondreynolds.co.uk/>) reminded me that madeira is sometimes a good match for ingredients such as mushrooms that challenge many wines - and that in the fashionable madeira parties in Savannah, it was a popular accompaniment to roasted terrapin... He also reminded me of his very useful [madeira and food matching chart](http://www.jancisrobinson.com/articles/matching-food-with-madeira) (<http://www.jancisrobinson.com/articles/matching-food-with-madeira>) (based on tastings with Barbeito wines) that we published on this site some years ago.

BARBEITO

- **Barbeito, Single Harvest Meio Seco 2003 Madeira**
(<http://www.jancisrobinson.com/tastings/view/558483>)

Distinctive aroma of almond paste and barley sugar and a slight stemmy note like hay, with a touch of lapsang smokiness. That same almondy flavour on the palate. Relatively dry and extremely mouthwatering. (JH)

Drink now

16.5 (<http://www.jancisrobinson.com/tastings/view/558483>)

- **Barbeito, Sercial 10 Year Old Reserva Velha NV Madeira**

(<http://www.jancisrobinson.com/tastings/view/558484>)

Fresh with barley-sugar aromas. Pure and arrow-like, concentrated but elegant. Tastes intensely dry. Goes on and on. (JH)

Drink now

17 (<http://www.jancisrobinson.com/tastings/view/558484>)

- **Barbeito, Malvasia 10 Year Old Reserva Velha NV Madeira**

(<http://www.jancisrobinson.com/tastings/view/558485>)

Much more winery than many madeiras – depth and complexity without any cooked character. Spicy apricot flavours and tastes remarkably dry for a Malvasia. More honeyed than caramelised. Elegant and fluid across the palate with captivating bitter-orange focus on the mid palate. (JH)

Drink now

17.5 (<http://www.jancisrobinson.com/tastings/view/558485>)

- **Barbeito, Single Cask 224 d+e Malvasia Colheita 2000 Madeira**

(<http://www.jancisrobinson.com/tastings/view/558486>)

Unusually pale, like all the Barbeito wines. Subtle and honeyed. Delicate spice and apricot and that lovely hay freshness. Deep and rich on the palate with a very definite wine character. There's a nuttiness which I get on so many of the Barbeito wines but it is more almond than madeira's more common walnut. Elegant and upright. There's terrific energy – spiky on the tongue plus tension and extreme length. Tastes not as sweet as many Malvasias. (JH)

Drink now

18 (<http://www.jancisrobinson.com/tastings/view/558486>)

- **Barbeito, Ribeiro Real Verdelho 20 Year Old 2000 Madeira**

(<http://www.jancisrobinson.com/tastings/view/558487>)

I find the aroma of the Barbeito wines so much harder to describe because they are very much themselves, distinctive, not a prototype madeira - even though they are also distinctively madeira, if that makes any sense. This has quince sourness along with dried-

apricot fruitiness, then actually quite steely on the palate despite the hint of sweetness. There's an amazing backbone that is not just the acidity but a kind of rigour. That tension is there again. Strikes me as a wine that would be great with food but what? Goes on for ever with a bitter-orange purity. (JH)

Drink now

18.5 (<http://www.jancisrobinson.com/tastings/view/558487>)

- **Barbeito, Ribeiro Real Bual 20 Year Old 2000 Madeira**

(<http://www.jancisrobinson.com/tastings/view/558488>)

Bright orangey gold. More walnut than almond here. Amazing complexity and depth. Even higher acidities in Barbeito wines than in any other producers. Bright orangey gold. Gorgeous caramelised orange and apricot and a slight nuttiness. Barley sugar, grapefruit. Beautiful – so much energy and life and length. Mouthwatering and full of flavours the colour of burnt umber. Intensely tangy long finish. Quite a grip at the very end – tannins? (JH)

Drink now

18.5 (<http://www.jancisrobinson.com/tastings/view/558488>)

BLANDY'S (MADEIRA WINE COMPANY)

- **Blandy's, Sercial 10 Year Old NV Madeira**

(<http://www.jancisrobinson.com/tastings/view/558367>)

Not very expressive, some quince and chamomile on the nose. Just a hint of lapsang. Clean and very fresh and elegant. Would be a terrific aperitif. That quince flavour on the palate too. Dry, refined and long. (JH)

Drink now

17 (<http://www.jancisrobinson.com/tastings/view/558367>)

- **Blandy's, Verdelho 10 Year Old NV Madeira**

(<http://www.jancisrobinson.com/tastings/view/558368>)

Spicy barley sugar with a touch of caramel. Intense sour orange on the palate, sourly dry tasting despite the sweetness. Not as refined as the Sercial, more power. (JH)

Drink now

16.5 (<http://www.jancisrobinson.com/tastings/view/558368>)

- **Blandy's, Bual Colheita 2002 Madeira**

(<http://www.jancisrobinson.com/tastings/view/558369>)

Newly released. Gentle caramelised apricot and barley sugar but with a smoky edge. Joyful and so expressive. Then more restrained on the palate. Tastes drier than I expected, with a fine sour finish. Very long. (JH)

Drink now

17.5 (<http://www.jancisrobinson.com/tastings/view/558369>)

- **Blandy's, Verdelho Colheita 1973 Madeira**

(<http://www.jancisrobinson.com/tastings/view/558370>)

Newly released. Gloriously complex mature aroma: starting to show that nutty character but still showing candied orange peel and Verdelho's characteristic citrus. There's caramel on the nose too but not sweet, if that makes sense. Glorious purity and complexity and intensity at the same time. It has power but no aggression. (JH)

Drink now

18 (<http://www.jancisrobinson.com/tastings/view/558370>)

- **Blandy's, Sercial Colheita 1998 Madeira**

(<http://www.jancisrobinson.com/tastings/view/558371>)

Smoky – a hint of lapsang or malt whisky with delicate apricot coming through behind that. Ripe citrus, typical of Verdelho. Sweeter than I expected on the palate. Rounded and more fruity on the palate. RS c 70 g/l. Apricot danish pastry. Gentle for madeira. (JH)

Drink now

17.5 (<http://www.jancisrobinson.com/tastings/view/558371>)

BORGES

- **Borges, Sercial 10 Year Old NV Madeira**

(<http://www.jancisrobinson.com/tastings/view/558410>)

Not a lot on the nose – orange and almond but not pronounced. Dry and scented on the palate with an attractive grip on the finish – as if there were some tannin tied up with the acidity. Very long and full of energy. (JH)

Drink now

16.5 (<http://www.jancisrobinson.com/tastings/view/558410>)

- **Borges, Verdelho 10 Year Old NV Madeira**

(<http://www.jancisrobinson.com/tastings/view/558411>)

Nutty aroma, burnished. Fluid, fresh and zesty but not quite as persistent as the Sercial. Long but tails off. (JH)

Drink now

16.5 (<http://www.jancisrobinson.com/tastings/view/558411>)

- **Borges, Boal 10 Year Old NV Madeira**

(<http://www.jancisrobinson.com/tastings/view/558412>)

Delicate aroma of walnuts and dark non-sweet toffee, touch of coffee. A delicate roasted-fruit flavour – with the sweetness that comes with that. Wonderfully fresh finish. (JH)

Drink now

17 (<http://www.jancisrobinson.com/tastings/view/558412>)

- **Borges, Malvasia 10 Year Old NV Madeira**

(<http://www.jancisrobinson.com/tastings/view/558413>)

Subdued nose and then vibrant on the palate: bitter-orange marmalade, super crisp and lively. Mouthwatering bitter-orange finish. (JH)

Drink now

17 (<http://www.jancisrobinson.com/tastings/view/558413>)

- **Borges, Boal 15 Year Old NV Madeira**

(<http://www.jancisrobinson.com/tastings/view/558414>)

Like the 10 Year Old Malvasia, quiet on the nose, just a touch of caramelised apricot. Super-tangy spice on the tongue, then rich and polished on the finish. Almost a bit aggressive but stays on the side of intensity and persistence. (JH)

Drink now

17 (<http://www.jancisrobinson.com/tastings/view/558414>)

- **Borges, Malvasia 15 Year Old NV Madeira**

(<http://www.jancisrobinson.com/tastings/view/558420>)

The second smallest winery on the island. In Funchal. Polished wood in colour and aroma. Burnished and nutty. Sweet and figgy on the palate. Satisfyingly rounded but with cracking acidity – so long and intense. Tastes less sweet than Justino's 10 Year Old Malvasia though

it is probably sweeter in terms of RS. Burnt orange on the long lively finish. Intense and insistent but not at all aggressive. (JH)

Drink now

17.5 (<http://www.jancisrobinson.com/tastings/view/558420>)

D'OLIVEIRAS

- **D'Oliveiras, Terrantez Colheita 1971 Madeira**

(<http://www.jancisrobinson.com/tastings/view/558394>)

Sour but caramelised quince aroma with some bitter toffee. Power and intensity on the palate, typical D'Oliveiras, no holds barred. Amazingly intense orange zest on the palate. A powerhouse of flavour and concentration with bitter-orange finish. (JH)

Drink now

17 (<http://www.jancisrobinson.com/tastings/view/558394>)

- **D'Oliveiras, 10 Year Old Seco NV Madeira**

(<http://www.jancisrobinson.com/tastings/view/558395>)

Slightly odd malted aroma – walnuts and somehow savoury. Again that power on the palate, dry and driving across the palate with force and length. Impressive concentration with a blast of flavour. (JH)

Drink now

16 (<http://www.jancisrobinson.com/tastings/view/558395>)

- **D'Oliveiras, 15 Year Old Meio Seco NV Madeira**

(<http://www.jancisrobinson.com/tastings/view/558396>)

Distinctive aroma: lifted and almost a touch floral but the dominant aroma is that bitter orange and caramel again. A definite curry spice note as it opens. Softer acidity than I expected, giving it an unusually gentle finish (relatively speaking in a madeira context). Broad and long. (JH)

Drink now

16.5 (<http://www.jancisrobinson.com/tastings/view/558396>)

- **D'Oliveiras, Sercial Colheita 1981 Madeira**

(<http://www.jancisrobinson.com/tastings/view/558397>)

Nutty plus burnt orange and a hint of chamomile. Dry and demanding on the palate. This

would wake you up at any time of day or night. Sour burnt orange on the finish. Powerful but not abrasive. (JH)

Drink now

17 (<http://www.jancisrobinson.com/tastings/view/558397>)

- **D'Oliveiras, Verdelho Colheita 1994 Madeira**

(<http://www.jancisrobinson.com/tastings/view/558398>)

Smallest winery on the island. Started 1850 and they still have some 1850 vine. Unusually, they make a vintage every year. No intervention for 20 years, no topping up, then they try it and decide if it is a vintage. Smells much tarter than the Blandy's Verdelho 1998. Sour orange and quince. More citrus. Noticeable VA. Very powerful, more obviously oxidative, a little burnt, tastes drier than the Blandy's 1998. A little harsher too and the bitterness on the finish that is typical of D'Oliveiras. More aggressive style. RS 70 g/l. (JH)

Drink now

16.5 (<http://www.jancisrobinson.com/tastings/view/558398>)

- **D'Oliveiras, Boal Colheita 1984 Madeira**

(<http://www.jancisrobinson.com/tastings/view/558399>)

Walnut and polished wood – more noticeable volatility here. Driving intensity and fabulous acidity completely undermines the sweetness. Intensely tangy orange-peel finish. (JH)

Drink now

17.5 (<http://www.jancisrobinson.com/tastings/view/558399>)

- **D'Oliveiras, Malvazia Colheita 1989 Madeira**

(<http://www.jancisrobinson.com/tastings/view/558400>)

Smells more savoury than the Boal 1984 even though it is sweeter. Nutty, bitter-caramel aroma, earthy. The most harmonious of all the D'Oliveiras wines tasted in this group. As powerful as the others but less strident. Gorgeous dried-apricot fruit intensity. (JH)

Drink now

17.5 (<http://www.jancisrobinson.com/tastings/view/558400>)

HENRIQUES & HENRIQUES

- **Henriques & Henriques, Monte Seco NV Madeira**

(<http://www.jancisrobinson.com/tastings/view/558428>)

Relatively pale. Unusual nose: nutty and somehow woody (not oaky). Dry with flavours of hay and chamomile. Needs to be served well chilled - as the label says 'Extra Dry Aperitif'. Savoury finish. Tangy and dry. (JH)

Drink now

16 (<http://www.jancisrobinson.com/tastings/view/558428>)

- **Henriques & Henriques, Sercial Single Harvest 2001 Madeira**

(<http://www.jancisrobinson.com/tastings/view/558431>)

Smoky sour orange. Barley sugar. So fresh it tingles on your tongue. Fabulous energy and electricity. Chamomile and apricots. Extreme purity. Tight and fine and dry. (JH)

Drink now

17.5 (<http://www.jancisrobinson.com/tastings/view/558431>)

- **Henriques & Henriques, Verdelho 15 Year Old NV Madeira**

(<http://www.jancisrobinson.com/tastings/view/558434>)

Much less expressive on the nose than the Sercial 2001. Some nutty caramel. Then real power on the palate. Intense citrus and just a slight hint of date. So intense it is hard to taste the flavours separately – you just taste the whole. Deep apricot on the finish. (JH)

Drink now

17.5 (<http://www.jancisrobinson.com/tastings/view/558434>)

- **Henriques & Henriques, Boal Single Harvest 2000 Madeira**

(<http://www.jancisrobinson.com/tastings/view/558435>)

Aromas of date and walnut matched on the palate, with a rounded breadth on the palate even with its charge of acidity. Generous in the mouth but still finishes so clean. Great length. (JH)

Drink now

17 (<http://www.jancisrobinson.com/tastings/view/558435>)

- **Henriques & Henriques, Malvasia 20 Year Old 2000 Madeira**

(<http://www.jancisrobinson.com/tastings/view/558438>)

Deep burnt umber colour. Very distinctive aroma – something roasted, also coffee, walnuts. Burnt caramel. Those walnuts give it an almost savoury note on the nose. Sweet but very nutty on the palate. More mushroomy and savoury, earthy. Tastes drier than the Borges

even though the RS is about the same. This one is not as instantly appealing but it grows on you. (JH)

Drink now

17.5 (<http://www.jancisrobinson.com/tastings/view/558438>)

- **Henriques & Henriques, Fine Rich Colheita 1997 Madeira**

(<http://www.jancisrobinson.com/tastings/view/558439>)

Both spicy and perfumed – fragrant and almost a touch floral even with all those other powerful madeira aromas of caramelised orange and ripe lemon. Fine, defined flavours of orange peel and a touch of caramel. (JH)

Drink now

17 (<http://www.jancisrobinson.com/tastings/view/558439>)

JUSTINO'S

- **Justino's, Sercial 10 Year Old NV Madeira**

(<http://www.jancisrobinson.com/tastings/view/558401>)

Delicate smoky apricot. Just a touch floral – orange blossom and orange peel. A little hard on the palate and tart on the finish but still full of flavour. (JH)

Drink now

16 (<http://www.jancisrobinson.com/tastings/view/558401>)

- **Justino's, Verdelho 10 Year Old NV Madeira**

(<http://www.jancisrobinson.com/tastings/view/558402>)

Not very expressive on the nose so that the spirit sticks out a bit. Some barley sugar. Electricity on the tongue – like putting your tongue on a battery. Very crisp acidity, almost too much but just in check with the sweetness. Seville orange and grapefruit pith on the finish. (JH)

Drink now

16 (<http://www.jancisrobinson.com/tastings/view/558402>)

- **Justino's, Malvasia 10 Year Old NV Madeira**

(<http://www.jancisrobinson.com/tastings/view/558403>)

The biggest winery on the island. RS c 160 g/l. Deeper brown. Smells like alcoholic raisins but also a little smoky. A little spirity. Like a cherry dessert made in Portugal, apparently,

according to the wine-loving Portuguese ambassador to London who is sitting next to me. Clafoutis? And cherry flavoured on the palate too, some spice. Dates and figs. Rounded and generous and gentle. Perfectly balanced with the sweetness and acidity. (JH)

Drink now

17 (<http://www.jancisrobinson.com/tastings/view/558403>)

- **Justino's, Fine Rich Colheita 1995 Madeira**

(<http://www.jancisrobinson.com/tastings/view/558408>)

This has more of the walnuts and polished wood of maturity, and a touch of coffee and dark caramel; spicy and rich and attention-grabbing on the palate. Amazing concentration and still so zesty and alive. Very, very persistent and insistent. (JH)

Drink now

17.5 (<http://www.jancisrobinson.com/tastings/view/558408>)

- **Justino's, Fine Rich Colheita 1998 Madeira**

(<http://www.jancisrobinson.com/tastings/view/558409>)

Dates and figs on the nose and on the palate. Tastes sweeter – and more gentle – than the Justino's 1995. Then finishes with a raisiny sweetness after very fresh acidity on the mid palate. (JH)

Drink now

17 (<http://www.jancisrobinson.com/tastings/view/558409>)