

Desert island wines

23 May 2012 by Jancis Robinson/FT

See my [tasting notes](#) on these wines.

Every now and then I am asked what my desert island wine would be. The answer is, coincidentally, very much an island wine, the eponymous wine of the volcanic Atlantic archipelago of Madeira. This is partly because I think fine madeiras are so distinctively delicious, from the dry aperitif styles right through to rich digestif. But it is also for a succession of intensely practical reasons. For a start, we don't know for sure what sort of climate this desert island will have. If it is the stereotypical palm tree-fringed tropical isle, then the high acidity that is characteristic of madeira would always be refreshing. If, on the other hand, it is a chilly redoubt in sub-Arctic waters, then madeira's spiciness and alcohol level of around 20% would help to keep me warm. And, most importantly, the wine in an open bottle of madeira can last almost forever whatever the ambient temperature, meaning that a single bottle would last me for weeks on that desert island, instead of the day or two that most table wines could be expected to last.

No matter how much of a soft spot I have for madeira however, my two visits to the terraced green cone in the middle of the ocean that is responsible for it left me with the impression of a vinous backwater. Yes, some miraculously vital, ancient liquids lurk in dusty corners of the lodges in and round the capital Funchal, in battered casks, glass demijohns and even in open bottles. But most of the efforts of those few still working in the wine business here seemed to be aimed at providing simple, unambitious syrups for the tide of cruise passengers that is daily disgorged over the capital.

The brightest exception to this rule during my visit in 2003 was John Cossart of Henriques & Henriques who was busy reinvigorating his family firm and enjoying success with a series of 10- and 15-year-old versions of the island's classic grape varieties Sercial, Verdelho, Boal (Bual in English) and Malmsey in order of ascending sweetness. But he died suddenly at the age of 53 in 2008 and some of the steam, and fruit, seems to have gone out of the wines.

The obvious bright star among Madeira winemakers during my second visit there two years ago was a young ex history teacher with the sort of gleam in his eye that comes from obsession and conviction. Ricardo de Freitas is the grandson of Mario Barbeito and runs the Madeira producer he founded as recently as 1946, Vinhos Barbeito. Since he took over in the early 1990s he has confidently developed the house's distinctively fresh, pure style with more acidity and less sweetness than most - and no hint of the caramel on which some of the cheaper blends depend.

I have long been a fan of Barbeito madeiras (imported into the UK by Raymond Reynolds) so it was no surprise to be bowled over by them once more at a recent trade tasting in London devoted to strong fortified wines - even if it was difficult to get a word with de Freitas who was, typically, using his time at the tasting to seize the chance to taste as many of the fine ports being shown at other tables as possible. The Barbeito madeiras made from the classic varieties on the island have long been superlative, but de Freitas is unusual for the magic he manages to conjure from the island's much less respected Tinta Negra Mole grape grown in 85% of the island's tiny vineyards. His stunningly satin-textured and vivacious Single Cask 113 Tinta Negra 1997 was my favourite of all the wines he was showing in London earlier this month.

The big surprise though was a new range of wines launched by Blandy's, the family that dominates the island's commercial life and who have just celebrated 200 years there. The Blandys own the island's most famous hotels and restaurants, the all-important travel agency, even the local paper. Blandy's, together with names such as Cossart Gordon, Leacock and Rutherford & Miles, constitutes the Madeira Wine Company whose much-visited cellars occupy part of a 17th-century Franciscan monastery in the middle of Funchal. In 1989 the then generation of Blandy's called in the Symington port family of Oporto to run the business, an association that never seemed to achieve all that it might. Put it down to culture shock between Portugal's two greatest gifts to the world of wine.

Last year the Blandy's regained control of this priceless asset and, to judge from the Blandy's Colheita madeiras I tasted in London recently, a new broom is sweeping through the dusty lodges. Not that the Madeira Wine Company has been short of winemaking expertise. For more than 20 years head winemaker Francisco Albuquerque has been every bit as passionate - for once not hyperbole - about his company's wines as his friend and contemporary Ricardo de Freitas at Barbeito.

But it now seems as though the company knows what to do with the results of his expertise. These new, smartly packaged half litres of vintage-dated madeiras were made by Albuquerque in 1995 and 1996 and are seriously exciting wines by any measure. Brisk, energetic, they have no hint of the tired cheesiness that was once found in some of the company's wines. Each is the produce of a single harvest (which is what colheita means) but none can yet be sold as vintage, or frasqueira, madeira because they have not reached the 20-year minimum age required by Madeira's wine laws.

Not that they lack subtlety. The Sercial 1995, Bual 1996 and Malmsey 1996 are admirable, and admirably different from each other, each displaying the textbook respective qualities of searing delicacy, rich nuttiness and sweet creaminess of these styles. But my favourite by a whisker was Blandy's Colheita Verdelho 1995 that combines to thrilling effect the tingling purity of Sercial with the nuttiness of Bual.

According to Chris Blandy who recently joined the family wine company, they have kept back enough stock of these wines to be able to bottle and release them later as vintage madeiras. Quite who provided the impetus for the new spirit abroad in Blandy's is not clear, but there is a similar one at the old house of H M Borges which has also realised that they are sitting on stocks of some of the most distinctive and historic wines in the world. Their 20-year-old Verdelho is delightfully tangy and appetising - just the thing for an island, deserted or not.

MY FAVOURITES

Barbeito 10 year old Sercial
Barbeito, Single Cask 113 Tinta Negra 1997
Barbeito, Single Cask 119 Verdelho 1996
Barbeito 5 year old Malvasia
Barbeito Boal Frasqueira 1982
Blandy's Colheita Sercial 1995
Blandy's Colheita Verdelho 1995
Blandy's Colheita Bual 1996
Blandy's Colheita Malmsey 1996
Blandy's Vintage Terrantez 1976
H M Borges 20 year old Verdelho
Henriques & Henriques 20 year old Malmsey

Blandy's wines are available via importers Fells' website vintagemarque.com. Madeira specialists include Patrick Grubb of Oxfordshire, [The Madeira Collection](#) of Belgium (which is also selling the new Blandy's wines) and [The Rare Wine Co](#) of Sonoma, California.

See my [tasting notes](#) on these wines and, as usual, click on individual tasting notes to find prices and availability.