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drinking out loud

Finally, Making It to Madeira

It's the "Jurassic Park" of fine wine

Matt Kramer

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FUNCHAL, Madeira—In the playbook of nearly all wine writers is a certain evangelical fervor for undiscovered, underappreciated or overlooked wines. Some of my colleagues wax rhapsodic about Sherry, for example. For my part I've banged on about Barbera and Lambrusco back when both were seen as rustic relics. (How times have changed, eh?)

Now, I'm not about to do the same for Madeira. But I will say this much: At some point in your wine life, you need to make sure to try a really good Madeira. And I can promise you two things:

One is that you'll likely have a bit of trouble wrapping your brain—never mind your palate—around Madeira. It's like no other wine, although certain tawny Ports and some Sherries can vaguely resemble it.

Second is the likelihood that the more you make yourself available to it, the more intriguing Madeira will become. Some forms of beauty take a while to penetrate.

I knew when I decided to live in Portugal for three months that I absolutely, positively would go to Madeira. I'd never been to the island. After all, it's not exactly on the way to anywhere. Madeira is more than 600 miles from Portugal, on the same latitude as Morocco.

A volcanic island, Madeira has rich soils, ridiculously steep slopes (my underpowered rental car literally could not make it up some steep hills, refusing to move forward like a balking mule) and an improbably cool, even climate year-round, with temperatures rarely dipping below 55° F in winter and rarely climbing above 78° F in summer. This last bit about mild temperatures is critical, by the way.

There are all sorts of interesting details about Madeira wine. But let me tell you the two that stand out for me. One involves the aforementioned business about temperature. The other centers on a common misconception about how the best Madeiras are made.

The cool temperature range translates to a critical wine fact: The base wine for Madeira, never mind which grape variety is employed, rarely exceeds 9 percent alcohol. You read that right—9 percent, give or take a point.

Indeed, in an effort to improve the overall quality of the wine, the local controlling authority for Madeira wines recently raised the minimum alcohol level of the base wine from a once-common 7 percent. The grapes struggle to ripen, which is why there's so little conventional table wine produced on Madeira.

"We used to see 7 percent wines all the time," said Leandro Gouveia, who hosts visitors at Vinhos Berbeito, which is arguably Madeira's most modern-minded producer. "Setting a 9 percent minimum was a way of raising the overall quality level for everybody."



Kent Hanson

Matt Kramer found a range of tastes from another time in Madeira.

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What that ultra-low alcohol level really means is a bracing acidity. And that, in turn, is the key to Madeira's improbable capacity to age. Effectively, the best wines are indestructible largely due to high acidity. It's also what makes Madeira seem so delicate compared to, say, Port or Sherry.

Tales of still-vibrant Madeiras that date to the 1700s are no lie. I had one recently at a dinner party in Porto that the host, a Port wine professional, swore dated to 1795. And, brother and sister, I'm here to testify that the wine was no faint echo. That *Jurassic Park* creature was *alive*. I've now tasted several Madeiras from 1875 and the early 1900s that were similarly vital. One from 1908—about which more in a moment—rocked my world.

The other critical fact involves Madeira's famous *estufa*, or "oven" treatment. Anyone who's had even glancing contact with Madeira has heard about how, centuries ago, Madeira producers discovered that their barrels of wine shipped to the West Indies tasted better than those that never left the island. The heat in the holds of the ships made the wines taste richer, fuller and just plain better.

So Madeira producers long ago decided to keep the wines at home and, after the brandy fortification was incorporated, just heat them. So today, some young Madeira wines are placed in a temperature-controlled stainless steel tank (the *estufa*) and heated to about 50° C (122° F) for several weeks or longer.

But here's the key: The *estufa* method is only used with lower-grade, cheaper Madeira. The good stuff—the only Madeira you want to try and buy—*never* gets subjected to this treatment. Why Madeira producers don't broadcast this fact at rock-concert decibel levels escapes me.

So what happens with the good stuff? The key word is *canteiro*. The *canteiro* method is simply where barrels or casks of Madeira are left to age naturally in warm rooms. (This is what Italian producers do with their Vin Santo, by the way.)

Where conventional wines are cellared in cool, even cold, underground cellars, the best Madeiras are placed in aboveground storage that warms during the day. Some facilities even have glass windows, the better to admit solar heat.

But Madeira is a temperate place. This natural warmth never remotely reaches that of the crank-it-up *estufa* method. Consequently, these naturally barrel-aged *canteiro* Madeiras mature and yes, oxidize, slowly and gently, resulting in a delicacy of both color and taste that's strikingly absent in the cheaper bottlings. Bottom line: You want to see the word *canteiro* somewhere on the front or back label.

Actually, the word you really want to see is *frasqueira*. This is a bit of Madeira labeling minutia that really matters. It means that the wine has come 100 percent from the vintage year declared on the label, as well as 100 percent of the grape variety declared (Sercial, Boal/Bual, Malvasia/Malmsey, Moscatel, Verdelho, Terrantez or Tinta Negra Mole, among others.)

Not least, a *frasqueira* wine must, by law, be kept in barrel or cask for a minimum of 20 years. Many sail past that, with anywhere from 40 to 100 years of barrel age. Now we're talking real pedigree—true wine privilege.

You can have a vintage-dated Madeira called *colheita* that can be pretty good in its own right. But a *colheita*, or "vintage," Madeira, although sporting a date, is required to have a minimum of only six years of barrel aging, and it needn't be composed 100 percent of a single grape variety. Consequently, a *frasqueira* Madeira is at a whole other level of both extended barrel age and flavor particularity.

If you go to Madeira—and you really should, as it's lovely—and visit one or another of the six or so producers remaining, you'll find that a Madeira tasting follows a set pattern, one that rings the changes from dry (invariably the Sercial grape variety) to sweet (invariably the Malvasia grape variety, sometimes called Malmsey on the label), with a variety of other grapes in between.

On my visit, I spent time with two producers that are, in their respective high-end fashions, stylistic opposites.

One is Vinhos Barbeito, which represents a modern, even adventurous, outlook on Madeira at the high end. Collectively, its wines emphasize finesse and delicacy, with a certain freshness (if that term can be applied to the likes of Madeira) and a persuasive profundity.

The other producer to which I devoted the better part of a late afternoon and early evening is the ultratraditionalist d'Oliveira, which was founded in 1820 and is still owned by the same family. Stylistically, d'Oliveira's Madeiras are richer and heavier than those of Barbeito.

D'Oliveira is almost Dickensian in its old-fashionedness. Nothing about either the appearance or pace of the place

could be called brisk. Never mind. The depth of its offerings very nearly defies belief, with stunning Madeiras that date back a century or more available for sale.

Between these two producers, I tasted 27 different Madeiras of all types. Rather than bore you with tasting notes—many of which, I confess, reveal similar terminology about color (varying shades of topaz or amber) and a variety of descriptors on themes of nutty, saline, sweetness, herbal, spicy and citrus, let me hit the high spots.

At Vinhos Barbeito, a 1992 Verdelho Frasqueira was stunning, delivering the signature spiciness of the Verdelho grape variety along with a multilayered delicacy that made it a standout.

Less fine, but decidedly impressive (and less expensive, too) was a 10-Year Verdelho with a scent of gingerbread and a long, toasty finish.

I found that I preferred the Verdelho grape Madeiras more than, say, the dry severity of the Sercial grape Madeiras—a matter of taste, to be sure.

Nearly every Madeira I tasted at Vinhos Barbeito displayed a delicacy and finesse that made the wines both distinctive and inviting for repeated sipping.

D'Oliveira, for its part, offers a trove of Madeiras that even a specialist in these wines would find extraordinary. You want a 1927 Bastardo (grape) Madeira? You got it. It's a dark caramel in color with a tarry scent and a rich, dense, herbal flavor, especially a touch of mint that's carried along on a seemingly limitless finish.

You want a 1977 Terrantez, an indigenous Madeira grape variety that some assert makes some of the best Madeira wine but which is sadly almost extinct today? D'Oliveira provides. (Lovely layers, with some spiciness, beautiful delicacy and a multidimensional, lingering finish.)

Or how about ...

1912 Verdelho Madeira (bottled in 2003). A very deep amber with a surprisingly perfumy scent that's more flowers than the usual Verdelho spice; exceptionally rich and intense with a tinge of sweetness; a long finish of slight burnt sugar/caramel that is supremely memorable.

1907 Malvazia [sic]. A deep topaz with, strange as it sounds, a slightly greenish cast at the rim and a burnt sugar scent and taste that may lack layers but which delivers a palate-staining taste of seemingly infinite length.

1908 Boal. My favorite. A very deep amber; minty; dense; powerful, with hard-to-believe freshness. Rich but not at all sweet. Even compared with other old Madeiras this one stands out as exceptional in its completeness, with no poke of acidity impaling the rich fruitiness and limitless finish.

You get the picture. It's hard to believe these wines even exist, let alone that you can still buy them. You can waltz into d'Oliveira's retail shop in downtown Funchal and walk away with pretty much as many bottles as you want. And they're available in the United States as well. (Rare Wine Company in Sonoma, Calif., has made a specialty of Madeira, and imports both Vinhos Barbeito and d'Oliveira.)

And no worries about using a wine preservation gizmo, either. Don't waste your Coravin capsule on Madeira. Once opened, Madeira will remain unchanged for literally months afterward, with no more preservation effort than a simple push of the cork back into the bottle between pours.

Yes, Madeira is a taste of another time. So what? More than most such antiques, the best versions can perk up your palate in a way that yet any number of more familiar aperitif (or after dinner) wines could never do.

Member comments 4 comment(s)

Stewart Lancaster — beaver, pa — April 15, 2014 2:07pm ET

what are the prices for these wines

Larry D Harries — Clarkston Washington USA — April 16, 2014 1:03am ET

Where can you buy these wines in the northwest

Paul Lopez — Paso Robles, CA — April 16, 2014 1:30am ET

Well written Matt, thank you, what a lovely island with friendly people. I've been the fortunate recipient of these glorious wines and one such wine bears a story. In 1987 I was invited, along with 12 others, to a Thirteenth Wedding Anniversary in Morro Bay, CA. There at the home of Jackson and Katherine Strauch, a bottle of the 1792 Blandy's Napoleon Bual awaited us along with Jackson's poetic story of how the wine came to be. After pouring thirteen one ounce tastes, he exclaimed, "my that's dry, for it's age!". Amazing to say the least. 13 years later, I was in Madeira sharing my story along with some print that had been in the media about the event. At Barbeito wine lodge, the owners were so taken by my story (and an article sent to us from them) that they ordered a personal tour and I tasted almost every decade from the 1800's with them. Unbelievable, it still takes me back. I'll be back there again soon and look forward to my next round of beautiful wines. Again, thanks Matt!

Matt Kramer — Portland, Oregon — April 16, 2014 1:31am ET

Mr. Lancaster/Mr. Harries: Regarding prices and availability, Madeiras of the sort that I tasted--and I certainly suggest that you should too!--are inevitably neither widely available nor dirt cheap. After all, they are rarities and, obviously, quite old.

Your best bet is to check out the Web site of Rare Wine Company (rarewineco.com) and look at their offerings of Madeiras which run from as little as \$35 a bottle to multiple hundreds of dollars for the really old collector's items. Since Rare Wine Company is also an importer that sells to distributors around the country, they may be able to direct you to a local retailer who carries their brands. Or, if direct shipping to consumers is available in your state, you can have it shipped directly from them.

Do keep in mind that, once opened, Madeira pretty much keeps (standing upright, by the way) forever. So you can dip in repeatedly for a mere sip with no fear of the wine going off. After all, Madeira already is oxidized, so unlike a Chardonnay or Pinot Noir, it's not going to lose its fruit once opened.

That's where I'd start, anyway. Have fun!

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