



IT'S GOT AN OLD-SCHOOL VIBE BUT THIS OLD STYLE CAN BREAK THROUGH TO A YOUNGER CONSUMER, SAYS **IAN BUXTON**

MAKING MAD MORE MEANING



HANKS MOSTLY TO

The darkly comic lyrics of Flanders and Swann's *Have Some Madeira, M'dear*, this most delightful of fortified wines is inextricably linked to moustache-twirling cads intent on slyly inveigling pure young maidens to a fate worse than death. Well, perhaps that reference is mainly for an older generation, but the faintly dated image lives on even if the musical duo have long departed.

According to Dawn Davies MW, buyer for the leading web-based retailer Speciality Drinks, Madeira continues to suffer from being seen as “still very old school” or, as she puts it none too kindly “what my grandma/pa used to drink”. But, as we know, with the right provenance and quality and with an intriguing back story, things can change. And, as Davies went on to tell me, Madeira offers exceptional value for money, especially for vintage expressions, and “with producers improving packaging and working towards more education the image will slowly change”. Moreover, she added, “as the quality of the liquid is consistent, like any trend it will come back round”.

WE CAN RIDE THIS WAVE OF EXCITEMENT AND IMPROVED QUALITY TO LAY THE GROUNDWORK FOR A LONG-TERM FUTURE. IT'S EARLY DAYS

Actually, she's not alone in her optimism. Raymond Reynolds, founder of the shippers bearing his name, has imported the Barbeito range of wines since 2002 and claims that Madeira is “breaking out of the crusty Old World”, a trend he puts down to improved quality and innovation by producers; repositioning of the category as a whole and interest among younger drinkers in the range and diversity of styles available from this little island.

“We can ride this wave of excitement and improved quality,” says Reynolds “to lay the groundwork for a long-term future. It's early days,” he adds “but the investment in winemaking and improved packaging is coming through”.

So let's step back and remind ourselves exactly what makes up Madeira and where it might fit into a contemporary drinks portfolio. In truth, it's a venerable category with a distinguished history. Long popular in the UK, it was at one time dominant in the US, being famously a favourite of the Founding Fathers – George Washington, Alexander Hamilton,

Benjamin Franklin and John Adams are all believed to have appreciated its qualities. Thomas Jefferson was a notable fan and is said to have toasted the Declaration of Independence in Madeira wine, while the British connection to the trade is equally long-standing.

The four styles most frequently encountered today are: Sercial, delicious as a dry, slightly acidic aperitif with complex almond notes; Verdelho, somewhat less assertive with smoky flavours to the fore; dark-coloured Bual with sweet hints of dark raisins; and Malvasia or Malmsey, an after-dinner alternative to port that shows Madeira's typical acidity to balance the high sugar content and rich, mouth-coating caramel palate.

SHARP DECLINES

The majority of volume, whether in the UK or US or in key European markets, is accounted for by younger, sweeter styles. However, after nearly a decade of steady growth in both the UK and the US this category saw sharp declines in 2018 over the previous year, a phenomenon that was particularly marked in UK multiple grocers. De-stocking in this channel was primarily accounted for by two factors: shelf pressure from craft gins and price rises on Madeira driven by the strength of the euro resulting from the extended Brexit process.

However, as UK brand manager for Blandy's Michael Oppenheim notes, while multiple grocers have “become an increasingly challenging sector for Madeira over the past couple of years”, the core over 50-year-old consumer is nothing but dedicated. “In the one case where Blandy's Duke of Clarence was delisted,” he says “we estimate 65-70% of the volume simply moved to the other grocers – in other words consumers visited another supermarket to find the brand.” Remarkable testimony to consumer loyalty. Once the style has been discovered people tend to stick with it, as Reynolds confirms, observing that “there's initially massive ignorance, but great acceptance once [the wines] are tasted”.

Fortunately, falling sales in lower-priced, younger varieties are being offset by growth in higher-value expressions that are showing well in independent specialists and premium on-trade accounts.

One might anticipate Madeira being consumed as an aperitif (especially the Sercial varieties) or after-dinner, where Bual or Malmsey compete with port, but surprisingly cocktails may offer an opportunity. >>

MADEIRA UNUSUALLY DELICIOUS

“We have to engage more bartenders in the category,” says Davies, noting that “this is how people start to get familiar with products”. And, from across the Atlantic, J Henahan, wine portfolio manager for Henriques & Henriques’ US importer, reports: “Increasing interest in and embrace of Madeira and other wines is perhaps not surprising – after all, vermouth and other aromatised wines are just that, wines. Interest in low-proof cocktails and growing recognition that aged, oxidative wines share a certain commonality with bourbon, scotch and other brown spirits in terms of their flavor profiles point to a slow but steady groundswell of interest.”

Though self-evidently, Madeira needs to appeal to younger consumers more open to exploration, and while purists might wince at the idea of Madeira as a cocktail ingredient, perhaps this idea and the recent headwinds in the supermarket trade are nothing more than short-term blips in Madeira’s long history. After all, this is a style particularly noted for exceptional keeping qualities, a result of the estufagem ageing process, meant to duplicate the effect on the ageing barrels of a long sea voyage through tropical climates. The best wines are incredibly long-lived both in the bottle and, quite remarkably, once opened – making them a reliable proposition for sale by the glass. “Nowhere is this more obvious than in the premium London

on-trade,” notes Andrew Hawes, managing director of Mentzendorff “where sommeliers regularly offer wines such as Henriques & Henriques’ 10-year-old Bual or 15 year old Verdelho by the glass with the dessert menu, the wide diversity of styles offering a broad range of pairing opportunities.”

MADEIRA IS GREAT FOR SOMMELIERS TO EXPERIMENT WITH – I ONCE TRIED A GREAT MATCH WITH 1979 VERDELHO AND SALMON SASHIMI

It’s a point picked up by Oppenheim, who emphasises that Madeira is an “incredibly versatile food-friendly wine”. He continues: “Although particularly strong with dessert and cheeses, with the four styles to pick from (ranging from dry to sweet) you can match with every course of the meal. Madeira is great for sommeliers to experiment with – I once tried a great match with 1979 Verdelho and salmon sashimi.”

LONGEVITY

Madeira’s great longevity also adds to its appeal to connoisseurs and wine collectors and the major houses maintain stocks of very old wines that may be available to their preferred customers, though inevitably these are allocated after careful consideration. From time to time, however, wine from the 18th century – still drinkable





– will appear at auction. In December 2016, for example, Christie's New York sold a two-bottle lot of 1795 Barbeito for \$19,600 and still earlier bottles are known to exist. Compared to rare aged single malt they might even seem a bargain.

Most of the wine sold today is, of course, of considerably more recent vintage. That's not to say, however, that older wines aren't available – Henriques & Henriques offers a 50-year-old from the historically under-rated Tinta Negra grape variety with a remarkable £185 rrp, albeit for a 50cl bottle. But at the top of the tree, both price and age-wise, we find the recently-released Blandy's MCDXIX Winemaker's Selection. With a retail price of £5,000, the wine is a blend of 11 exceptional wines spanning the 19th, 20th and 21st centuries, made from the five historical white grape varieties of Madeira – Sercial, Verdelho, Terrantez, Bual and Malmsey.

It's a striking example of what Hawes sees as consumers "seeking new wine experiences" and which Blandy's CEO Chris Blandy claims is a wine which "will not only set the standard today, but will also be a reference for future generations". And, as Oppenheim is quick to remind me, the MCDXIX and similar bottlings are wines "you will never lose money on, as with the long years of oxidation and slow heating they will remain stable for months after opening".

To complement their traditional portfolios a number of producers are now offering table wines from Madeira. Blandy's offers its Atlantis label as rosé, white and reserva white made from Verdelho – with further plans to develop and promote its still wine production. Similarly, in 2020 Barbeito will bring a table wine to the UK.

So Madeira may be set for a modest revival. As Henahan maintains, the production is "rooted in tradition, pragmatic yet stubborn, and full of pride" – qualities that surely speak to current concerns with provenance, heritage and complexity of taste.

The wine is versatile; offers great value for money and works for both the off and on-trade. Its established consumers are loyal and new consumers can surely be drawn in by a potentially beguiling combination of innovation rooted in tradition.

Davies tells me: "I love Madeira and have just increased our range and am looking to add more – value for money-wise it's one of the best."

After all, as an old song reminds us: "Have some madeira, m'dear, you really have nothing to fear." **DI**

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