

## Recent events

### Fine Madeira Wines - 19th March 2021

Our tasting in March explored varieties of a unique style of wine from the Atlantic island of Madeira<sup>1</sup>. This small old volcanic island lies closer to the coast of north Africa than to Portugal, an isolation enabling a wine to evolve with a very distinctive style. As well as being fortified with vinic spirit the wine is heated for a minimum of three months in an *estufa*, a special hothouse.



The island was the last port of call for ships sailing to India before they crossed the Equator. Often they took on ballast in the form of wine in casks, the flavour of which was found to have improved dramatically on arrival in India, after a long voyage through the tropics. The modern *estufa* system imitates the conditions in the hold of the ship, subjecting the wine to the same constant heat. The better wines benefit from slow *canteiro* solar heat in casks under the pantiles of the dockside store houses.

In the Zoom presentation Stephen Chapman explained the very restricted cultivation of the four distinct noble white grape varieties: Sercial, Verdelho, Bual and Malvasia. Taking advantage of hundreds of small family producers using plots at different altitudes and aspects, to give sequential ripening, grapes are hand-harvested and sorted. The work-horse grape Tinta Negra, yielding 96% of the crop, can as we discovered, yield an interesting wine from a single vineyard and single vintage, Barbeito 2008.

All Madeira wine, be it dry or sweet is characterised by a distinctive oxidised old oak barrel citrus, dried fruits and toffee flavours combined with a high natural acidity which contributes to its longevity. It is not uncommon to find vintages that are over 100 years old. All varieties are improved in depth and length of flavour characters by extended aging in American or French oak casks. The 15 and 20 year old samples of Bual and Terrantez we tasted had more complexity and length in both aroma, palate and balance than the younger wines. Madeira is a strong wine, 18-20% alcohol, and because in the aging process it is fully oxidised it may, once opened, be kept for months in bottle or decanter. Although made from white grapes the wines can assume delightful colours varying from old gold to tawny and mahogany. The lighter dryer styles from Sercial and Verdelho make very good aperitifs and food wines. Sweeter Bual and Malvasia will



accompany desserts or may be enjoyed after a meal. These are more wines to talk about than to talk over.

The export industry has shrunk: it still exports 300,000 litres (around 10% of total production) to the UK with more going to the US, France and Scandinavia.

Currently there are just seven shippers. We tasted wines from three: Barbeito, Henriques & Henriques and Blandy's, or the Madeira Wine Company, which is the biggest by far.

<sup>1</sup> The pierced silver decanter label by Charles Reily & George Storer (1829) features the crest of Trinity Hall

For marketing and distribution, it is tied up with the port house of Symington (with brands including Dow, Graham, Warre and Coburn).

Covering the full spectrum our tasting included a five year old *Rainwater* Reserva from Barbeito, an aromatic blend of Tinta Negra and Verdelho. Full round and soft with a fresh finish the high acidity would make it a perfect foil for olives and salty nuts. A real rarity however was Blandy's 20 year old Terrantez. Made from a white grape that was all but exterminated by the odium in the 1850s; it is a late ripening, low yielding, thin-skinned grape and prone to botrytis so tricky to grow. There have been a few recent replantings.

These grape varieties tend to only be grown on the Island in any quantity with the exception of Verdelho which is being grown in the Hunter Valley, NSW and Victoria, Australia and Marlborough and the Esk Valley, Hawkes Bay, New Zealand.

If you have old Madeira it is recommended to be stored upright, not laid down. The high acidity will mean it will need frequent recorking. As we noted it is fully oxidised so keeping vertically and well sealed will ensure longevity.

Stephen Chapman

## Wild Summer Outing - 16th July 2021

What a whirlwind of a tasting: not around the world in 80 days but around the world with eight engaging wines. So we fastened our seat belts, emptied our tubes to fill our glasses and David Morgan took us over Zoom literally around the world. We started in Japan, touched down briefly in Switzerland (yes, they do grow grapes there), on through eastern Europe to Georgia, Moldova, Armenia and Turkey before crossing the Atlantic for a quick glass of Syrah in São Paulo and ending in Morocco.

In Japan's Yamanishi we found white Koshu grapes cultivated on overhead pergolas, on volcanic soils that yield a crisp dry wine that could work with sushi or fish. The Swiss are cunning and the rapporteur is convinced they keep the best within the Cantons. The Doral grape, a Chasselas/Chardonnay cross producing a Marsannesque wine, left one taster looking for more from the vineyard on the shores of Lake Geneva, west of Lausanne.

Switching to (Georgian) red the price was down but the nods of approval accelerated with a tannic wine from local Saperavi grape of 2018 vintage which we thought would be better laid down a while longer. The pioneering modern winery is one to watch in the future from this the cradle region of wine. In Moldova we followed similar intense and tannic and fruit flavours from the 260 hectares Chateau Pucara, apparently acclaimed by Hugh Johnson, from the predominantly Feteasca Neagra grape. Stakes were up and so was the altitude.

In Aragatsotn Province, Armenia we found Karmrahyut grapes cultivated at 700 – 1,900 metres producing tannic mouth-puckering wines aged 12 months in new French oak and 12 months in Artsakh oak barrels. It was a style asking for a lightly seared Longhorn steak or a haunch of Fallow deer from Knepp. For the trip to Türkiye this taster remembers bottles of raki placed on the table which was the starter for any meal along the Bosphorus, what red wine that followed was not important. Perhaps Papaskarasi 2018 was one of those. It scored Jancis' *NFM*. The transatlantic crossing was worth the air miles. A 2017 pure Syrah from vines cultivated on granitic soils at 900-1,200 metres and wine aged in French oak scored highly, and the *Decanter* silver award well deserved. This wine had taken our wild summer outing to another level. Landing in Meknes, Morocco at 650 metres on dry limestone the Première de Baccari of 2015 was no disappointment. A Syrah/Cabernet Franc blend aged for 18 months in new 500 litres French oak barrels and then 12 months in bottle before release was a recipe to ensure pleasure. A lovely wine on which to finish; and thank you David for the fascinating journey.



A large and excited group of Tasters enjoyed wines from Navarra in May, presented by Ana Laguna by Zoom. A full report on this event will be presented in the next Newsletter.

## Other items

### Château Bauduc & the Beardwoods

My Mother and Father, Sheila and Peter Beardwood (right), loved their wine and were members of The Winetasters. They toured Europe and sampled many wines at many a Château. They visited Château Bauduc and my mother's 'go to' wine became the Château Bauduc (white) as it was a really good wine for the price and she always raved about it. The wine is actually on the wine list of Gordon Ramsey and Rick Stein restaurants.

When my Mother passed away in 2010 we 'inherited' a couple of bottles and, as we also like them, we have continued to buy a dozen direct from the Château every so often.

Twenty odd years ago an Englishman, Gavin Quinney, left London, bought the Château and he has been very active in continuing the traditions and standards. From a blog he wrote on his website I found out that his great uncle was a man called Noel Chavasse who was one of very few people who had been awarded the Victoria Cross twice!

This rang a bell with me! Noel Godfrey Chavasse was born in Oxford in 1884 and was the son of the Right Reverend Francis Chavasse. He arrived in Liverpool in 1900 after his father was appointed Bishop of Liverpool. Noel attended Liverpool College, where he excelled at sport – he actually represented Great Britain in the 400 metres at the Olympics in 1908!



After training to become a doctor, he joined the British Army as a medical officer, where he was attached to the 1/10th Battalion of the King's (Liverpool) Regiment. Although he wasn't a frontline soldier, Noel Chavasse (left) was responsible for some of the bravest and most unselfish acts of the entire four-year conflict and became the most decorated soldier of the war for his actions.

My Grandfather Eddie (below), (on my Father's side) was a foot soldier in the same regiment and during action at Passchendaele was blown up by a grenade and left on the field, presumed dead.

His body was in a pile of other bodies on the battle field and Noel Chavasse apparently spotted his body twitching and carried him from the battlefield to safety and subsequent repatriation.

So, I added to the blog and emailed Gavin about the connection and what a small world it actually is. So without his great uncle's intervention I would not be writing this now or indeed buying his wine!

As a footnote, the very moment Gavin received my message he was being visited by the son of one of my Mum and Dad's friends from the Winetasters (a certain Mr Price I gather) who is also now a buyer (of wine)!

A final nice touch is that Noel Chavasse's father said to him, post conflict: *Once upon a time you were known as being the son of the Bishop of Liverpool but now I am known as the being the father of Noel Chavasse.*

Nick Beardwood



### Zoom Tasting Video Clips

Video clips from some of The Winetasters Zoom tastings are available on our website. They can be found here..... <https://www.winetasters.org.uk/zoom-tastings>

## The last test tube tasting?

Some time early into the first lockdown I thought about all the things I was going to miss and whether there was going to be any way to do them remotely/online.

Music gigs were top of my list. I attend many gigs (c20 a year) and it wasn't long before those I had booked were being cancelled or rescheduled (some four times - booking agents with an optimistic, but clearly unrealistic, outlook on life). I thought they might move online but not many did and I only joined four in over 12 months. An opportunity missed by the musicians, I think.

Next on my list was wine tasting. I considered how we might do that looking at various wine 'containers' that could be viable for postal deliveries and still keep the wines in good condition. For a moment I was worried whether the 'senior' profile of the Winetasters would preclude them from enjoying using technology; how wrong could I be.



What really set the ball rolling was the invite that went out from Liz to celebrate the life of John Barker as this was to be undertaken over Zoom. So, thank you John; this might never have got off the ground if it hadn't been for you! John's Zoom gathering went smoothly from both the celebration of his wonderful wine-tasting life point of view and a technology point of view and that convinced me it was worth pursuing the idea.

I renewed my search for suitable containers with vigour. I thought school test tubes would be a good tasting size, but I didn't want glass as I thought packing and unpacking those might be calamitous and that's when I discovered plastic test tubes that appeared to be the right size and, most importantly, promised to be liquid-tight. They are, apparently, most commonly used for 'wedding favours' but I felt we had a far better use for them! So, I offered up the seeds of my idea to the Committee.

After a promising response and thanks to the joys of Amazon, I had a small sample of test tubes in my hands the next day. I decanted some red I was drinking into a couple, turned them upside down and shook them violently and all looked good, no leaks. Two days later and the wine (nothing special) was as good as when it went into the tube (nothing special).

To further test my idea, I ordered enough tubes to trial two white single grape wines as a blind tasting for the Committee and three friends – one of whom has since joined and one who is a regular guest. Sadly, my choice of white wines for a blind tasting wasn't that great but fortunately this didn't put the Committee off the idea of trying out a White Wine tasting and duly four Committee members offered up two wines each to present.

I am never going to forget that first ever full decanting day in early August. It felt like the hottest day of the year and Sarah had abandoned me for the relative chill of the North Kent coast. I managed to decant two wines in the kitchen before 7am but the heat was becoming more intense by the minute and I took a break in the lounge where our portable aircon unit was keeping the air temperature a notch below 'frying tonight'. As it was definitely cooler than the kitchen, I moved the whole operation into the lounge and realised it was just as well Sarah was in Kent and the wines weren't red!! (I don't think she has spotted that white wine stain on the lounge carpet yet).



Whilst my idea of pouring the wine into the test tubes using a small funnel worked OK with the small initial samples, I realised, too late, that it didn't cut the mustard when undertaking a production run and decanting 16 bottles into 240 odd test tubes. However, a pipette (again something I hadn't used since I was 15, probably to squirt someone with one of the noxious substances found freely available in the science labs of my youth) did work well to form that all important meniscus in an effort to reduce the air in the tubes to the minimum. My thanks also have to go to Jack, my now Winetasters son-in-law, for suggesting a syringe for future decanting.

On the Monday when I came to make a trip to the Post Office, I realised that not only had Sarah deserted me but so had the car. Whilst our PO isn't far away, the half mile with two large bags full of test tubes which in turn were full of wine felt like the last lap of a particularly grueling marathon and the slow walk in the still oppressive heat was punctuated by frequent stops to relieve my arms and mop my brow. I remember getting some odd looks from neighbours and those passing. Another note to self for any future tasting.



The first Zoom tasting went very well and seemed to be enjoyed by all, and we were soon planning another. In total we have undertaken seven tastings as I write this including Madeira and the Balkans, neither of which I remember tasting previously with The Winetasters. I have thoroughly enjoyed them all. For some tastings we have had such demand for places that I have been decanting 24 bottles into 360 test tubes; lockdown made members' friends, family and work colleagues seek out 'social' experiences and what better than The Winetasters on Zoom on a Friday evening?

My favourite tasting, and the one that has turned out to be the most expensive one for me personally, was Argentina. I love Malbec and as a result of that tasting I joined the Wine Society to make just a few purchases. Who says that Malbec doesn't go with Turkey? Certainly not J Alberto and on one of the oddest Christmas days ever, with close family members missing (thank you Covid), one of us was found sound asleep cuddling an empty bottle after lunch!



I recorded the Zoom tastings with the idea of adding relevant and interesting clips to the website and so spend a few hours after each tasting editing the two hours or so of video into about a dozen clips. Some of the 'asides' in the tastings have been very funny e.g. "Emu Burgundy", "A warm vaccine" and "The wrong door". I think my favourite was the Emu Burgundy tale (one of Charles many, many witty stories). The clip can be found [here \(https://www.winetasters.org.uk/zoom-tasting-1\)](https://www.winetasters.org.uk/zoom-tasting-1)

So, is this the last test tube tasting ever? Well from a pandemic point of view I hope it is, but maybe, just maybe, it's something we should consider in the future to both keep the more remote members involved but also to save us all turning out in the depths of a cold February when we could all be at home by the fire!

Ken Buckle

## Test Tubes

For the time being after our Zoom tastings we are not asking for the test tubes back. So please do not send any more to Ken.