

SUGAR CANE AND MADEIRA RUM HISTORICAL FACTS

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, sugar had become the main product produced in Madeira and, in addition to the expeditions which until then were directed to mainland Portugal, the Gulf of Guinea and African markets, sugar was taken to the markets of the Mediterranean and Northern Europe.

It was on Madeira Island that was born the technology that is currently used all over the world, both in the production of sugar cane, and in its transformation for the manufacture of sugar, sugar cane honey, rum and alcohol. Even today, throughout the Island, exists several living testimonies of its secular role.

There are several and widely varied evidences that have throughout history proven the close and unequivocal link between sugar cane cultivation and «Madeira Rum» and the Autonomous Region of Madeira, including bibliographical references.

15th Century

The cultivation of sugar cane was introduced on the island of Madeira around 1425, soon after the beginning of its settlement, at request of Infante D. Henrique, given the potential economic interest of this cultivation, in view of the fact that sugar was a product much sought after by kings and noblemen throughout Europe. The introduction of the crops was made using "stakes" from the island of Sicily, which immediately proved to be highly adaptable to the soil and climate conditions in the areas of early settlement, on the lower grounds, on the Eastern and Southern Coast of the Island, where populations began to gain increasing knowledge of its production and use, which, combined with the strategic geographic position of the Madeira island, stimulated the development of sugar cane cultivation and sugar production techniques that would later expand with the discovery of America, first by the Portuguese to Brazil and later the islands of the Caribbean and Antilles.

Due to the soil and climate conditions of the Madeira Island, sugar cane production became sufficient for the island to start exporting and, according to Luis de Cadamosto, a Venetian Navigator, in 1455 the production of sugar in Madeira was almost entirely for export. In 1466, sugar had become the main crop and, in addition to the exports that until then were directed at Mainland Portugal, the Gulf of Kenya and African markets, it began to expand to Mediterranean and Northern European markets.

16th Century

The 16th century on the island begins with the decrease of sugar cane cultivation, due to a number of factors including

production surplus and soil exhaustion. At the end of the century, the crisis sets in, with competition from Brazil's sugar offering much cheaper prices.

17th Century

With the disease of the Madeira sugar cane plantations and with competition from Brazil's sugar, new crops arise in Madeira, such as vineyards, cider and other fruits. The milling of sugar cane, which came to occupy about half a hundred mills in the 16th century, declined significantly in the following one hundred years, leaving just one mill in operation in the 18th century.

18th Century

Throughout the 18th century, the main bet was only on vineyards, which took up the space of the sugar cane plantations. Still, these continued, for there are data documenting the existence of sugar cane plantations and it is known that the Socorridos mill remained in operation throughout the 18th century.

19th Century

With the diseases that ravaged the vineyards, in the mid-19th century (with the appearance of powdery mildew and phylloxera almost wiping out the Madeiran vineyards at the time), arose the need to resort to other crops and thus was reborn the sugar cane. Initially limited to low lands in the South, it progressively covered areas not recommended for its production, until, between 1882-1886, a disease almost destroys the sugar cane plantations in Madeira, caused by the fungus *Coniothyrium melasporum*.

The introduction of new varieties made it possible to reconstruct the sugar cane plantations that, from 1890, expanded again, boosting the sugar industry and the production of agricultural rum (which among the locals is commonly known as «aguardente de cana» - "sugar cane spirit"), thus appearing the first spirit distillation devices. It is estimated that between 1847 and 1870 there were 26 spirit distillation devices. This development situation remained until the end of the 30s of the 20th century, when its cultivation reached an area of about 6,500 ha, having then declined due to delimitation of the agricultural areas, reaching an estimated total surface of 1,420 ha in 1952. This tendency to decline remained sharp throughout the second half of the 20th century.

20th Century

By the end of the 80s of the last century, there was a substantial drop in the area of cultivation, primarily related to the closure of several industrial plants for selling the produce, such as the Hinton company and the Machico mill. Effectively, this led to a collapse in cultivation, for lack of trade channels, becoming limited to little more than a hundred hectares of area (in 1986 it was 119.9 ha, decreasing rapidly to 90.3 ha. in 1988). In addition, farmers began to have other cultural appetites, in particular for banana trees, vegetables, tropical and subtropical plants, vineyards, etc.

21st Century

At the turn of the century, in recent years, there has been a growing boost in the production of sugarcane, sustained fundamentally by various incentives (greater demand for "Madeira Rum", better prices, supply of quality seedlings, technical support for planting, new investment projects, etc.), developed by the regional authorities (Regional Secretariat for Agriculture), which continued to announce various support measures for the production and processing of sugarcane. It has also increased and defended its derivatives, of unique quality, as a result of the long experience of its producers, who have managed to keep alive a whole historical, patrimonial, and economic universe typical of this land. Consequently, in the last few years, there has been more significant growth in the area occupied by sugarcane, which has grown to 172 ha.

In this way, the cane-growing tourist attraction, consisting of the unique aroma of the working mills and the flavors of their by-products, is kept up to date, and all the historical regional traditions are based on this crop.