

Madeira

Madeira's fortified wines keep practically for ever - they have been known to survive for more than two centuries.



Out in the Atlantic, on the same latitude as Casablanca, the island enjoys mild temperatures throughout the year, but the climate is also strongly influenced by the ocean. It is extremely mountainous, with deep valleys and steep slopes where the vines grow on little terraces in fertile, acid, volcanic soils that are very rich in organic matter.

Vines are mostly trained on traditional pergolas, the bunches hanging below, shaded from the sun by exuberant foliage. Yields are high. The resulting grapes have high acidity – a distinguishing feature that they pass on to all Madeira wines.

A small clutch of historic Madeira grapes are known as the 'noble' varieties: Sercial, Verdelho, Boal, Malvasia (sometimes called Malmsey) and the rarer Terrantez. All are white, and the first four are traditionally vinified to give different degrees of sweetness in the finished wine: respectively dry, medium-dry, medium-sweet and sweet.

Terrantez makes fine, dry wines with very marked acidity. However, 80 per cent of the island's vineyards are planted with another variety, Tinta Negra, which is made into fortified wines of all four traditional sweetnesses. Some table wines are also made on the islands.

Shakespeare

In Shakespeare's play "Henry IV" there are references to Madeira wine. The character named Falstaff sells his soul to the devil "for a cup of Madeira and a cold capon's leg".



An elegant wine

Madeira was considered a very elegant wine. Court ladies would even use it as a perfume on their handkerchiefs. In England, Madeira and Port would compete for the first place in the court's preference.

Duke of Clarence

The Duke of Clarence was a noble Englishman who, after being sentenced to death for attempting to murder his brother, Edward IV, chose to die by drowning in a Madeira Malvasia cask.

Delicious Madeira

Madeira wine was widely exported to England, France, Flanders and the United States. Francisco I (1708/1765) used to say that Madeira was the richest and most delicious wine in Europe. Important families from Boston, Charleston, New York and Philadelphia would compete among themselves to get the best Madeira wines.