



MADEIRA WINE, A SECULAR HISTORY

In 1419, at the very beginning of the period of Portuguese discoveries, João Gonçalves Zarco, Tristão Vaz Teixeira and Bartolomeu Perestrelo discovered an island in the middle of the Atlantic which they named Madeira Island. The three Donee Captains received the captaincies from Infante D. Henrique (Henry, the Navigator) and immediately took to cultivating its lands with wheat, vines and sugarcane.

The first colonisers were members of the Portuguese nobility and brought labourers and craftsmen from the north of Portugal to the island. During these first years, the special privileges conceded to those who colonised the island, also enticed important European merchants who, right from the start, became aware of the potential of Madeira in terms of exploring routes with important export markets.

The denseness of the vegetation on the island made it necessary to burn large areas and this was an increased contribution to the fertility of its soil. During the first years of colonisation, and up to 1461, the first system of “levadas” (water channels) was built, a system which was little by little gradually expanded throughout the centuries.

Agriculture prospered with a great focus on the cultivation of sugarcane, though also on vines and wheat. In 1466, sugarcane had become the main produce and, in addition to the expeditions which until then were directed to mainland *Portugal*, the Gulf of Guinea and African markets, sugarcane was taken to the markets of the Mediterranean and Northern Europe.

Although it remains impossible to pinpoint the exact time when the first vines were planted and what their varieties were, it is thought that the first colonisers brought with them varieties which already existed in *Minho*. However, historical records which dated from 1450 by the Venetian navigator Alvise da Mosto, known as Luís de Cadamosto, show that the Malvasia Cândida (Candid Malmsey) variety had been brought to the island during the first years of colonisation. The navigator states that “... of the various vine varieties, Infante D. Henrique ordered that lands should be planted with Malmsey brought from Candia (the capital of Crete) and these are growing very well...”, while praising, in his diary of voyages, the wine export and its good quality. These documents are extremely important as they prove that, admirably, 25 years after the beginning of the island’s colonisation, the export of Madeira Wine had already begun!

Throughout the fifteenth-century, the area occupied by the culture of vines steadily grew. The consequence of this was an increase of exports but it is, undoubtedly, the discovery of America by



Christopher Columbus that constitutes a landmark for the history of Madeira Wine.

Of this time tales are told involving historical figures and in which the notoriety of Madeira Wine abroad is already evidenced. The saying goes that, in 1478, George, Duke of Clarence, the brother of Edward IV, the King of England, when sentenced to death by the High Chamber, chose to be drowned in a butt of Malmsey Wine.

Sixteenth-century

The beginning of the sixteenth-century is marked by a decrease in the cultivation of sugarcane owing to a variety of different factors, amongst which an excessive produce and the exhaustion of the soil. By the end of the century the situation is one of crisis with the competition of sugar from Brazil offered at much cheaper prices. The lands with sugarcane plantations are now converted into vineyards. Foreign colonisers continue to disembark in *Madeira*, amongst them Simão Acciaiolio who was responsible for bringing over the Malmesey Babosa vine variety.

Throughout this century there are many references to Malmsey by visitors like the Venetian Giulio Landi and the Italian Pompeo Arditique. Giulio states that "The whole island produces a great quantity of wines that are considered to be excellent and very similar to Candia Malmsey".

Seventeenth-century

Throughout the seventeenth-century the production and export of Madeira Wine grew substantially, and it is thought that during this period exports may have tripled. Although the major exporters were foreigners, British influence in the sector will only become notorious and predominant with the development of colonial markets in America and through commercial concessions made to British merchants.

These concessions enabled British merchants living on the island to occupy a privileged position in commercial trade with the Indies and Americas, having these markets supplanted the importance Brazil had occupied until then as the major market for the export of Madeira Wine. This was how triangular commerce came to be between *Madeira*, the New World and Europe (with Great Britain occupying a prominent position).

This triangle also included the transportation of goods from the Portuguese and the British colonies back to Europe.

The close of this century foresaw even more fame and prestige for a wine that had become known and desired all over the world owing to a great quantity of commercial trade routes which, undoubtedly, offered



unlimited advantages for its expansion.

Eighteenth-century

At the very beginning of this century, the Methuen Treaty is signed (1703) between England and Portugal, and establishes that Portuguese wines would pay less one third of the customs rates upon entering England in relation to wines coming from other countries. In turn, English textiles entering Portugal would not pay any rates whatsoever. Despite this measure, which greatly benefited, as was intended, Oporto Wine, exports of Madeira Wine were still primarily directed towards the Indies and North America. Exports to Europe remained secondary.

The association of Madeira Wine with North America is very close and to witness this proximity one may evoke the fact that the celebration of the Declaration of Independence of the United States of America, on the 4th of July 1776, by its first President, George Washington, was marked by a toast with a chalice of Madeira Wine.

Present on the most refined tables of European Courts, it was the wine preferred by kings, emperors and statesmen. Thomas Jefferson, as did all the other “Founding Fathers”, greatly appreciated the most exquisite wines of his time, but elected Madeira Wine as his favourite.

Besides the fact that it was an epoch of great notoriety and fame for Madeira Wine, the period which expands throughout the eighteen-century is particularly interesting and rich in what concerns the development of the character of this wine. The introduction of two new techniques significantly contributes to this development and these new techniques are fortification and heating “estufagem”. By the middle of this century, most producing companies already fortified their wines.

Curiously, export distribution per market registers a change at the close of this century. This was probably due to the war of independence of the United States of America which brought many English citizens back to Great Britain. This, in turn, led to the progressive growth of the English market in terms of import of Madeira Wine.

Nineteenth-century

The beginning of the nineteenth-century is marked by a “boom” in exports, inflated by the Napoleonic Wars. However, this was not to be a favourable century for Madeira Wine. The post-war depression, already during the first decade, is prejudicial to Madeira Wine and there is a substantial decrease in its exports. The reopening of the French and Spanish ports, until then closed, also played a role in this. With



French and Spanish ports closed, Portuguese wines entering the British market had no competitors.

Of the many occurrences related to this post-war period, one continues to arouse much interest. The protagonist was Henry Veitch, the English Council in Madeira who, upon Napoleon Bonaparte's calling at the island in 1815 on his way to exile in the island of Saint Helena, presented the emperor with a barrel of Malmsey. The saying goes that owing to the emperor's refusal to down his exile miseries in Madeira Wine, the barrel with the precious nectar was returned to the Island of Madeira upon claim of the donor. In 1840, the wine of that one barrel was then multiplied into hundreds of bottles which were to delight innumerable English citizens, amongst whom Sir Winston Churchill who, upon visiting Madeira in 1950, had the privilege of savouring it.

The instability in North America brought about by the Civil War of 1861 will dramatically affect the exports of Madeira Wine to that market. Moreover, despite that fact that Madeira Wine was fashionable in post-war England, the truth is that this was not sufficient to cover the contraction of the American market.

Other factors play a role in the changes verified in wine exports, namely the opening of the Suez Canal in 1869. From this moment onwards, ships going west no longer call at the Island of Madeira.

The expansion of the Russian market by mid-century comes as a breath of fresh air. This market was to rival for some time with the British market in terms of trade turnover.

However, the second half of the century is marked by the devastating effects of the diseases that attacked the vineyards: oidium and phylloxera.

During this period, and notwithstanding the increase of the American vine, which is introduced as a means of combating phylloxera, the majority of the production of Madeira Wine consisted of "Verdelho" and "Tinta Negra". There are also reports mentioning the frequent existence of "Bual", "Bastardo" and "Terrantez". The wine produced with Malmsey vines continued to produce in small quantities, maintaining its fame and the quality awarded by the mythic malmsey "cândida" of the "Fajã dos Padres", a location initially owned by Jesuits.

Despite the recurring crises, by the turn of the century the production and commercialisation of Madeira Wine had recovered and would project itself in the market of the future.

Twentieth and Twenty-first-centuries



The twentieth-century will be a relatively stable one for Madeira Wine if compared to the previous century. During the first decade of this century and up to the First World War, export markets change and the German market gains enormous projection and a foremost position as the top export market. However, during the span of time between the two World Wars, the main destinies of export for Madeira Wine undergo some oscillations with the Scandinavian market, especially that of Sweden and Denmark, arising to the position of consumers of the best Madeira Wine.

This century is equally marked by efforts in terms of regulating Madeira Wine in view of achieving greater quality. It also witnessed the merging of a great number of producing companies, Portuguese and English, thus completely changing the scenario of the entrepreneurial tissue of Madeira Wine producers.

As from the 80s onwards, the tendencies in terms of export markets are delineated and will not undergo significant changes until our days.

The Revolution of 1974 and the subsequent entry of Portugal into the European Union brought about significant development in the Autonomous Region of Madeira which had an impact in the vitivinicultural sector. The reinforcement of pro-quality control becomes one of the priorities of governmental policies alongside a significant and healthy development of the vitivinicultural industry.

The twenty-first-century opens with the reinforcement of the quality of a wine with over 500 years of history.

Today, viticulturers and the whole of the companies related to the production and commercialization of Madeira Wine are highly committed to constantly improving the quality of this wine. They seek, from the planting of the vines to the bottling of the wine, to contribute towards the preservation of the fame and prestige of one of the world's best wines.

ROUND TRIP WINE

From the seventeenth-century onwards, one of the main markets for Madeira Wine was the Indies. This trade route was to become famous for Madeira Wine, not only because of the quantity of exports that were to take place throughout two centuries, but also due to the famous "Vinho da Roda" (Round Trip Wine).

The transportation of Madeira Wine to those regions was made in the hold of the ships, which reached very high temperatures on the passing through the tropics. On certain occasions, the wine would return to Europe, and it was then verified that these journeys greatly enhanced the quality of the wine. It was then that the barrels of Madeira Wine were sent to the Indies with the sole objective of enriching and valorising it. It was this wine that, on its return to Europe, conquered an unprecedented fame. In England, Madeira Wine



gains an extraordinary reputation which was responsible for the astronomic commercialisation prices the wine reached in the market.

Motivated by the evidence that heat greatly augmented the quality of Madeira Wine and probably enticed by the valorisation of the Round Trip Wine, by mid-eighteenth-century, producers were to invest in the “estufagem” (heating) method, a technique that is in use even today.