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Barbeito and Blandy's celebrate

TASTING ARTICLES MADEIRA GLASSES

This year, according to local lore, it is 600 years since the island of Madeira was discovered, one year after the neighbouring Porto Santo island. At that stage in its evolution Madeira was so densely wooded that it was named for the Portuguese word for wood, *madeira*. (In his excellent 1998 book in the Faber and Faber series, *Madeira*, specialist writer Alex Liddell points out that both islands were marked on many fourteenth-century maps, but let's not spoil the celebrations.)

What is clear is that in the fifteenth century the island quickly became an important port of call for all those adventurers plying the Atlantic. Madeira

wine was born out of necessity as ballast for the ships, and as a prophylactic against scurvy on long voyages. The dominant wine company, nay company of any sort, on the island, Blandy's, is celebrating the anniversary with a special, extremely limited release of a historic blend of madeira, about which there are more details below.

Barbeito

Almost exactly a month before Chris Blandy and Francisco Albuquerque came to London with a preview of their commemorative madeira, Ricardo Diogo Vasconcelos de Freitas of Barbeito presented a range of his particularly innovative madeiras over a dinner at St John.

(This is one of London's great restaurants, run by good friends of mine, Fergus Henderson and Trevor Gulliver. The food at our dinner – especially a block of foie gras terrine – was superlative. But it came as no surprise to me to see that Ricardo's UK importers Raymond Reynolds brought their own wine glasses – as anyone I know in the wine trade who goes regularly to St John does as well. St John insist on using horrid stumpy

little things that do absolutely nothing for the taste of any wine; I think they think it's a clever statement. They are wrong. I have had this discussion many a time with Trevor – who spends more and more time on producing and importing wine, which makes it all the more exasperating for those of us who care about wine glasses, and especially of course for someone like me who has designed the perfect wine glass. Enough. On with Barbeito's wines.)

Ricardo explained that our meal was an attempt to recreate the madeira suppers that were so popular in the southern states of America in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. (Savannah still has a Madeira Club. Manny Berk of The Rare Wine Co in California still ships exclusive blends, not usually single varietals, and usually richer than those sold in the UK, to the US.) At that early stage, Ricardo explained, madeira was very different from the heavily fortified wine we know today. It was unfortified and drunk much younger.

So we kicked off with his experimental Verdelho 2017 table wine, which he said started as an

adventure and became increasingly serious. He admitted that he used to be opposed to the idea of table wine made on the island but five years ago when he had the opportunity to take control of a 20- to 25-year-old vineyard himself, as opposed to buying grapes from farmers as is the usual practice on Madeira, he realised he could persuade the vines to produce grapes specifically suitable for table wine, reducing yields in particular.

In those early days of madeira suppers in the southern states, a three-year-old wine was regarded as 'old' whereas today, that epithet is reserved for madeira that's between 50 and 150 years old.

Though he added the caveat that in many cases today, 50-year-old madeira is better quality than such 150-year-old examples as have survived.

Making quality predictions for madeira is perilous, he explained, presumably because it goes through so many different stages in the production process. For example, a 1972 Sercial he made from grapes with only 7.2% potential alcohol, turned out to be one of his best wines ever. The different vine varieties fare very differently each year. And only in

2012, he reported, were all seven of the varieties he vinifies successful.

Barbeito madeiras are noticeably drier than those of other producers. Ricardo seeks to ‘enhance’ the already pronounced acid that characterises madeira (and makes it so very different, for example, from Portugal’s even more famous fortified wine port).

Ricardo is also famous for his championing of Tinta Negra (previously known as Tinta Negra Mole), the vine variety that is by far the most commonly grown on the island even though it is not one of the famous pale-skinned varieties traditionally associated with Madeira. See the detailed background to this tasting note: <https://www.jancisrobinson.com/tastings/35201>. His 2007 did not disappoint...

He did throw in one little titbit for us northern Europeans. He explicitly pointed out that ‘madeira ages much better in cool climates such as Scandinavia and the UK’. Amen to that.

**Barbeito, Single Harvest Tinta
Negra 2007 Madeira**

16.5

This has been made from a single vineyard since 1997, although not all vintages are bottled. Half the grapes are picked less ripe than the rest since Tinta Negra is relatively low in acid. This was bottled in 2018.

Pale orange. Powdery nose. Tangy, with apparently lots of acid. Very clean and well defined with some noticeable sweetness. Definitely up to scratch even if it doesn't carry a famous grape name.

Drink 2018 – 2033

Barbeito, Boal 40 Year Old NV Madeira

17

735 bottles produced.

Pale fox red. Sweet and slightly woody. Dried-peel nose that reminds me of a Sicilian sweetmeat. Butterscotch, buttery, then masses of acid. 2.4 g/l volatile acidity but seems super-clean!

Drink 2017 – 2030

Barbeito, Malvasia 40 Year Old

17.5

NV Madeira

The wine of the local high school director. A blend of wines that are much older and much younger than 40 years old. The age description refers to the wine's character rather than the actual average age. Only about 700 bottles produced. One of his most 'classic' wines with residual sugar under 100 g/l.

Chestnut coloured. The nose is a little loose and candified (like Edinburgh rock/sucrose) on the nose. Brawny, rich character reminiscent of Christmas pudding (masses of dried fruit and sweet spice).

Drink 2018 – 2033

Barbeito, Bastardo 50 Year Old NV Madeira

17

Homage to Ricardo's grandfather Mario. The first bottling of a Bastardo since 1958. Contains 3% Tinta Negra, and some wine from all of 2004, 2007 and 2009!.

Mid brownish tawny appearance with a

peachy nose reminiscent of rum essence.

Very unusual indeed.

Drink 2019 – 2030

Blandy's

'We wanted to produce a wine that represents the greatest wines of Blandy's over the last three centuries', Chris Blandy's told me while explaining their commemorative The Winemaker's Selection. The Roman numerals MCDXIX represent 1419.

A huge amount of effort has been put into the packaging. The bottle itself is based on a picture of one found in an eighteenth-century book. The bottles have been made by hand on the Portuguese mainland and the box in which it sits is made of *vinhatico*, a sort of mahogany exclusive to the island.

The complex packaging also incorporates the wicker and embroidery for which Madeira is known and the whole caboodle is to be launched next week during the island's wine festival. UK importers Fells also have some stock. Blandy's wines are imported into the US by the Symington's

company Premium Port Wines in California and Vineyard Brands in Alabama. Madeira has a long and particular history in the southern states but Blandy reports with some satisfaction that a southern bias is no longer so evident. But the statistics show just how tiny the madeira market is: a total of 30,000 cases sold in the US and 20,000 cases in the UK.

I've always cited madeira as my desert island wine, because a tiny amount goes a long way, and madeira even in an almost-empty bottle lasts forever. It therefore seems a little counter-intuitive to me that Blandy's have decided to put this special blend into magnums, 600 of them, exclusively – but then what do I know about marketing rare wines? Chris Blandy's rationale for magnums only is, 'We're the only ones to do large-format madeira.' Though, he admits, 'other companies may also be doing something to celebrate the 600th anniversary'. The magnum contains 11 different vintages, from 1863 to 2004, so the average age is apparently around 100 years.

Chris Blandy and winemaker Francisco Albuquerque showed me a sample of this historic

wine and two more wines they are releasing at the same time as the commemorative magnums that are a mere 40 years old or so. See notes below.

We talked about the madeira market in general. ‘Prices were ridiculously low’, observed Blandy, ‘but they have risen recently. Last year was another record for exports, especially in the US, Japan and China – and the volumes sent to the French market have rebounded.’ The French typically regard madeira as a cooking ingredient, and there is a special provision for denaturing ‘cooking madeira’, which may be only a couple of years old, by adding salt to it. ‘Good for cash flow,’ was Blandy’s comment.

We Brits have not been so helpful for sales, apparently. In 2018 the volume of madeira shipped to the UK fell by 40%. But Blandy reckons this was mainly the most basic three-year-old madeira stocked by supermarkets, who have been closing stores and trimming their ranges. They may have given over the shelf space to other, more fashionable alcoholic drinks.

RS 55 g/l. 768 bottles, 45 magnums, 22 double magnums and three Balthazars produced.

Lustrous orange. Rancio buttery nose.

Then great tang and masses of acidity.

Undertow of deep mahogany and quite a bit of chew. Very long and clean. Bracing!

21%

Drink

Now

£230 RRP

Blandy's Malmsey 1981 Madeira **17**

RS 100 g/l – really low. 999 bottles, 55 magnums, 25 double magnums and three Balthazars produced.

Darker orange tawny. Hint of woodiness on the nose and then superb balance of sweetness and acidity on the palate.

Much less sweet than most Malmseys.

The palate has won me over. Very persistent with some bourbon notes.

Unusually concentrated. 21%

Drink

Now

£235 RRP

Blandy's, MCDXIX The Winemaker's Selection NV Madeira

18

A wine blended to commemorate the discovery of Madeira by João Gonçalves Zarco in 1419. Wines from 1863 to 2004. There are eleven wines in the blend in total, including three from the rare Terrantez grape. Only 600 magnums to be released in September 2019. Medium-sweet style: 34 g/l dry extract, RS 95 g/l, TA 10.5 g/l. Blending this involved opening up all manner of ancient bottles – 1863, for example. ‘The less I knew about it the better’, says Chris Blandy.

Brownish tawny with a green rim.

Complex nose with obviously many ingredients. Mellow. Chestnut, butter, treacle, acidity! Passionfruit. Very fresh. Energetic. Even a note of brazil

nuts. No shortage of interest in this
extraordinary wine. 21.7%

Drink

Now

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