

Madeira: Fortified for All Occasions

BY NEAL MARTIN | OCTOBER 08, 2019

Earlier this year I published my first article on Madeira, which focused on ancient bottles that together had accumulated over six millennia of demijohn/bottle age. As I stated back then, these have become scarce and prohibitively expensive, and so I promised a more down-to-earth report on recent releases that are more rationally priced and available. I have done my best. Some of the prices here run into four figures – apologies for that – but you will also find some that retail for under a pair of ten-dollar bills.

A majority of these tasting notes come from the annual Big Fortified Tasting, held in London at the end of April. This event embraces all types of fortified wine, though with this report in mind, I put my palate on a tight leash and led him only to the Madeira producers. These notes were subsequently augmented with samples from Miles Madeira that were sent to my address by their US importer. I should add that the job is not finished. At a future date, I will add releases from Broadbent and Henriques & Henriques and further releases from Barbeito, not to mention the Historic Series via importer Rare Wine Company. Rather than waiting, I chose to publish these 50-odd tasting notes and aim for rolling coverage to keep the Madeira torch aflame.

Traditional Grape Varieties

In my previous article, I recounted the history of Madeira, so perhaps in this second piece it is worth reminding ourselves of the grape varieties synonymous with styles: Sercial (dry), Verdelho (medium-dry), Bual (medium-sweet) and Malvasia/Malmsey (sweet). It should be noted that prior to World War II, it was not customary for American or Scandinavian markets to use varietal names; when they were employed, they often denoted the style of Madeira rather than the actual variety.

Sercial – In mainland Portugal, this variety is known as *Esgano Cão*, or “dog strangler,” thanks to its sharpness and often mouth-puckering acidity. In most vintages it does not exceed 11 degrees in alcohol. There is only around 16 hectares planted on the island because this is a notoriously fickle variety to cultivate, although it thrives around locales such as Seixal and Jardim da Serra. Do not let “dog strangler” put you off; Sercial is an outstanding variety that works wonders with Madeira. It is usually paler in color than other noble varieties. If you are accustomed to sweet wines, its taste can be initially jarring; however, in time you fall in love with its vitality and complexity. It can be enjoyed young, but with maturity it manifests delicious soy, pine and resinous aromas. Madeira is too often served at the end of the meal. Like Verdelho, Sercial works much better as a welcoming *aperitif*. Don't take my word for it – try it yourself.

Verdelho – Prior to phylloxera, Verdelho comprised around two-thirds of Madeira's plantings. Now it is down to around 50 hectares, predominantly on the north coast, where it can cope with a less benign climate. It is usually cultivated close to the ground instead of up high on trellises. It tends to reach between 10 and 12 degrees of potential alcohol, so it is a little sweeter than Sercial and a tad darker in hue. In my experience, there is a much larger differential between Verdelho and Bual than between Verdelho and Sercial. I admire Verdelho immensely. Like Sercial, it makes a startling and memorable *aperitif*, that acidic drive revivifying the palate for what is to follow; though it is less uncompromising than Sercial thanks to its tendency to produce dried honey aromas and flavors. I have encountered many Verdelho Madeiras over a century old with undiminished vitality and profound complexity.

Bual (Boal) – Known on the island as Malvasia Fina, there is just under 16 hectares planted in the warmer climate on the south coast of the island. Bunches are generally smaller and more compact than other varieties, often achieving around 11 to 13 degrees in sugar content, and they tend to be the darkest in color among the noble varieties. Many of the finest 19th-century bottles have been Bual, often endowed with just the right amount of richness not to overwhelm the senses. Unlike Sercial and Verdelho, a Bual should come at the end of a meal, when those honeyed, caramel and marmalade flavors can seduce the senses.

Malvasia – Malvasia is the heritage variety on the island, having been cultivated not long after settlers first arrived. Bottles are often stenciled with the English corruption, “**Malmsey**,” a name that gained notoriety when the Duke of Clarence was allegedly drowned in a butt of Malmsey at the Tower of London in 1478. (I can think of worse ways to go.) Despite its fame, Malvasia flirted with extinction in the 1940s, farmers finding it too sensitive to climate and mildew. It demands warm, benevolent microclimates and is best grown on trellises. Therefore, it is mostly found in the south of the island and is particularly renowned within the ambit of Jardim do Mar. It can reach up to 13 degrees sugar content and provides the richest style of Madeira, usually more unctuous than Bual though slightly paler in color. Barley sugar, marmalade and dried fruits are synonymous with a fine Malvasia.

Tinta Negra – This grape variety was referred to as Tinta Negra Mole – *mole* translating as “soft,” in reference to its skin – until it was discovered that the indigenous Madeira variety is different from its namesake on the Portuguese mainland. At around 260 hectares or 58% of total plantings, it is the most widely grown variety throughout the island and provides more than half the grapes that produce Madeira. Madeira writer Alex Liddell points out that prior to 1993, at the lower-priced commercial end, what was labeled Sercial, Verdelho, Bual or Malvasia was often in fact Tinta Negra. This is because Tinta Negra is a dab hand at replicating the styles of those aforementioned grapes; this versatile variety can turn its hand to anything if you cultivate it in the right location. Want a drier Sercial style? Just plant your Tinta Negra at altitude and/or in a cooler microclimate. Bual? Somewhere warmer. Fortunately, these days, producers are more truthful, but Tinta Negra can still produce a wide array of styles, from dry to sweet. In the hands of a good grower, a fine Tinta Negra is certainly achievable and can provide a cost-effective introduction to the delights of Madeira. It might lack the esteem of the island's noble varieties, but in recent years, it has gone up in people's estimation.

Then we have peripheral grape varieties such as **Terrantez**. I expounded the virtues of Terrantez in my first Madeira report, so I will merely repeat that some apotheoses of Madeira have come from this variety and I am thankful that though it plays a minor role, its future now appears safe. I must admit a soft spot for **Bastardo**, if only for its glorious name that provides endless puns for writers like myself. As far as I am aware, no Madeira producer has released a Bastardo for decades; bottles from the 19th century up until the 1920s, especially from Leacock's, were delightful. According to Alex Liddell, just 1.73 hectares of Bastardo are extant, and consequently it is usually blended with Tinta Negra to make a dry-ish Madeira.



Ricardo Freitas, pictured with colleague Paula Andrade, at the fortified tasting in London. Freitas has popularized limited individual barrel bottlings of Madeira in recent years.

Types of Madeira: Blends, Garrafeira and Colheita

Madeira with some indication of age begins with 3-year-old blends, though I have tasted very few of these, since they tend to be mundane and of little interest to those with discerning taste. This report begins with 5-year-old blends. Madeira producers adopt different approaches; for example, those under the Madeira Wine Company use traditional grape varieties while others use Tinta Negra. Barbeito uses both. I would encourage those venturing into this category for the first time to head for more interesting 10- and 15-Year-Old Madeira, which can be both varietal and non-varietal. The former can represent great value for money, and the verisimilitude to a Verdelho or Bual gives you an idea of those wines without opening your wallet too wide. Beyond that, the Madeira adventurer can upgrade to either a *garrafeira*, which must stipulate variety, be aged in wood for a minimum of 20 years and pass a standard of quality, or 20-, 30- and 40-year-old Madeiras, which show much more maturity and secondary characteristics compared to their 10- or 15-year-old counterparts. I include a couple of interesting 40-year-old blends from Barbeito in this report.

Of course, there is another option: *colheitas*, which are essentially *garrafeira* that have not been aged in wood for 20 years. A *colheita* must come from a noble variety, which incidentally includes Tinta Negra, and undergo five years' maturation. This gives Madeira producers much more flexibility, creating a useful bridge between blends and *garrafeira*. In the hands of a talented winemaker, a *colheita* can represent a sweet spot between price and quality, which is ideal for restaurants that find it difficult to persuade diners to share an entire bottle of expensive old Madeira. The fact that most of these come in handy 50cl bottles makes them perfect, notwithstanding that you can always reinsert the cork and pour a "cheeky sharpener" whenever you like. Recent years have witnessed the proliferation of single-cask bottlings, especially from Barbeito, whenever a winemaker feels that a small lot has a distinguishing characteristic they wish to capture in bottle. Specific barrels are usually denoted on the label. You will find two or three in this report. They are often excellent in quality and good value, even if limited in quantity by nature.

Of course, there are other types of Madeira. One occasionally sees "Rainwater," essentially a style of Verdelho, and there are multi-vintage *solera*, but since neither is included in this report, I will save descriptions for a future article.

Overall Impressions

As readers will already be aware, this writer is a fully paid-up member of the Madeira fan club. However, that does not excuse me from objective appraisal. Suffice to say that among this clutch of releases, there are highs and lows. Barbeito is perhaps the most consistent producer, thanks to the exacting standards of Ricardo Freitas, and a wine like his 10-Year-Old Verdelho Reserva is a perfect entry point. The 2007 Single Harvest Tinta Negra demonstrates that this variety deserves respect. Best of all, I guide readers to two 40-year-old blends bottled in summer 2018: the Boal Vinho do Embaixador (pictured below) and the Malvasia Vindo do Reitor. The former is a selection of Boal lots over the last 40 years, aged by the *canteiro* method and subsequently blended with older lots. Just 739 bottles were produced, each one individually numbered. Some of the wines that I tasted may not currently be imported into the United States, but I have included guide prices based on other export markets.

Blandy's, the best-known brand under the umbrella of Madeira Wine Company, is one that I have written about and reviewed before on Vinous. For many, including myself, they serve as the entry point into the island's wines, not least because they cater to tourists flocking into Funchal by boat or plane. Confusingly, the business encompasses various labels that the family bought over the years, including Leacock and Cossart. Since Chris Blandy took over, the company has gained a sense of direction and winemaker Francisco Albuquerque has been allowed to demonstrate his winemaking chops, in terms of both commercial releases and limited luxury bottlings such as the MCDXIX Winemaker's Selection that I recently highlighted in Cellar Favorite. Blandy's sent me additional recent bottlings, the standout being the 1980 Sercial, closely followed by the 2004 Malmsey at the other end of the richness scale. Blandy's is more dynamic today than it has ever been.

Pereira d'Oliveira is a Madeira house whose wines I have found a little inconsistent; although when they are on form, they can be exceptionally good. At the commercial end, their 15-Year-Old Medium Sweet, made in the style of a Boal, is recommended; likewise their 1994 Verdelho. I have tasted a few bottlings of 1978 Terrantez and they never quite deliver the goods. Certainly they are delicious Madeira, yet they lack the "wow factor." Pereira d'Oliveira recently bottled a 1929 Tinta Negra Sweet that I tasted in London. It costs a pretty penny, at just under \$600.00 per bottle; although it does attest to the longevity of the variety, and it is hard to find Tinta Negra with such bottle age. Readers should note that I have augmented my tasting notes with a smattering of ancient bottles back to 1850, most of which remain commercially available through their US importer.

H M Borges's **1993 Vintage Verdelho** is very fine, and their **10-Year-Old Sercial** is another recommended entry point for those wishing to drink a drier style. I cannot find an importer in the US, though both of these are widely available in Europe and elsewhere. Justino's was pleasingly consistent. Their **10-Year-Old Malvasia** is excellent and, at just over \$50.00, represents great value for money. The samples from Miles Madeira, part of the Madeira Wine Company, generally did not achieve the same levels as Barbeito or Blandy's; although they are much cheaper than their competitors, and if I have change from a twenty-dollar bill for a bottle, I do not have too many complaints.

Readers will notice that I have not provided drinking windows in this report. Madeira does not obey the same laws of evolution, since oxidation is part of its creation. In my experience, stating drinking windows is at best guesswork and at worst misleading. Simply remember that nearly all bottles of Madeira, irrespective of age or style, are intended for consumption when they are released onto the market, and cellaring them further will rarely give you much reward. Far more important is to open them well before drinking them. Even the entry-level bottles will benefit from a couple of hours of air, while ancient bottles deserve 24 hours minimum to aerate, preferably 48 hours (or longer). Remember that you can stick an unfinished bottle in the fridge and return for another pour whenever you wish – over not just days but sometimes months. *Then* you will see some evolution in your Madeira.

I must confess that I raised an eyebrow when I saw the price tags attached to some recent bottlings. Given the effort that goes into their limited production, I understand that a significant cost is justified. However, Madeira remains a niche beverage that must nurture a new generation of Madeira lovers that extends beyond enthusiastic sommeliers. While there are plenty of impressive Tinta Negras and non-vintage labels that are extremely affordable, the stepping stone to a grander single-vintage bottling should not, in a pecuniary sense, be placed too far away. Nevertheless, I hope this article encourages more wine lovers to consider Madeira in all its manifestations. The lack of labeling and the fact that there are only eight producers can give a misleading impression that Madeira is merely iterations of a single style, whereas in reality it embraces a multitude of forms, from searing dry Sercial to rich, unctuous Malmsey, perfect as an *aperitif* and as a dessert wine; from bottles that capture the freshness of youth to those that transcend time. Somewhere out there waits a bottle of Madeira that suits you, a fortified for any occasion.

You Might Also Enjoy

Cellar Favorite: MCDXIX, The Winemaker's Selection Madeira – Blandy's, Neal Martin, September 2019

Hurdling Over Time: 19th-Century Madeira, Neal Martin, February 2019

Cellar Favorite: Blandy's Madeira – Recent Releases, Neal Martin, March 2018

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93_{pts}

Barbeito NV 40-Year Old Malvasia Vinho do Reitor

Madeira, Madeira

Fortified/spirits from Portugal

Drinking window:

The 40-Year-Old Malvasia Vinho do Reitor has 94gm/L residual sugar and was bottled in August 2018. It has a well-defined, focused bouquet of walnut, ginger and sandalwood aromas, hints of potpourri emerging with time. The fresh, elegant palate offers marmalade and quince, with ginger biscuits and a subtle oxidative note toward the poised, refined finish. This bears all the marks of classy winemaking. Recommended.

Neal Martin. Tasting date: April 2019

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94_{pts}

Barbeito NV 40-Year Old Boal Vinho do Embaixador

Madeira, Madeira

Fortified/spirits from Portugal

Drinking window:

The 40-Year-Old Boal Vinho do Embaixador has 74gm/L residual sugar and was bottled in July 2018. It has an elegant beeswax, almond, apricot and honeyed biscuit bouquet that feels very well defined. The palate is underpinned by a fine line of acidity and offers plenty of marmalade and quince notes plus a touch of lemongrass toward the discreet, almost understated finish. Pure class. Highly recommended.

Neal Martin. Tasting date: April 2019

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87? pts

Barbeito 1994 Verdelho Frasqueira MEF

Madeira, Madeira

Fortified/spirits from Portugal

Drinking window:

The 1994 Verdelho Frasqueira MEF has 63gm/L residual sugar and was bottled in September 2018. Uncharacteristically for Barbeito, I find this rather muddled on the nose, which features brushes of acacia honey and hazelnut but some odd tertiary notes. The palate is better, with a fine minty opening, allspice and ginger notes and a harmonious finish. I just cannot work out the aromatics here.

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91 pts

Barbeito 1988 Sercial Frasqueira

Madeira, Madeira

Fortified/spirits from Portugal

Drinking window:

The 1988 Sercial Frasqueira has a light, elegant bouquet of walnut and cigar humidor. The palate is viscous on the entry, offering hazelnut and almond notes and revealing ginger and molasses toward a slightly viscous finish countered by sharp acidity. I appreciate the tension of this Sercial, which gains cohesion with aeration. Excellent.

Neal Martin. Tasting date: April 2019

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92 pts

Barbeito 2004 Malvasia Colheita Single Cask 132a+d

Madeira, Madeira

Fortified/spirits from Portugal

Drinking window:

The 2004 Malvasia Colheita Single Cask 132a+d was bottled in June 2018. It has a pungent, oxidative nose that takes no prisoners. Notes of mushroom and sandalwood infuse the honeyed aromas, although I would have liked more focus. The fresh, vibrant palate is quite rounded in texture, offering orange peel, flapjack, sesame and ginger toward the lively finish. Moderate in length, this is a distinct and characterful Malvasia that should offer at least a decade's drinking pleasure.

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92 pts

Barbeito NV 10-Year Old Verdelho Reserva

Madeira, Madeira

Fortified/spirits from Portugal

Drinking window:

The 10-Year-Old Verdelho Reserva, which was bottled in 2017, has 63gm/L residual sugar. The very pure bouquet features vibrant marmalade, quince and saffron aromas. The palate comes bounding out of the blocks at full pelt, fresh and poised, and quite saline compared to Barbeito's other cuvées, with penetrating stem ginger and dried apricot notes toward an engaging finish that beckons you to take another sip. Superb!

Neal Martin. Tasting date: April 2019

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92 pts

Barbeito 2007 Single Harvest Tinta Negra

Madeira, Madeira

Fortified/spirits from Portugal

Drinking window:

Winemaker Ricardo Freitas told me that with respect to the 2007 Single Harvest Tinta Negra, half the grapes were picked before full maturity in order to capture freshness. It has 62gm/L residual sugar and a pH of 3.31. The light, airy bouquet offers acacia honey, pressed white flowers (dandelion?) and orange pith. The palate is fresh and clean on the entry, with a tang of marmalade and stem ginger that segues into a potent hazelnut and brown spice finish. These is a lot going on in this lively Tinta Negra, and it comes highly recommended.

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88 pts

Barbeito NV 5-Year Old Boal

Madeira, Madeira

Fortified/spirits from Portugal

Drinking window:

The 5-Year-Old Boal, which was bottled in 2017, has 85gm/L residual sugar. The very pure bouquet offers honey, orange blossom and a touch of hazelnut. The palate is built around a fine bead of acidity, displaying hints of caramel on the midpalate and leading into a smooth finish that just needs a little more acidity.

Neal Martin. Tasting date: April 2019

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