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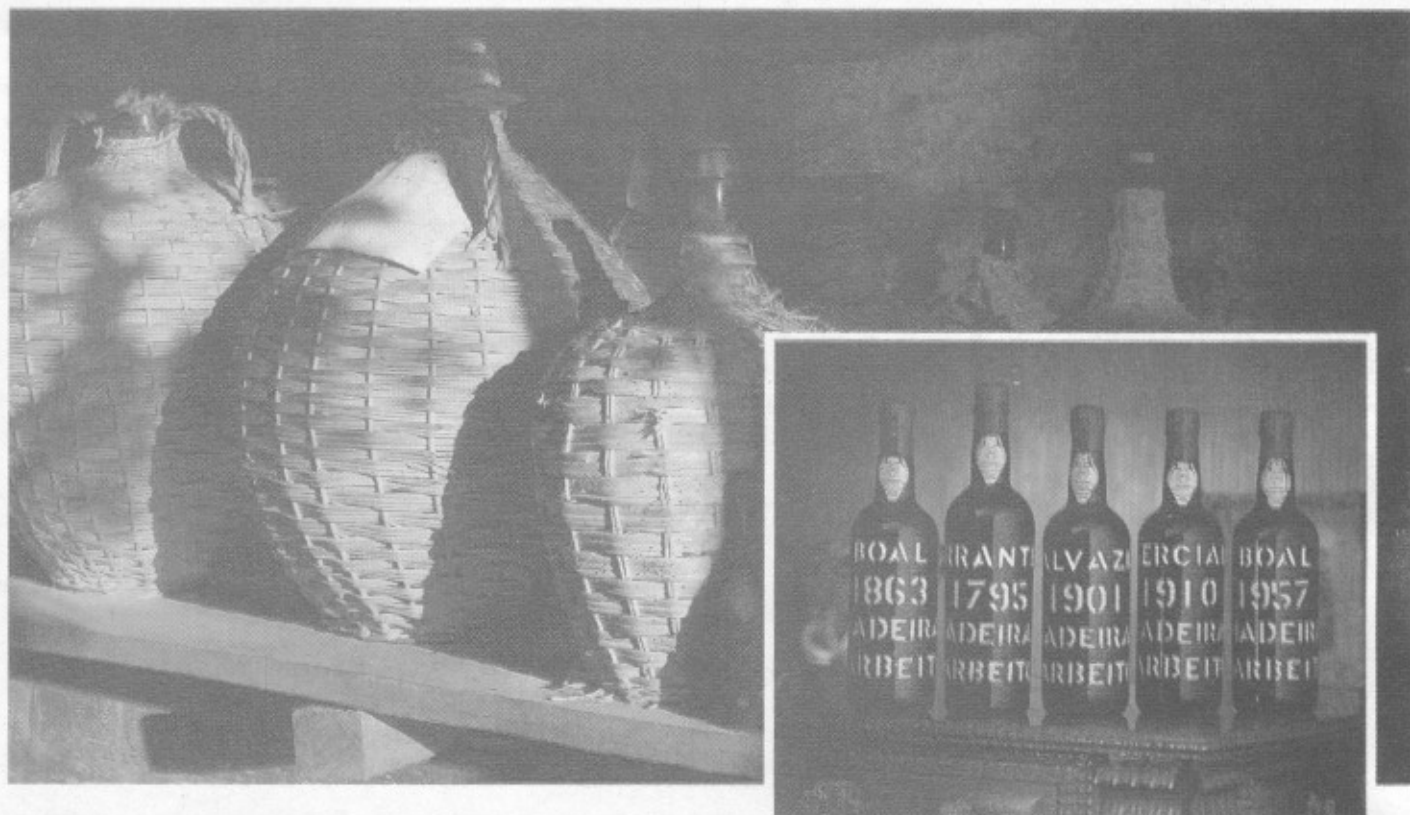
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Immortal Wine

Madeira wine is finally on the upswing. Madeiras are being rediscovered for their classic versatility, unique character and their newfound quality.

By Jonathan Read

ABOVE: Vintage Madeira bottles with their distinctive, stenciled "labels."

Photo Courtesy of Vinhos Barbieto

Madeira wine is one of the three great fortified wines of Iberia, along with Port and Sherry. In Colonial America, Madeira was the wine of choice and was used to toast both the Declaration of Independence in 1776 and the inauguration of George Washington in 1789. George Saintsbury, in his classic *Notes on a Cellarbook*, wrote, "I know no wine of its class that can beat Madeira when at its best... In fact, I think Madeira and Burgundy carry combined intensity and complexity of vinous delights further than any other wines. There is possibly something of the unlawful about their rapture..." Today, however, Madeira is typically thought of as merely a cooking wine to add an edge of tang and richness to sauces and soups.

Madeira (the place where the wine is made) is a volcanic island under Portuguese control that lies 600 miles southwest of Lisbon and 400 miles off the coast of Morocco. Today, despite encroaching development and a couple of larger vineyards, grapes are still grown in very small and remote steep terraces cut into the hills of this breathtaking island. Portugal joined the EU in 1986 and a great deal of investment on the island and in the wineries has taken place since. Today, Madeira is making wines of a higher quality than ever before and top restaurants, wine shops, and connoisseurs the world over are rediscovering the wine's quality, versatility, and unique character.

During Europe's colonial expansion, Madeira's location made it a natural refueling point for any ships traveling south around Africa to Asia and the last stop for those traveling west to the Americas. The growing colonies in the Americas and in the West Indies had a strong demand for wine and Madeira was perfectly positioned to satisfy that demand.

Nearly every ship that came to the harbor of Funchal, the regional capital of the island, loaded up with Madeira wine before they moved on. In 1665, in an effort to get a monopoly on goods shipped from Europe to the colonies, King Charles II of England forbade the export of European goods to British colonies except through British ports and in British ships. The one exception was the island of Madeira, as England had strong relations with Portugal through royal marriages. This played a significant role in North America becoming one of the largest consumers of Madeira wine at the time, as the colonists bought and traded for nearly a quarter of the wine produced on the island.

The wines of this time are thought to have been mostly dry, white, and rather light in body but with a searing and preserving acidity resulting from the island's volcanic soil. Despite their hardness, the wine often became unstable and deteriorated during their long abusive journey across the ocean. Fortifying the wine with spirits for added stability, as done in Oporto (Port), became common practice by the mid-1750s.

It was discovered that this fortified Madeira was dramatically improved during the long ocean voyages. After months of sloshing back and forth in a ship's hull, with high heat and lower barometric pressure, the sugars gently integrated, and the wine as a whole became rounded, concentrated, and oxidized. The more the wine was "beaten up" the better it became, especially (according to legend) if the ship crossed the equator. These wines were called *vina da roda* or "wines

The Classic grapes of Madeira

Sercial: Grown at the highest altitudes, about half a mile above sea level. It is harvested last, and makes the driest of Madeiras. Sercial wines have a pale golden color in their youth and a defined nuttiness with an edge of caramel and a mouthwatering acidity. Serve chilled as an aperitif or with consommés and salty appetizers.

Verdelho: Grown near sea level and makes wines that are slightly sweeter than Sercial. Verdelho wines have a golden color with hints of brown and olive green. Initially they have a sweet flavor of toffee and nuts but finish dry. This grape makes for some of the best combinations of elegance and power. Serve with a slight chill on its own or with rich soups and cheeses or even spicy Indian food.

Bual (boal): Grown at up to a quarter mile above sea level, these are low yielding vines producing small amounts of fruit. Bual wines are rich and dark with luscious flavors of butterscotch, chocolate, and orange peel all balanced by the tang of acidity. Enjoy with a slight chill on its own or with dry cheeses, fruit and nut tarts, or milk chocolate.

Malvasia (malmsey): Grown near sea level, this grape makes the sweetest and darkest of all of the Madeiras. These are luxuriously rich wines incorporating flavors of espresso, dark chocolate, dried fruit, and molasses still, with bright acidity. Serve at a cool room temperature after the meal by itself or with cream cakes, dark chocolate, or cigars.

The three other "classic" varietals are rarely found today. They are Terrantez, which is making a limited comeback, as well as the sweet Moscatel and the red Bastardo. Wines that were once erroneously labeled for a "classic" grape (where none were used) are now labeled only for their relative sweetness. In this way "Sercial" level is now labeled "Dry," "Verdelho" is "Medium Dry," "Bual" is "Medium Sweet," and Malmsey is called "Full, Rich, or Sweet."

Other Madeira Label Terms:

Rainwater: A historic term that is now relegated to wines of no minimum age that are semi-sweet and are typically made entirely from Tinta Negra Mole.

Finest: This term refers to the most basic Madeiras, bottled after only three years aging in bulk. With increasing care being taken to improve the *estufa* tank-heating process for even these modest wines, they are much more reliable and less coarse-tasting now than in the past.

Reserva: This is usually a blend of wines aged five years, at least partly in cask. This is the youngest age where it is permissible to use the classic grape varieties in the blend, although the more common, Tinta Negra Mole is often used. Many of these wines still have a raw, unfinished feel to them.

Reserva Velha: These wines are aged for ten years in cask, and are much mellower and more balanced than wines designated Reserve. Generally they're made from a blend of the classic grapes.

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of the round voyage" and had a rich and pungent baked flavor with a tangy backbone of acidity that prevented even the sweetest wines from being cloying.

The colonies were among the first to enjoy this miraculous wine and it became the most popular wine of our forefathers in every social class. All along the eastern seaboard Madeira Clubs emerged as the archetypes of today's wine-tasting groups. Especially famous and passionate were those in the cities of Charleston, Baltimore, Philadelphia, and Savannah (where the Madeira Club continues even today). Aristocratic families were regarded for their taste in Madeira almost as much as they were for their wealth or lineage. Large collections of Madeira were synonymous with status and were passed on to future generations as family heirlooms. Madeira, because of its complete oxidation, is very robust and will keep for years, with the best lasting for centuries. Even after it was opened, (assuming it was re-sealed), the contents would keep for weeks, months, and even years. Word of its popularity in America from British traders and troops led to many connoisseurs of Madeira in Britain as well. The wine industry of Madeira was at its peak, and demand far outstripped supply, when the first of a series of disasters struck.

As it did all over mainland Europe, *Oidium* or Powdery Mildew struck the island in 1852. By the time it was found that the disease could be controlled by dusting the vines with sulphur, it had almost destroyed wine production in Madeira. After a brief period of rebuilding, the American phylloxera louse arrived in 1873 and destroyed 6,000 acres of vines before resistant rootstock was discovered. The results of these two afflictions were devastating to

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Extra Reserva: Wines aged for at least fifteen years in cask. As with the *Reserva Velha* wines these are typically made from classic grapes.

Vintage: The greatest of all Madeira wines. These wines must mature for a twenty-two years before release, but many age much longer.

The Producers: Very reliable Madeiras of every type can be found from the larger houses like Justino, Henriques & Henriques, and the Madeira Wine Company (the largest on the island whose labels include: Blandy's, Leacock, and Cossart Gordon). Though they are more difficult to find, the wines from the lesser known houses of Barbieto and Pereira d'Oliveira are well worth the search for both quality and value. These two houses are particularly noteworthy for vintage wines as they both have incredible stocks going back through the last two centuries.

the entire economy and population of the island. The wineries had to survive by any means they could.

Only about 20 percent of the vineyards were replanted with classic Madeira vines. Most were replanted with European and American hybrids as they would be more disease resistant and would yield more fruit (though often at the expense of quality). While the remaining industry had its peaks and valleys through world wars and Prohibition, production was increasingly relegated to lower quality bulk wine hastily made from poor grapes. It is from this bulk wine that today's poor image of Madeira persists.

Today there are codified processes and definitions as well as minimum requirements of quality enforced by the EU for all types of Madeira. About 2,200 growers still cultivate grapes on the island,



A view of the coast on the island of Madeira.

Photo: Jonathan Read

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most of whom plant other fruit and vegetables intermixed between the vines. Madeira is ordinarily a blend, the age stated on the label indicating the youngest wine in the blend, and the name of a grape variety on the label. The named variety must constitute at least 85 percent of the blend as per EU regulation. Each classic variety is grown at altitudes that best accentuate its character.

The various levels of sweetness that are associated with the individual grapes are largely, though not entirely, due to when the wines are fortified during fermentation. The juice from the Malvasia grape is fortified right at the beginning of fermentation, Boal and Verdelho after around four to seven days, and Sercial about a month after the fermentation started. The earlier it is done the less sugar will be converted into alcohol and therefore the sweeter the wine will be. Tinta Negra Mole, an under appreciated red grape that is typically used for lesser wines, can be made to imitate the other varieties depending on the altitude at which it is grown. While not used in vintage wines, wineries such as the long established Vinhos Pereira d'Oliveira are making beautiful Madeira partially, if not exclusively with the grape.

It is no longer necessary to send the wine on a trip around the world to get classic Madeira qualities. Today the journey is simulated on land through a process called *estufagem* (derived from the Portuguese word for "hothouse") where the wines are heated at a high temperature in tanks or casks with direct or ambient heat respectively for a minimum of three months. Since heating in this way happens quickly, some of the wine's sugar will turn to caramel. When the heating is finished, the wine is allowed to cool and is then transferred into wooden casks to mature for a minimum of eighteen months. There is always some air in the casks so the wine completely oxidizes. This can make for fine versatile wines, though never as complex or refined as the venerable vintage wines.

The best wines however, and all the vintages, are aged in the *canteiro* method in which the wine is stored in lodge attics in Funchal, and warmed naturally by the sun in wooden casks for at least three years. Wines treated with this method do not display the burnt caramel edge of the *estufagem* method, and have a more intricate, fresh, and refined taste. Individual casks are monitored as they develop and the best are isolated early on as they could evolve into the intensely complex and structured vintage wines that are the pinnacle of Madeira and rank among the truly great wines in the world. Vintage Madeira must mature in cask for a minimum of twenty years, though most spend much longer—up to 100 years and more is not unheard of. In this time the sun's heat leads to further concentration and oxidation. To avoid over-concentration the wine will be transferred to glass demi-johns to stop further evaporation. When the wine is finally bottled it will rest two years in bottle before it is released.

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The best vintage Madeiras of today can surpass even the most legendary Madeira wines of our forefathers. Not only has winemaking has improved so much in the past 300 years, but demand no longer outstrips supply, and the wines are sufficiently aged before release to the market. Vintage Madeiras require at least thirty to seventy-five years in cask to sufficiently concentrate and mature. Many benefit from even more time—the trophy pieces of Vinhos Barbieto, an outstanding producer on the island, are the precious few bottles of vintage 1795 Terrantez they still have for sale. Making a unified movement towards quality within the Madeira wine industry, the exportation of bulk wine has largely been abandoned and the image of Madeira wine is finally on the upswing. Madeiras are being rediscovered for their classic versatility, unique character and their newfound quality. These wines are user-friendly, as they are nearly indestructible, and don't require cool storage. One bottle can be savored for months after it has been opened.

Though the situation is improved, good Madeira is still hard to come by and what many retail stores offer may best be left for cooking. The refined five, ten, and fifteen-year-old blends available today are encouraging, but for a truly transcendent experience (for those who are into that kind of thing), the great vintage Madeiras are well worth the splurge. How many wines can be over a century old, let alone two, and not only hold up but also show youth and verve together with grace and antiquity? *Z*



Jonathan Read lived and worked in Nagoya, Japan for two years. He is intimately familiar with Japanese culture and speaks the language well enough to keep from getting arrested in Tokyo. Currently he is studying for his Masters of Wine Degree and is a specialist in sake, Port, Sherry and spirits for Moore Brothers Wine Company.