

## Dear, dear Madeira: source of some of my favourite wines

28 Feb 2003 by JR

I rarely leave a wine region itching to write a computer program, but so it was as I flew the four hours back to London from my first- ever visit to the semi- tropical island of Madeira recently - a dream trip for someone like me who has long been a fan of these rich, nutty but refreshing elixirs.

In fact throughout the short time I spent there I found myself voicing all sorts of bright, modern, and doubtless completely impractical ideas about how the madeira wine industry (the island's only one other than tourism) might be more efficiently run.

John Cossart of Henriques & Henriques, third biggest madeira producer, was bemoaning the fact that the metal hoops on the casks in which this unfashionable, rare but deliciously refreshing strong wine are aged sometimes snap in the extreme heat that is so crucial to the madeira- making process. Perhaps wooden hoops such as are used in other wine regions might do the trick, I suggested. Cossart looked disconcerted, frowned, then muttered distractedly about metal hoops being what he was used to. —

I got the same sort of response when, after his complaint that he was already running out of space in the company's new winery on a precipitous hillside west of Funchal, I wondered whether some of his stainless steel tanks could not double up as both fermentation tank and tank to be heated for the controversial heating or *estufagem* process. (The dominant Madeira Wine Company loudly espouses the *canteiro* system whereby their better wines are heated 'naturally' in barrels not tanks - although both companies in fact use *estufagem* for their cheaper wines and *canteiro* for their best.)

And my computer program idea, for monitoring the uniquely intricate puzzle represented by maturing stocks of madeiras of differing quality, age, grape variety and character, met with a similar blank at the Madeira Wine Company, the dominant producer on the island responsible for such names as Blandy's, Cossart Gordon, Leacock and Miles.

But if I were the visitor from hell, as doubtless I sound, the chaps I met there could not have been more courteous. For this is sleepy island life with a heavy dose of old British gentry. Rapid change and modernisation would not sit easily in a place which depends for its economic survival on tourists of retirement age (however hard they are working to encourage younger visitors - and rumour has it that the palatial Reid's Hotel is to install a children's area).

But the madeira wine industry is in transition, and very much for the better. For a start, shipping out mediocre wine in bulk was outlawed last year so that, for example, French-owned Justino Henriques, the only company to rival the MWC in size, and a specialist in supplying French kitchens with inexpensive young madeira, now has to bottle its wines on the island. (In fact, so ineluctably is madeira viewed in France as a condiment rather than a drink that, according to Paul Symington of the MWC, 'the French would no more drink a glass of a madeira than one of Lea & Perrins'.)

More recently, in January in fact, three new people were appointed to run the previously somewhat moribund official Madeira Wine Institute. Their combined ages are just 95 and two of them were the first to sign up for a course in modern viticultural techniques run by a specialist imported from Bordeaux university.

The Bordelais vine adviser was imported by the team that has only relatively recently (by Madeira standards) been installed at MWC since the Symington port dynasty took a half- share in the company in 1989, taking over the day- to- day administration from the Blandy family (who are still well plugged in to the island's hotel and tourism businesses). Young winemaker Francisco Albuquerque has been sweeping a new broom through the hot, dusty lodges in which the wines are stored and bringing a new rigour to the madeira- making process. His conversation is peppered with terms such as polyphenols, fufurals, etherisation and reduction which you feel is probably a foreign language to most of the old Madeirans with any experience of winemaking on the island.

And this highlights one of the very real problems with madeira. Its life cycle is the longest of any wine I can think of. While on the island I tasted wonderfully treacly wine from the famous blend (*solera*) dated 1814 which is supposed to have been sent to Napoleon on St Helena. Even the cheapest blends are a patchwork of different ingredients and a vintage madeira, the connoisseur's madeira, may be released only when it is over 20 years old and, some think, ideally not until it is closer to 30.

A cask or two of a lot may then be bottled and sold, but the rest of the wine will continue to change in the cask (just as the bottled wine changes, albeit much less dramatically, over the years), yielding a whole new set of decisions about exactly when and how to bottle another portion of that particular lot. Who, on the island, has a real grasp of modern oenology plus the experience of how this unique wine style evolves over decades?

Henriques & Henriques winemaker Luis Pereira may be that person. He was certainly voted overall Fortified Winemaker in last year's International Wine Challenge, giving a huge filip to the madeira wine industry - but it is difficult to know for he is extremely shy. I suspect that even his partner John Cossart is allowed only the vaguest intimation of Pereira's doubtless encyclopaedic knowledge of his stocks of wine maturing in bottle and cask.

John Cossart's great leap forward was in the early 1990s when, soon after inheriting the company from his father Peter (all of them originally of the Cossart Gordon family), he not only planted a vineyard, the only one on the island to belong to a madeira wine producer, and built the new winery, he also redesigned the H&H bottles giving them a distinctly 20th century look. Radical stuff.

The MWC's response was to go into marketing overdrive, introducing not just one but two innovative new styles of madeira - probably the first for a century or two. The great bulk of madeira wine (as opposed to condiment), is sold as a blend of varying degrees of sweetness with an average age of either three or five years, substantially dependent on Tinta Negra Mole, the red- skinned grape that represents about 90 per cent of all grapes harvested on the island. There are also much more serious 10- and 15- year- old blends labelled with names that have come to be associated with each of the four surviving classic white grapes: in increasing levels of sweetness, Sercial (also known as Esgana Cão), Verdelho (Gouveio), Bual (Malvasia Fina) and Malmsey (Malvasia Candida). And then at the very top end are the venerable vintage wines as well as wines from dated *soleras*.

The Symingtons with their port experience thought what madeira needed was something affordable with a date on it, along the lines of a Late Bottled Vintage port. After merciful lobbying, the Madeira Wine Institute finally allowed them to produce a wine from a single, young harvest (*colheita* in Portuguese), launched in 2000 as Blandy's 1994 Harvest Malmsey. The MWI then, to the extreme irritation of the MWC, decided that these single harvest wines did not in fact have to be produced from one of the classic grape varieties, opening the doors for H&H's and Barbeito's Single Harvest 1995s made entirely from (much cheaper) Tinta Negra Mole.

And now the MWC has come up with Alvada, a jazzy, ultra- accessible shocking- pink- labelled five- year- old blend of Bual and Malmsey in the 50cl bottle that is becoming more and more common in an effort to make madeira seem more affordable.

Compared to its somnambulant past, the current changes in the madeira wine business must seem frenetic to the rich, tangy liquids sleeping under the rafters in the lodges round Funchal. Perhaps I was crazy to even mention that computer program.

### Some favourite madeiras

(All prices per 75cl bottle unless otherwise stated)

#### Madeira Wine Company

**Alvada 5- year- old Malmsey/ Bual** - (50cl) about £9 from Sainsbury's top stores, Rodney Densem of Crewe and Stevens Garnier of Oxford

**Cossart Gordon Malmsey Colheita 1989** - 25 euro

**Cossart Gordon Bual Colheita 1986** - 28 euro, £19 Alex Riley Wines of Cambridge

**Cossart Gordon Bual 1958** - 94.80 euro, £96 [Patrick Grubb Selections](#) of Steeple Aston (fine madeira specialist)

**Cossart Gordon Bual 1908** - 698.35 euro (sic), £169 [Patrick Grubb](#) (very limited quantity)

**Blandy's Verdelho Solera 1870** - approx £90 from Fells of Berkhamsted

#### Henriques & Henriques

**10- year- old Sercial** - (50cl) 15 euro, Waitrose £11.99

**15- year- old Verdelho** - (50cl) 22.50 euro, £16.99 Waitrose, (75cl) £25.95 [Lea & Sandeman](#) shops around London

**15- year- old Malmsey** - (50cl) 22.50 euro, £16.99 selected Waitrose stores, (75cl) £25.95 [Lea & Sandeman](#)

**Bual 1957** - 100 euro

**Century Malmsey Solera 1900** - 251.90 euro

#### Barbeito

**Single Harvest Madeira 1995** - (50cl) about £14 from [Berry Bros & Rudd](#), [Fortnum and Mason](#), Halifax Wine Company ([www.halifaxwinecompany.co.uk](http://www.halifaxwinecompany.co.uk)), [Richards & Richards](#), Roberts & Speight, and [Great Northern Wine Company](#).

Euro prices are for single bottles which can be sent to addresses within Europe from Madeira either from [directsales@madeirawinecompany.com](mailto:directsales@madeirawinecompany.com) for MWC wines or [sales@henriqueshenriques.com](mailto:sales@henriqueshenriques.com) for H&H wines. Both have considerable stocks of historic vintages and are open to offers.

MWC's US importer is Premium Port Wines of San Francisco. H&H US distributors include Chambers of San Francisco; Allied Beverages, New Jersey; Southern Wines & Spirits for some states; and Pivotal Inc.

American readers should also try specialist madeira importer Many Berk of the Rare Wine Company on [berk.rwc@snet.net](mailto:berk.rwc@snet.net) who has many fine madeiras on offer.

For more detail on great madeira bargains for the connoisseur and my tasting notes see [purple pages](#).

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