

## What a tasting!

28 Apr 2010 by Jancis Robinson

All sorts of things were amazing about last night's tasting of great madeira at the top of a cliff overlooking the Atlantic. There was the fact that we tasted 43 of them. Then there was the fact that no fewer than seven had been made in the 19th century. There was also a 1795 that I gave 18.5 out of 20 to and found myself recommending a drinking window of 1840-2020. Madness! The lowest mark I gave all evening was 17, and even the youngest wines, made in 2001, were extremely fine by any standards.

Belgian chocolatier Pierre Marcolini had been brought along, even though he had never tasted madeira before, to suggest various madeira and chocolate combinations, which he did with extraordinary aplomb. (The rather oaky Sambirano from Madagascar with Blandy's Bual 1977, for instance, and a milk chocolate with the particularly tart 1934.) He was rather concerned that our evening tasting was too ambitious in terms of the number of wines. We arrived on the terrace of Reid's Palace hotel's Villa Cipriani at 6.30 pm (with the view of Reid's shown here) and, by the time we had been served an impressive four-course dinner by moonlight, it was almost one in the morning. By then Marcolini was asleep in the bus, but not before pointing out, at the end of our tasting, that several of the wines were older than his native Belgium, and in rather better nick.

Michael Blandy, who runs the Madeira Wine Company and is a member of the family that controls so much on the island, including the leading travel company (much challenged by the recent volcanic ash scare), many hotels and the local paper, observed that the wines we tasted were in noticeably better condition than the old madeiras of similar age in his personal cellar. He was given many of them by his grandfather but presumably we were extremely fortunate to have been treated to such gems straight from the cellars of the Madeira Wine Company, Barbeito and D'Oliveiras.

It is also worth remembering that several of the wines towards the end of our tasting had been made before the arrival of the phylloxera louse that devastated wine production on the island – and stocks of the noble pale-skinned grapes Sercial, Verdelho, Boal (for Bual) and Malvazia (for Malmsey) – at the end of the 19th century.

I'll be publishing my notes on this quite extraordinary tasting next week, and will be explaining the background to it a week on Saturday.