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WILL LYONS ON WINE

Wine-Lovers Will Treasure Madeira

The tiny volcanic island produces a wealth of remarkable and seemingly timeless wines

By WILL LYONS



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Jean-Manuel Duvivier

"I HOPE IT HASN'T affected the brakes, or we will be killed," says Ricardo Freitas, winemaker and owner of Madeira wine company Barbeito. "We will be killed," he repeats, as we navigate down a precipitously steep mountain road about 500 meters above sea level.

We're on the tiny volcanic island of Madeira, some 600 kilometers west of Morocco. It's early morning and, having met Mr. Freitas in the winery, I have asked to visit the vineyards. So we're driving in his plush 4x4 to Jardim da Serra, a parish in the winemaking region of Câmara de Lobos. Unfortunately, he has just pulled the handle off the handbrake.

"It's funny that you were just admiring the car," laughs Mr. Freitas, "and now we have this!" He waves the handle at me as we pull away from the vine-rows of Sercial grapes and begin our descent.

The day before, Humberto Jardim, co-owner of Madeira producer Henriques & Henriques, had advised against taking his Land Rover up the small track to his vineyards as it was raining and he couldn't guarantee he could keep control of the car. I didn't blame him. Even if you don't have a fear of heights, navigating the blind hairpins and steep cliff roads that weave between Madeira's vineyards is a daunting prospect.

Today we're in luck though: The car is an automatic and it looks as though the brakes have kicked in.

Before I came to Madeira I thought the remote Upper Douro valley in northern Portugal was the toughest place to grow grapes. Now I'm not so sure. Some of the vines in Madeira grow on such steep terraces that pickers have to lie down to gather the harvest and then it's a 45-minute walk to the truck that will take the grapes to the winery.

Faced with this sort of physical trial, one wonders why they do it. When bananas, sugar cane, potatoes and corn all vie for the land, surely there must be easier ways for the island's farmers to make a living?



Whatever the reason for their persistence, there is a long history of growing grapes this way, explains Mr. Freitas. Here, as in Champagne, the industry is made up of a few big producers who buy grapes from hundreds of smallholders who tend the land. In fact the vineyards are so small—with the vines often trained on pergolas above other crops—that it's easy to miss their presence.

But we should be thankful for Madeira's 2,000 or so small grape-growers. For in a wine world fast heading toward a globalized, standard, homogenized style, Madeira is one of the few wines that is without parallel: Anyone who has sipped it will know, it is simply unique.

What Madeira achieves in style is a dance between scintillating, electric acidity and sweetness. The acidity flickers across the tongue and can give the sensation of biting into a lemon, then leaves the tongue refreshed rather like peppermint. In short, it is reviving.

There are five major styles, based around the five grape varieties planted: Sercial, Verdelho, Bual, Malmsey and Tinta Negra Mole. Sercial is the driest and Bual the sweetest.

My own preference is for Sercial which, with its tangy, savory character, makes for a pleasant lunchtime aperitif. Verdelho is the most complex, and its off-dry style can pair with cold meats and soups. Bual has a pleasing butterscotch, vanilla finish which is attractive with cheese or as a digestif.

But while the everyday Madeira is all well and good, for the collector the real treat is to be found in vintage wines. Anyone who has more than a passing interest in history and wine will find these nothing short of astonishing.

Due to the way Madeira is made, the wines can last for decades and even centuries. As with port, the fermentation is stopped with alcohol but it is the aging of Madeira, where the barrels are exposed to temperatures of more than 40°C, that makes the wine bulletproof. During the aging process it undergoes a form of oxidation, which means that a bottle can stay fresh, even when opened, for many years. It is an extraordinarily long-lived wine.

While on the island I visited producers Pereira D'Oliveira, Henriques & Henriques, Blandy's and Barbeito, and tasted wines from as far back as 1920, 1900, 1894, 1890, 1875, 1863 and even from a demijohn 1834. None of them showed any sign of decline. In fact, what struck me was their intensity of flavor and freshness.

These are wines that one can still buy for a few hundred euros which, compared to the many thousands achieved at auction for aged Bordeaux or Burgundy, feels a bit of a steal.

Perhaps the price will never go up. As Mr. Freitas says: "As a Madeira wine producer you will never be rich, but you will be rich in your heart."

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