

SWEET SURPRISE

In the world of fortified wine, Madeira's annual production may be small, but it's growing. Stephen Quinn visited the main producer, Justino's.

The Portuguese island of Madeira is tiny – only 57 km wide and 23 km long – yet the wine industry is doing well for such a small place. Madeira wine has a long and recognised history and this recognition, coupled with a push for new markets, has had significant results in terms of sales.

In 2014, exports of Madeira were worth €17m (\$18.5m) – an increase of more than 16% compared with four years earlier. Exports are considered much more important than domestic sales, which produced relatively small revenues of €3.8m last year. About 1.5m tourists visit Madeira each year – a third aboard the ships that enter Funchal's scenic harbour and the rest through the airport. Interestingly, sales to them are classified as exports and the wine companies have thriving shops at the airport.

Tourists come to the island because of the temperate and consistent climate – the winter maximum is typically 15°C while the summer maximum averages 21°C. Tourism and wine represent a major slice of Madeira's economy. The climate is another factor for the success of Madeira wine.

Biggest producer

Justino's is the heavyweight among the island's six producers, making just over half (54%) of the annual production of 4.5m L. Justino's sells 36% of all Madeira wine and Henriques & Henriques (part of the same company) sells another 18%. Blandy's (trading as the Madeira Wine Company), Barbeiro, H.M. Borges and D'Oliveira contribute the other 46%.

Madeira has about 1,300 grape growers, and producers buy from them rather than own their own vines.

Justino's buys from 800 of those growers, and typically purchases between 30% and 43% of all grapes grown. It makes about 1.6m L a year. Exports represent a huge proportion of the company's revenues – 94% – which is much higher than the average of 82% for

exports for other wine companies on the island.

Julio Fernandes is commercial director for Justino's and responsible for the company's export drive. He discussed the wine business while tasting at the company's headquarters, 15 km to the east of the capital Funchal. Justino's main markets include France, Germany, Brazil, England, Austria, Switzerland, the Benelux countries, Spain and Scandinavia, as well as the US, Canada China and Japan. The focus on France is partly related to the fact that Justino's was acquired by a major French distributor, Cofepp (also known as La Martiniquaise), in 1993.

Most wine regions mature their wines in cool cellars, whereas Madeira wants to keep its wines warm. Part of the process is known as estufagem – 'heating' in English – where pipes or jackets heat wine in tanks to develop flavours. Justino's uses solar heating for the bulk of its 4,500 barrels and hopes soon to use solar for all heating.



Julio Fernandes, commercial director, Justino's

Long history

The Portuguese navigator who discovered the island Madeira in 1418, João Goncalves Zarco, named it after the Portuguese word for wood. It is appropriate given the number of years that Madeira spends in barrels.

The way Madeira is made is unique, and an accident of history. Grape brandy was added to stop fermentation and preserve wines on long sea journeys. During the seventeenth century, winemakers discovered the positive influence of the sun on wine shipped through the tropics. Intense heat transformed a light and acidic wine, giving it depth of flavour and a pleasant burnt quality.

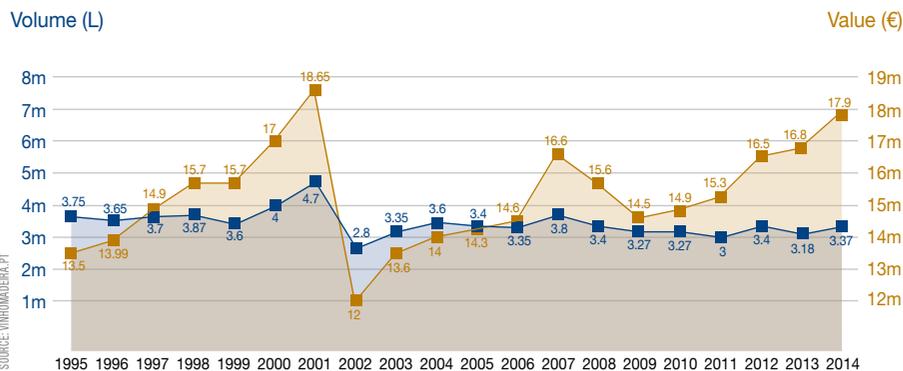
Madeira was subsequently stored in the holds of ships as ballast and sent on round-trip journeys to develop flavours. This wine became known as vinho da roda, or 'wine of the round voyage'. Nowadays that process is replicated by storing wine in hot locations, which explains the influence of the climate on the island's wine industry.

The best wines are stored for decades in old barrels. Justino's uses only French oak purchased from Cognac and Armagnac that is at least six years old. Blandy's only uses old American oak.

Six coopers work on the island of Madeira. Blandy's employs four and Justino's the other two. They spend much of their time repairing and recycling barrels because these casks are used for decades. Barrels are never entirely filled because winemakers want the wine to be exposed to oxygen. "Oxygen is our friend," one winemaker said, "unlike in other winemaking countries where it can be an enemy." Over time oxidation gives Madeira its unique aromas and flavours.

Wines are transferred between different size barrels depending on the stage of the ageing process. Justino's prefers 350 L- and 650 L-barrels, while Blandy's employs a wide range of sizes. It needs small barrels of about 300 L because the floors in its building are old and cannot hold the weight of large barrels.

Sales of Madeira wine 1995 - 2014



The Blandy's building in the centre of Funchal has been, at various times, a monastery, a hospital and a prison. Blandy's acquired the building in 1840.

Unlike the deep cellars of most other wine makers, high-end wines in Madeira are stored in special lofts at the tops of buildings. The method of allowing wines to warm in these lofts is known as 'canteiro' which refers to the beams that support the floors. Wine is heavy and unless the high parts of the building are reinforced there is the danger of the weight of the wine causing floors to collapse.

Both companies store wine in ancient casks purchased from Brazil, made from satin wood whose local name is radeiro de cedo. Some casks are more than a century old.

Madeira has also had a long and distinguished connection with history. The wine companies focus on that history in much of their marketing, taking care to mention, for example, that it was used to toast the American Declaration of Independence. The first president, George Washington, is said to have consumed a pint of Madeira at dinner each evening.

According to some stories, the first Duke of Clarence - brother of King Edward IV - when sentenced to death in the Tower of London for treason in 1478 chose to be drowned in a vat of Madeira. Blandy's makes a Duke of Clarence Malmsey in his honour, though it is at the lower end of the quality and price range.

How Madeira is made

Most people associate Madeira with the four white grape varieties that produce the main fortified wines: Sercial, Verdelho, Bual (also known as 'Boal') and Malvasia. Sercial

makes the driest wine, ideal as an aperitif; Verdelho is medium dry; Bual is medium sweet and Malvasia is sweet, often labelled as Malmsey. (The big four grapes are only used in wines that are 10 years or older.) A little wine is made from the rare Terrantez grape, but only about 2,000 L are available each year from this grape on the entire island.

But 85% of grapes grown on the island are the Tinta Negra variety, whose name is sometimes translated as 'black ink'. Tinta Negra is a chameleon grape: It can acquire the character of the four styles of Madeira depending on the altitude of the vineyard, the region where it is planted, and winemaking methods. For all grapes, generally the higher

the altitude the higher the acidity. The sweetest wine, Malvasia, is grown up to 200 metres while the driest, Sercial, can be grown up to 800 metres. Acidity is a feature of good Madeira. It provides texture, freshness and balance.

Vintage Madeira is only made in exceptional years and must spend a minimum of 20 years in cask and two years in bottle. It typically represents about 5% of each company's output, but demands high prices.

Justino's Madeiras come in a range of styles to attract different markets. All were a revelation from the purity and freshness of the younger wines to the elegance of the 10-year-old single-grape styles, through to the superb Colheitas of 1995, 1996 and 1998. Colheitas come from a single year, but unlike vintage Madeiras do not need to age for 20 years before being released. "These wines provide high-quality wine from a single outstanding year but at an affordable price," said Fernandes.

In recent years Justino's has invested heavily to boost exports, improve vinification processes and develop bottling capacity. "Over the years Justino's has become the leading producer and exporter of Madeira wine thanks to the acknowledged quality of its wines and the substantial increase in its production capacity," said Fernandes. ■



Madeira continues to hold its own