

Time for Madeira

The white is endless, it stretches out like a second sea when you hike so far above the clouds on Pico Riuvo. Up that high, time stands still on Madeira. And yet time also moves on. Madeira is no longer fashionable. Another tourist tells me, “We weren’t going to come here. We thought it was just for old people.” His name is John Mitchels and his hair is peppered, and age has cut into his face. He laughs when he sees my expression, saying he knows he isn’t as young as he used to be. Time and age both seem to play tricks on this island.

Madeira is a Portuguese island off the coast of Morocco, less than 60 km long. Even though it is that small, it has seven sub-climates. It is uniquely beautiful. But it is the wine that we have come for. Madeira makes its own unique drop. Back in the 15th Century when wine was travelling over the Atlantic. There’s tales of sailors getting thirsty on their way over, taking a sip each day until suddenly they panic and fill what they’ve drunk with rum. They discovered that the weaker wines made the journey after being fortified. The sway of the ocean mixing, the heat of the sun, creating an accidental delicious new elixir.

But Madeira is no longer new. It is no longer in fashion. In fact, most times we think of it as something Grandmas drink at Christmas or a cooking ingredient Grandmas soak bland cake in. But we are missing out.

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Madeira is all about time and aging. The island was discovered in 1419. In order for it to be farmed, they set fire to the island. It was ablaze for seven years. The layer of ash from the flames added to the fiery history of the volcanic soil. By adding a spirit to the wine (fortifying it), then heating it, you are left with a wine that can out live any other. After a time, when wine from Burgundy and Bordeaux are falling over, all flavour and depth striped away, Madeiras from 140 years ago can be drunk and relished.

Imagine that, you can drink along with all the big events. Not events like you our birthday or an accomplishment you've made, but something major that happened in the world; D-Day, women getting the right to vote, the release of Prince's first album.

I brought back a bottle of the year I was born. Not a world event, but a lovely occasion for me. John Mitchels thought it was a nice idea and it would be "much, much cheaper than what his would be."

I'm curious about why it is that only older people drink Madeira and even holiday there. Is there a generational identity that people feel the need to conform to? Well, it shouldn't be at the cost of something so delicious or a place that is so beautiful.

In Madeira the clouds seep down to flirt with the sea while you lie on a beach of smooth grey pebbles that are so warm, they give you an unintentional massage. The wine is so smooth you would never think it was so alcoholic and has such bright acidity it leaves your mouth watering. Neither of these things should be avoided because of some age box.

There are many different Madeiras to appeal to many tastes. There are blends, but here's a quick guide to single grape Madeiras. They range from the nuttier, leaner **Sercial** (sweet but can stand up to a savory course) through to **Verelho** (flirts with being sweeter but still has walnuts and almonds imbedded) to **Bual** (toffee skips along the tongue and leaves spices behind) and **Malmsey**, whose power and sweetness stuns you, but leaves you wanting more.

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Madeira loves company and a whole range of food can sing next to the glass. From risotto to Roquefort, laksa to orange cake. If you want a night to sip and appreciate, think Madeira.

Once again, it all comes back to time with Madeira. It's a gift. You can't knock it back on a hot day. It needs time to be enjoyed. Each sip is rich and full. Each sip is a reward for yourself. You are taking a moment to relax. In winter it is perfect for some warmth and escape.

If you have the time, escape to the island. Its landscape is steep rock and its beaches are otherworldly, with cliffs, black sand and natural sea-salt pools. The people have the time for you - saying hello as you walk down the street. The hikes are breathtaking, each day can take you to another world; waterfalls, sea-cliffs, cloud walks. Walk along the levadas or conduits, the water control systems that date back to the 16th century. The tasting houses for the wine are all in the capital, Funchal. We sat in these old buildings, surrounded by barrels of wine that had been there since 1929, tasting history.

Madeira is all about age and time. No matter what the age and no matter what the time.

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References

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