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## Island mentality: Madeira

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11 FEBRUARY 2016

KATE HAWKINGS

Drinks: Wines Location: Portugal

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They do things rather differently on Madeira. And thank God for that, says **Kate Hawkings**, as she discovers how a tiny, sub-tropical, granitic lump in the mid-Atlantic can produce wines that are tailor-made for the on-trade

Some 350 miles west of Casablanca in Morocco, its dark cliffs rising

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### UPCOMING EVENTS

Bourgogne Wines Club:  
Chardonnay

15 February @ 10:30 am -  
10:30 pm



Courvoisier 'Toast of Paris'  
Newcastle masterclass

16 February @ 1:30 pm - 3:00  
pm

41-51 High Bridge, Newcastle,  
NE1 1EW United Kingdom

vertically from the wild Atlantic ocean, the lonely subtropical island of Madeira hoves into view. A bonnet of cloud hangs over its mountainous peaks, but I catch glimpses of steep, verdant valleys as the plane makes its second attempt landing at the island's notoriously dangerous airport.

I got an enormous thrill, and it wasn't just because I'd survived the flight. Madeira is the home to my desert island wine and after months of planning, I had finally arrived.

Discovered by the Portuguese in 1419, Madeira became an important trading and victualling stop for ships sailing between Europe and the Americas. Wine made on the island was generally taken on board these ships and it was soon discovered that something magical happened during the voyage.

The wine was exposed to high temperatures as it sailed through the tropics, and oxidised as it began to evaporate. Heat and air, usually the sworn enemies of wine, turned madeira into something extraordinary.

Its fame spread quickly on both sides of the Atlantic, and by the 18th century it was so highly regarded it was

used to toast the American Declaration of Independence. By this time, madeira makers had perfected the technique of fortifying the wine then heating it artificially on the island to mimic the effects of the long sea voyages, and these techniques are still used to this day.

Madeira has been saddled with something of an unfortunate association with old buffers in blazers and bow ties, but now a younger generation is being turned on by these amazing wines and selling them to grateful customers. What makes madeira so special is its incredible longevity. Once bottled, it is completely stable and stays miraculously fresh. Which explains why I am not alone in my passion.



## London Beer Week

📅 22 February - 28 February



## In Pursuit of Balance – California wines tasting

📅 22 February @ 10:00 am - 5:00 pm



## SITT Spring tasting – Manchester

📅 22 February @ 10:30 am - 5:00 pm

📍 Lancashire County Cricket Club, Manchester , M16 0PX

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## COMPETITION



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'It's much more than just a wine,' says David Clawson of The Remedy in London. 'It's like drinking a piece of history.'

Old and rare madeiras command high prices, but they seem a relative bargain compared to ancient vintages of other wines. Pulling the cork on a costly bottle of, say, an old Bordeaux, is always rather risky. At best, it will be something of interest despite being well past its prime; at worst, it may be completely knackered and nobody will give you your money back. With madeira, you can be pretty sure of drinking something which still has life and verve, whatever its age.

Like most of us who adore this wine, Clawson has something of an evangelical glint in his eye. 'It's crazy more people aren't really into it, but I think that might be slowly changing,' he says.

Clawson has 11 madeiras on his current list, the oldest being a 1912 Verdelho selling at a cool £45 per 50ml glass, but he also has three 10-year-old wines selling for a mere £5 a pop.

'I think madeiras are incredible value for wines of such complexity and depth, and because they all last indefinitely once opened, there is zero wastage so they're a gift for restaurateurs.'

*'It's much more than just a wine. It's like drinking a piece of history'* David Clawson

Older wines need gentle coaxing back to life, so Clawson decants anything over 10 years' age for 24 hours then pours it back in the bottle to serve.

Madeira's wine has had a chequered history: phylloxera and oidium ravaged the vines in the late 19th century, then two of its biggest markets collapsed, with revolution in Russia and prohibition in America, in the early years of the 20th century.

But things are looking brighter for madeira in this century. EU legislation has made everybody – growers, makers and marketers – clean up and shape up everything they do and it's only fairly recently that the results are starting to show.

### Each to their own

There were once dozens of producers on the island but over time this has dwindled to eight. The Madeira Wine Company is an amalgamation of several old companies of which Blandy's is perhaps the most famous, established in 1811 and now run by Chris Blandy, the seventh generation of the family, with his uncle Michael.

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Joris Beijn, head sommelier at Marcus Wareing Restaurants, has a range of Blandy's on his lists and displays the distinctive bottles at The Gilbert Scott to pique his customers' interest.

'Some people ask for the wines specifically, others don't know it but they really enjoy it when we suggest it,' he says. 'The Verdelho Colheita 1998 is a great introduction and a fantastic wine to go with a cheese board. It has acidity to work with fresher cheeses and sweetness that goes well with blue cheese.'

Meanwhile D'Oliveira is the maker of choice for Clawson at The Remedy. 'It's the most traditional in style, and because it has the largest stocks of old wine on the island, even very old vintages are generally a really good price,' he says. All madeira is distinguished by its glittering acidity but it's fair to say that D'Oliveira's is perhaps the brightest of all.

James Fowler at The Larder House in Bournemouth is also a fan. 'I initially fell in love with the hand-stencilled bottles, then I tasted it and was amazed by the zippier nature of madeira compared to sherry and port,' he says. Fowler pairs his madeiras with food and is also experimenting with it in cocktails.

Justino's wines are characterised by a savoury minerality, and its range of 10-year-old single varietals offer astonishing value for money. Henriques & Henriques is also worth hunting down. Barbeito is the newest producer on the island, established in 1946. Once mainly making bulk wines for blending, it's now known for dazzling modern wines with incredible freshness and lift.

There are around 1,500 growers on the island, some with plots small enough to produce only two or three boxes of grapes each harvest. The volcanic soils suit the grapes well, but growing isn't easy – steep slopes and high humidity mean grapes are mostly grown on narrow terraces, where the vines are trained on latadas – horizontal trellises a metre or so



off the ground. This terrain means that mechanisation is impossible, so everything in the vineyard is still done by hand.

But the grape-growing is simple compared to the arcane ageing and blending techniques these wines may undergo.

When the grapes have been harvested they are sorted and graded under the watchful eye of the Madeira Wine Institute, a body set up to support growers and producers, and to ensure that the high standards of the wine are maintained.

Wine selected to be blended and bottled while young (three years is the minimum age for bottling) is fortified with neutral grape spirit then heated using the estufagem process – water at around 50°C is circulated around the stainless steel vats for three months or more, then the wine is left to rest for another three months before its final destiny is ascertained.

*'I was amazed by the zippier nature of madeira compared to sherry and port'* James Fowler

Wines deemed to have good ageing potential are treated to the gentler canteiro system: after fortification, they are put into casks and racked on the top floors of the wine houses, where they are subjected to ambient temperatures which reach at least 40°C in the summer. Space is left at the top of the casks for oxygen, and natural evaporation through the wood further oxidises the wine, so concentrating its distinctive characteristics. Casks are moved down to lower, cooler storeys as and when the winemaker sees fit.

At this point the makers determine where a wine may end up. Some may be blended and sold labelled merely by style – dry, medium-dry, medium-

sweet or sweet – and the average age in the blend. Even relatively young wines may be blended with something quite ancient from the producer's stocks. They may be labelled with a specific varietal as long as it comprises at least 85% of the total.

Those aged for five years in cask may be

#### MADEIRA AT SWA 2015

While the influence of port and sherry have waned in the Sommelier Wine Awards, madeira's has soared. Always a popular category, 2015 saw an impressive haul of medals for madeira, with Justino's a stand-out performer.

With four Golds, a Silver and one Highly Commended wine, plus a Critics' Choice award for Terrantez 1978, the producer was a worthy winner of the Fortified Producer of the Year award. Justino's is available in the UK via Liberty Wines (020 7720 5350). [justinosmadeira.com](http://justinosmadeira.com)



labelled colheita with the year of their harvest, but could well sit happily for far longer before being bottled and released. A recent legislation change also demands the date of bottling is marked on the label.

Frasqueira wines are those that have been aged for at least 20 years in cask and then for two or more years in bottle. They are labelled simply with the dominant varietal and the year of their vintage, and are the wines that command top dollar.

I tasted more than 100 wines in three days on the island, dating back to 1850. I drank wines in the place they were made, with the people who are currently making them. They work with wines made by makers long-dead, knowing that their own wines won't be drunk until long after they've gone.

There is something incredibly moving about this, and it gives a certain magical gloss to these stunning wines. To those of you who have yet to discover their glory, I urge you to have a madeira, my dear.

## THE GRAPES & STYLES OF MADEIRA

The four major 'noble' grape varieties are always made into the same style:

**Sercial** – dry. This style is best served chilled as an aperitif.

**Verdelho** – medium-dry. This style is perhaps the most versatile; great with smoked fish, sashimi, hard cheeses and ham. A revelation with foie gras.

**Boal** – medium-sweet. Lovely on its own, but also good as a dessert wine for those who prefer the edge taken off the sweetness.

**Malvasia** (also known as Malmsey) – sweet. Great with hard-to-match chocolate.

**Terrantez**, difficult to grow and now rare to find, is perhaps the most highly esteemed amongst madeira geeks for its particularly citric complexity.

**Bastardo** is (perhaps understandably) better known as Trousseau. Only five vintages were made in the past 200 years, the most famous being 1927 and the most recent, 1954. Once almost extinct, Barbeito has been replanting this grape and now has its first wine, from the 2008 vintage, in barrel. We may all be dead before this is bottled.

**Tinta Negra**, on the other hand, is the most widely planted grape on the island and accounts for some 85% of the total. It is the most versatile and resistant of grapes and may be made into any style. Once seen as merely a workhorse grape, fit only for blending and cooking, Tinta Negra is now allowed to be named on labels and can finally hold its head high among the noble grapes. Barbeito is its biggest champion and has recently released some stunning wines made from 100% Tinta Negra.

**Rainwater** is a style, not a grape, but deserves a mention because it's such a good entry-level wine. Always medium-dry and usually made from Tinta Negra, this is Fergus Henderson's madeira of choice, and is what he famously pairs with a slice of seed cake for elevenses at his restaurant St John.

#### Key stockists

Barbeito: Raymond Reynolds, 01663 742230, [raymondreynolds.co.uk](http://raymondreynolds.co.uk)

Blandy's: John E Fells & Sons, 01442 870900, [fells.co.uk](http://fells.co.uk)

D'Oliveira: Bovey Wines, 01208 862613, [boveywines.co.uk](http://boveywines.co.uk)

Justino's: Liberty Wines, 020 7720 5350, [libertywines.co.uk](http://libertywines.co.uk)

Henriques & Henriques: Mentzendorff, 020 7840 3600, [mentzendorff.co.uk](http://mentzendorff.co.uk)

Patrick Grubb sells old and rare wines from various producers. Email:

[patrickgrubbselections@dsl.pipex.com](mailto:patrickgrubbselections@dsl.pipex.com)

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