



THE
ATHENÆUM
PALL MALL LONDON

CELEBRATING THE CLUB'S
BICENTENARY YEAR

Madeira Wine Tasting

15th April 2024



Speaker – Professor Kathleen Burk

Chairman – Richard Mair



MADEIRA WINES

Madeira fortified wines are amongst the greatest in the world. They last nearly forever, and this sets them apart from other fortified wines: an opened bottle of the 1795 vintage was discovered at the back of a cupboard in Madeira nearly 200 years later, and it was still delicious. The tastes range from dry and ferociously acidic to very sweet and soft with infinite gradations in between, but the characteristic of Madeira is the acidity in all types. The length of their finish is very long. Not surprisingly, the soil is volcanic with lots of nutrients, and ash which does not retain water very well. It has a sub-tropical climate – it is four hundred miles northwest of North Africa – which is mitigated by the ocean breezes.

From 1425, when Madeira was first colonised by the Portuguese, the island has been a stopping-off point for ships, which would take on barrels of wine. Towards the end of the 17th century it was found, probably by accident, that the wine was much improved by the pitching and rolling in the hold of a ship as it sailed across the tropics. The process of ‘backloading’ referred to the wines being shipped to the tropics and back again with the intention of improving and developing it in cask. The wine was then called a *vinho da roda*, a ‘return journey wine’, and became very fashionable. By the middle of the 18th century it had become commonplace to add ‘a bucket or two of brandy in each pipe’.

The most important factor in making Madeira is heat. In the early 18th century it was referred to as a *vinho do sol*, a ‘wine heated by the sun’, but by the end of the century the demand for the wine by the expanding British and American markets was so great that artificial methods to heat the wine were developed. Short cuts were taken, such as heating the wines to boiling point, or plunging the bottles into a trench filled with fermenting horse manure for several months. In 1835, a royal decree regulated the temperature to which the wine could be heated in the *estufas* or ‘hot houses’.

MAKING MADEIRA

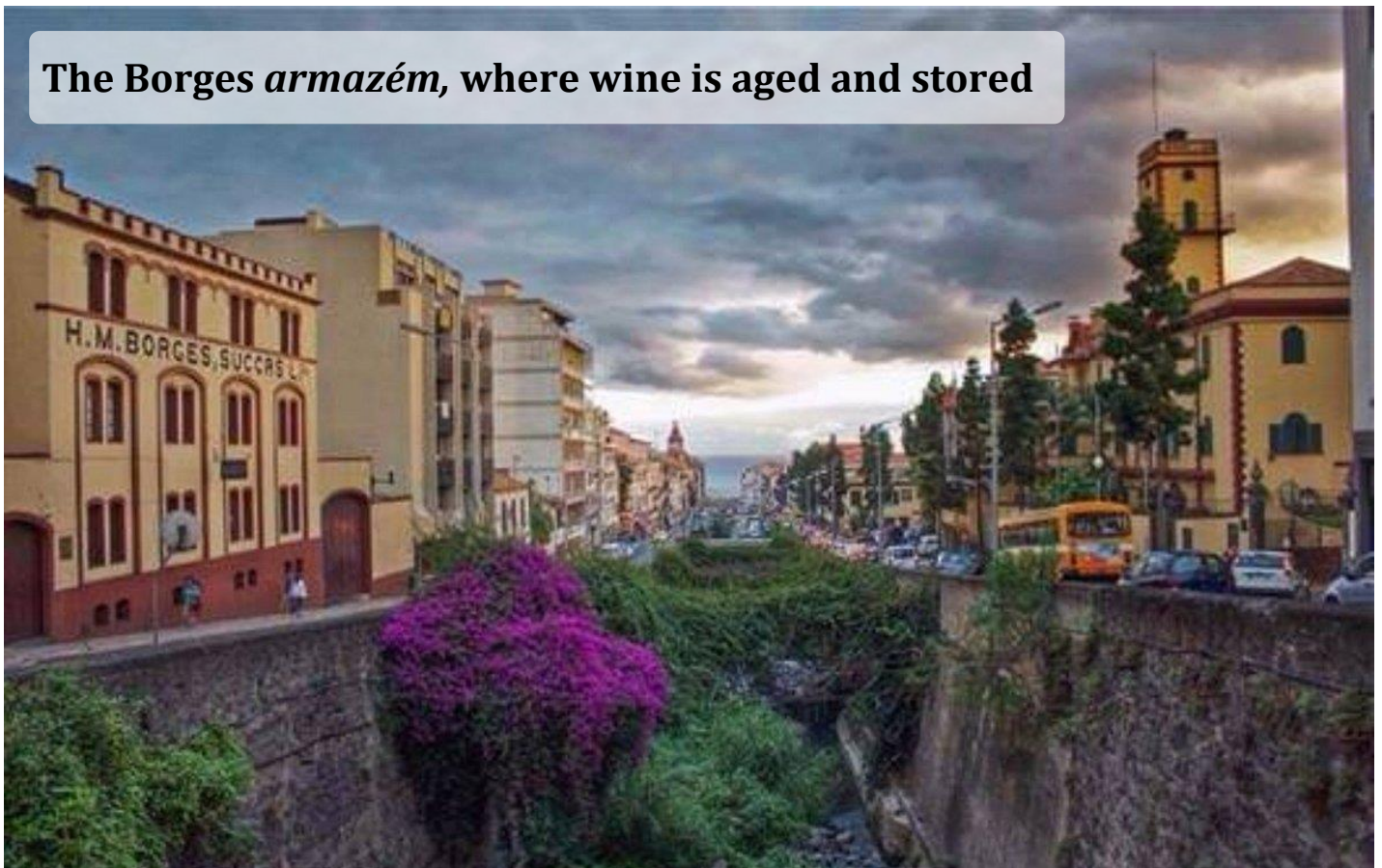
To make Madeira, the wine is normally fermented with natural yeast in stainless steel temperature-controlled vats, the sweeter wines for as little as 48 hours, the drier wines longer, up to 4-5 days. Fermentation is arrested with *aguardente*, a grape spirit with an alcohol level of 98%. The wines are left in the vats to rest until November, when they are classified according to style and quality. Most Madeira wines, especially those made from Tinta Negra and Bastardo, both red grapes, are subject to the process of *estufagem*: today's *estufas* are stainless steel vats in which the wine is heated by passing water heated to 45-50° centigrade through an external jacket. Properly done, it should concentrate but not burn the wine.

Wine from the traditional or 'noble' white grapes, Sercial, Verdelho, Boal, Malvasia and Terrantez, are generally aged in pipas, 'lodge pipes': these are wooden casks of 400-650 litres, made of dense wood with a close grain to limit evaporation levels. Oxygen is crucial, so each cask has a small 'headspace' for air; as the wine ages, it is slowly stabilised by oxygen until, in time, it cannot be further damaged. The wines are generally only stored in the warmest lodges (or on the upper floors of others) for the first 4-5 years. Then a wine of high quality destined for long ageing will be transferred to a cooler lodge. A wine aged in wood for a minimum of two years without *estufagem* may be called a *Vinho do Canteiro*, which normally indicates a wine of a higher quality. The name comes from the scantling racks on which the casks are placed on the floor.

H.M. Borges 10 Year Old Reserve Sercial, Secco (Dry), 19% ABV (alcohol by volume)

This is a small, independent family company which dates from 1877. It does not own any of its own vineyards but buys in grapes along the south coast from another family, who are shareholders in Borges. Eighty per cent of what they buy is Tinta Negra, much of which in Madeira goes for cheaper wines. Only wine destined for three-year-old blends is sent for *estufagem*; the remainder is aged in oak and satinwood vats on four floors in the Borges *armazém*, which is a building where wine is aged and stored; theirs is an elegant building in the centre of the capital Funchal. The term Old Reserve on a bottle means that the wine is ten years old and made from one of the 'noble' grapes. The Sercial grape is something of a rarity, with only about 33 hectares on the island. A sercial wine has been called ferociously acidic – indeed, in Spain the name for the same grape translates as 'dog strangler'. I think that that is a bit extreme, but it is certainly the most acidic of the madeiras. It is also the lightest. Served a bit chilled, it is wonderful as an aperitif with almonds or olives, or with a starter of mushroom fritters.

The Borges *armazém*, where wine is aged and stored



Barbeito Bastardo Duas Pipas Reserva, Meio Secco (Medium Dry), 19% ABV

The company was established as shippers in 1946 – a rather brave thing to do in the immediate postwar period. The current owner/director took over in 1991, bravely ending the company's bulk shipments in a drive for quality. Fortunately, the Kinoshita family of Japan became joint partners in 1991. They had been the Barbeito distributor in Japan since 1967, and the two families, as well as their firms, have a close relationship, not least because they share a drive for quality. It was found that the use of pneumatic pressing did not produce enough colour, and in 2013 they reintroduced foot-treading for all of the traditional varieties, using three people to tread between 2000 and 3000 kilos of grapes.



Barbeito vineyards

The Bastardo story is interesting. It is the same grape as the Trousseau in the Jura, but it was extinct in Madeira for many years. Its recovery was due to a grower who in 2004 planted vineyards of that variety on his family lands in the north of the island, where the temperature is cooler. In 2018, there were only 1.34 hectares planted,

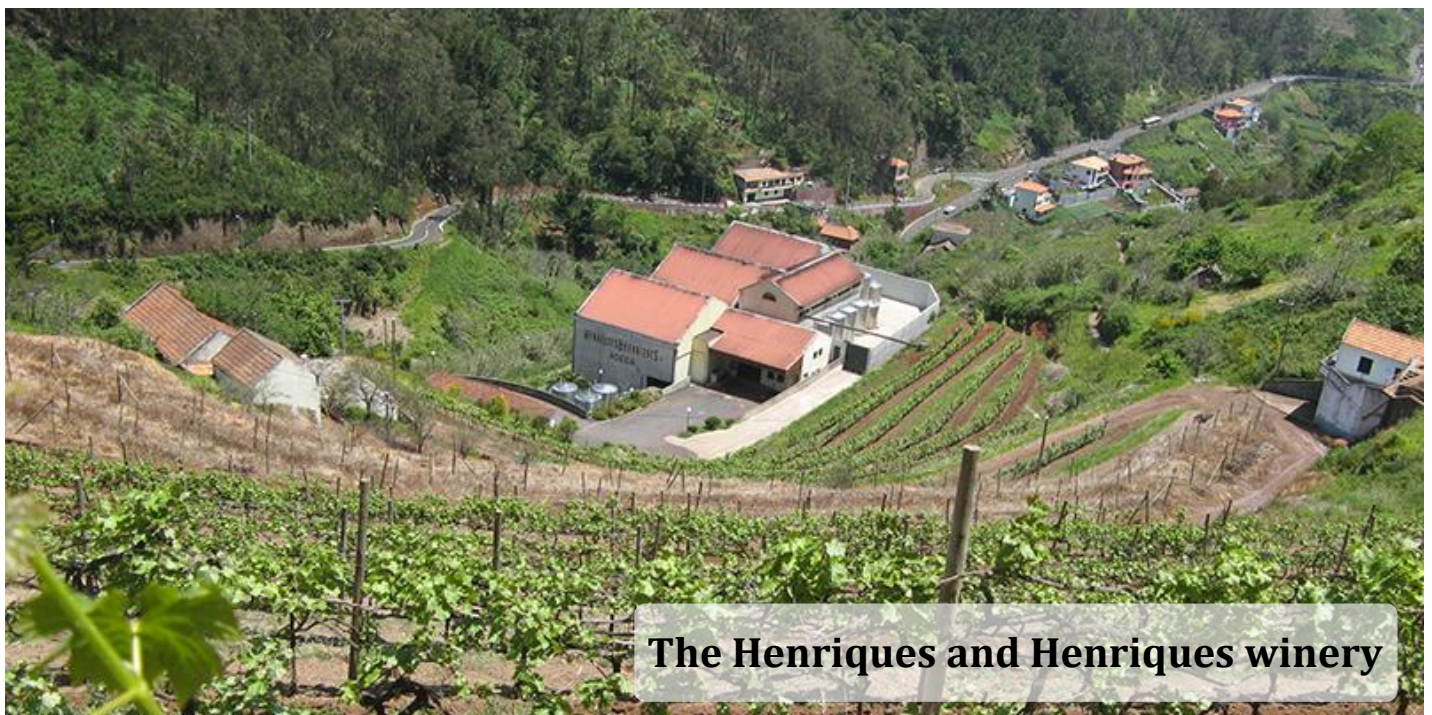
so it wins the prize for rarity on the island. Their first harvest was in 2007. The grapes are picked in early September and then again late in the month. Duas Pipas refers to the fact that this blend is made up of only two wines: one made by skin contact fermentation from 2010 (cask of 400 litres) and the other by direct pressing from 2012 (cask of 700 litres). The result was 1700 bottles in all, all numbered. Although as a Reserva it ought to be five years old, it is apparently ten and should be labelled a Reserva Velha. Served at 12°to 13°C, it is very attractive with fish stew and marinated or smoked fish, as well as an aperitif.

Henriques and Henriques 20 Year Old Terrantez, Meio Secco, 20% ABV

This wine-shipping firm was established in 1850, but the Henriques family were already large landowners. It is unique amongst Madeira shippers in that it has almost always owned its own vineyards – the family planted vineyards in the middle of the 15th century, only a few years after Madeira was first discovered and colonised. The fact that the company has long sourced a significant proportion of grapes from its own vineyards, and are therefore in control from the vineyard to the bottle, possibly goes some way towards explaining the consistently high quality of their wines. They are one of the few companies to maintain good-sized stocks of old wines in both cask and bottle.

Terrantez is probably the most highly prized of all of the Madeira grapes. Unfortunately, it is also susceptible to oidium or powdery mildew, and was nearly wiped out in the 1850s (along with many of the vineyards in Europe). Then phylloxera came along, for which there is no cure – the grower must pull out all of the vines, or it will ineluctably spread. It has such a miniscule yield that there was little or no replanting, and by the 1970s it was practically extinct, with the

last vineyards around Funchal sold to build houses and shops. However, there has been a welcome recovery, with the total production rising sharply. This is because of newly-planted vineyards, including by H&H. There are now 4 hectares, double that of 2016. It remains susceptible to powdery mildew, although sulphur will control it, and to botrytis, but growers persist because it produces such high quality wine. It is a lovely wine, old gold with hints of green, and tastes of dried fruits, particularly raisins, and nuts and spices. I think that it should be enjoyed without food, but all sorts of pairings are possible.



The Henriques and Henriques winery

Henriques and Henriques 15 Years Old Verdelho, Medium Dry, 20% ABV

There are nearly 60 hectares of Verdelho on the island, making it the second most planted *Vitis vinifera* grape – that is, not a native wild grape and not a hybrid. It grows best on the cooler north side of the island or at higher altitudes on the south. It combines a moderate level of sugar with high acidity, appropriate for a medium-dry wine. Verdelho goes very well with French onion or mushroom soups, Welsh rarebit, roast chicken and confit of duck.

H.M. Borges Tinta Negra 2013 Colheita, Meio Secco, 20% ABV

In Madeira, the term colheita means something different from what it does in the Douro, where it is the term for a single harvest tawny port. In Madeira it also means a single harvest/vintage wine, but it has to have spent at least five years in wood before bottling. It has been called an early bottled vintage madeira. The Tinta Negra is the most planted variety by far, with 238 hectares split amongst 1,218 growers – small farmers like it because it is very productive and easy to grow – and it makes about 90% of all Madeira wine. These are not just the bulk wines, but unless stated otherwise, it will include the 3- and 5-year old wines as well. These wines do not have a specific place in the style spectrum, but can range from medium dry to medium sweet.



Borges Tinta Negra vineyards

This Tinta Negra wine is very different. For one thing, it is complex rather than simple. It was aged in American and French oak casks on the canteiro system – an interesting combination, since French oak is fine grained whilst American oak is wider grained, the latter tending to produce an oakier scent and flavour in wines. In this case, it has been controlled. This Tinta Negra wine is an excellent example of what a devoted winemaker can do with a grape to which many others are indifferent.

Blandy's 15 Year Old Bual, Meio Dole (Medium Sweet), 19% ABV

The first Blandy came to the island in 1811 and rapidly set up the shipping company that still exists today. By the time of his death in 1855, it was trading from Russia to the Americas. The company grew further under his son, and had the resources to buy up stocks of wine after the oidium crisis, which had bankrupted many other shippers. By the 1870s, Blandy's had the largest stocks of wine on the island, and could weather the phylloxera storm. This pattern was followed again later. Blandy's diversified into other businesses, including coal bunkering, general merchanting and banking; thus they were never dependent on the Madeira wine business, as many others were. The 1974-75 'Carnation Revolution' challenged the hegemony of the Anglo-Madeiran families on the island. Although the Blandys had never owned any vineyards, they were large property owners, but managed to avoid the wave of expropriations by initiating development projects and entering into strategic joint ventures. The Blandy family survived by reinventing themselves: they sold off trophy assets, entered into a partnership with the Symingtons from the Douro in 1989, and became more deeply involved in tourism projects, such as hotels. They are, however, still involved in wine, with a seventh generation Blandy managing the wine interests.



The Boal name (Bual is the English version) covers not one but several varieties. The Boal grape growing on Madeira has since 2000 had the official name of Malvasia Fina. Relatively easy to grow, it is the most productive of the traditional white grapes and the third most planted. Even so, in 2018 there were just 13.7 hectares, split between 114 growers. Annoyingly, Boal is very susceptible to drought and so needs a lot of groundwater. It has the lowest acid levels of the traditional white grapes, and thus it is sometimes necessary to add tartaric acid to provide needed structure. It goes particularly well with curries, apple pie, with cheese, caramelised oranges, ginger cake, and as a digestif with nuts and dates.

Henriques & Henriques 10 Year Old Malvasia (Sweet), 20% ABV

Malvasia (Malmsey is the English corruption) is the umbrella covering a number of different varieties, the most highly prized of which is the Malvasia Cândida. It is unclear whether it forms part of this wine, but H&H do have a vineyard planted with the variety. After the oidium and phylloxera crises, it was not widely replanted, and by the mid-20th century it was nearly extinct. It is challenging to grow, and the production can vary widely from year to year. There are now only 35 hectares split amongst 116 growers. In the winery no distinction is made between the types of Malvasia. Unless the wine is specifically labelled Malvasia Cândida, it should be thought of as a style of wine, rather than as a varietal.

This Malvasia is really intense and rich, with dried raisin fruit, a thick undertone of chocolate, spices and nuts. The length is forever – after swallowing, just sit quietly and experience it. Try it with duck with hoisin sauce, crème brûlée, treacle tart, pecan pie, mature cheddar or blue cheese, sticky toffee or Christmas pudding, or as a digestif with nuts, dates and dried figs.



Canteiro ageing in Henriques and Henriques's *armazém*

Professor Kathleen Burk April 2024

Members and Guests

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George Anderson Esq
Lemeau Arrott-Watt
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Helen Ball
Dr John Ballard
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Gerald Davies Esq
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Sir Peter Dixon
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