

# MADEIRA RHUM (RUM DA MADEIRA)



## Historical Context

The production of Rum da Madeira is intimately linked to the island's colonial and agricultural history. Sugarcane was introduced to Madeira shortly after its discovery in 1419, with the first cuttings imported from Sicily. This crop rapidly became the economic engine of the archipelago, earning the designation "white gold" during the 15th and 16th centuries. By the 19th century, as European viticulture suffered under the weight of disease, sugarcane cultivation experienced a revival, leading to the island-wide generalisation of rum production by 1846. Despite declines in planted surface area throughout the 20th century, the traditional knowledge and infrastructure for agricole rum production remained.

Today, Rum da Madeira is the only agricultural rum produced in Portugal protected by strict regulations that ensure its quality and authenticity.



## Geographical Context

The PGI area for Rum da Madeira encompasses the entirety of the Madeira Archipelago, including Madeira Island and Porto Santo Island. Sugarcane must be cultivated within this same geographical area.

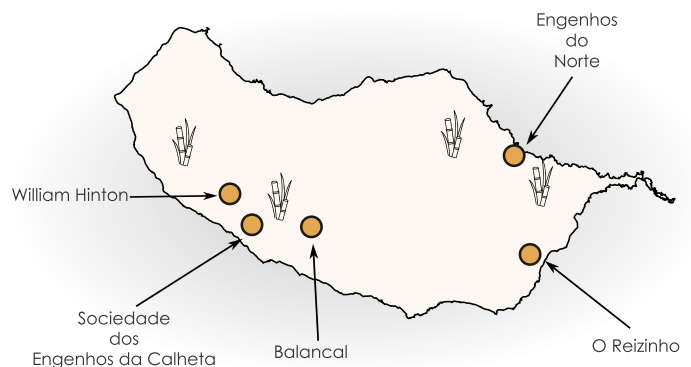
Key municipalities involved in sugarcane production include:

- Ponta do Sol
- Calheta
- Santana
- Machico

While the entire territory of Madeira and Porto Santo is recognised as the designated PGI zone for the production of Rum da Madeira, the aforementioned municipalities contribute nearly 80% of the region's sugarcane output, with Ponta do Sol being the most important contributor.

As of 2025, the following producers are officially registered:

- Engenho Novo da Madeira (William Hinton Rum),
- Florentino Isildo Gouveia Ferreira (O Reizinho),
- J. Faria & Filhos, (Engenhos do Norte),
- Sociedade dos Engenhos da Calheta,
- Vinha Alta (Balancal),
- Abel Fernandes.



## Definition and Legal Protection

The use of the PGI designation is strictly reserved for rums that meet the geographical and production standards outlined in the legislation. Any misleading references to the PGI, including similar-sounding names or suggestive terms, are legally prohibited.

The Instituto do Vinho, do Bordado e do Artesanato da Madeira (IVBAM) plays a central role in the regulation and promotion of Rum da Madeira. As the official governing body, IVBAM is responsible for certifying production facilities, approving labelling, monitoring production through detailed current accounts, and conducting mandatory analytical and organoleptic evaluations. IVBAM also ensures that all producers comply with the legal standards defined under regional and European legislation, thereby safeguarding the quality, authenticity, and identity of Madeira Rum.



## Classification

Rum da Madeira is classified into two primary categories:

- **Natural Rum da Madeira** is unaged, either colourless or with a faint yellow hue. It is consumed young, often highlighting the vegetal, fruity, and mineral aspects of fresh cane distillation.
- **Aged Rum da Madeira** develops through prolonged contact with oak. By regulation, all age statements must correspond to the youngest spirit in the blend and may only appear on the label if the ageing was carried out in oak barrels for a minimum of three years.

Aged categories officially recognised by IVBAM include:

- 3 years
- 6 years or Reserva
- 9 years
- 12 years or Reserva Velha
- 15 years or Reserva Especial
- 18 years or Reserva Superior
- 21 years or Grande Reserva
- 25 years or Grande Reserva Premium

Authorised traditional terms may appear on the label, such as “**aguardente de cana,**” “**aguardente de cana-de-açúcar,**” or “**aguardente de cana sacarina.**” For aged products, the terms “**velho,**” “**rum velho,**” or “**aguardente velha**” are permitted, provided the appropriate year references are included.



## Production Notes



### Harvesting

Three main sugarcane varieties are cultivated in Madeira: Cana Roxa, NCO 310, and Yuba:

- **Cana Roxa**, or purple cane, is the most historically established variety and is known for its robustness, adaptability to steep terrain, and aromatic profile.
- **NCO 310** is a hybrid developed for high yield and sugar content, offering excellent juice quality with efficient fermentation characteristics.
- **Yuba/Canica** is valued for its disease resistance, good adaptation to less watered soils as well as the quality of its juice, which give the resulting Rum a more characteristic aroma and a superior flavour quality.

These three cultivars have proven particularly well-suited to the island's volcanic soils and microclimates, contributing to the distinctiveness and quality of Madeira's agricultural rum.

Sugarcane is grown on small, fragmented plots averaging 5,000 m<sup>2</sup>, typically divided across several parcels. Cultivation and harvesting remain entirely manual and non-mechanised, with workers cleaning, cutting, and bundling the canes by hand. Each bundle weighs around 30 to 35 kilograms and is manually transported down steep terrain to the engenhos (mills).

To maintain freshness and prevent oxidation, the cane must be crushed within 48 hours of harvest. The harvest season runs annually from 1st April to the end of May. Exceptionally it can begin in mid-March.

The yield of sugarcane significantly varies, ranging from 40 tonnes per hectare in older plantations to up to 120 tonnes per hectare in newer fields.



## SUGARCANE ECONOMICS IN MADEIRA

Sugarcane cultivation in Madeira is among the most expensive in the world. In 2026, the price paid for sugarcane on the island reached €620 per tonne (€0.62/kg), a figure significantly higher than those observed in most other rum-producing regions)<sup>1</sup>.

This is significantly higher than in most rum-producing regions, where cane prices typically remain below €0.15/kg and often below €0.05/kg in mechanised systems.

The cost structure is driven by the island's extreme topography and fragmented land use. Plots are small and dispersed, making mechanisation impractical. As a result, cultivation and harvesting are carried out entirely by hand.

These constraints are reflected in the structure of the sector. The number of sugarcane producers has declined from over 900 in the mid-2010s to fewer than 700 today, illustrating the increasing difficulty of maintaining viable production under such conditions.

Rather than enabling expansion, this environment favours small-scale, quality-driven production. The high cost of raw material reinforces a focus on typicity and value.



## Extraction

Once delivered to the mill, the sugarcane is immediately processed through mechanical crushers. The juice, referred to as "caldo," is then allowed to settle through a decantation process and is filtered to remove fibrous particles and impurities. This preparatory stage ensures that the must remains stable and clean for the fermentation phase.



## Fermentation

To proceed to fermentation, the juice must have a minimum Brix content of 15°, as stipulated by legislation.

The fermentation typically takes place in stainless steel vats and can last from 24 to 72 hours, depending on the temperature, yeast management, and producer preference. No molasses or added sugars are permitted. The result is a lightly alcoholic cane wine, which forms the aromatic base of the final distillate.

<sup>1</sup> IVBAM



## *Distillation*

Distillation must be conducted in facilities registered with IVBAM and located within the PGI territory. Both column and pot stills are authorised, provided that they preserve the spirit's traditional aromatic profile. The choice of still and distillation parameters are left to the discretion of the producer, allowing for stylistic variation while maintaining compliance. The resulting distillate is typically collected at strengths between 65% and 72% ABV and is then either bottled as a natural rum or directed to maturation.



## *Maturation*

For aged Rum da Madeira, the distillate must be matured in oak casks for a minimum of three years. The ageing process must occur within the region and be declared in advance to IVBAM, which oversees a separate account system for aged spirits. Oak casks may be of varying origins and prior uses, with a notable prevalence of ex-Madeira wine casks. These lend a distinctive influence to the rum's aromatic profile.

Age statements are only permitted when the rum has been aged for the declared number of years, with the youngest rum in any blend setting the age reference. The result is a complex and evolving spirit with increased roundness, depth, and aromatic intensity.

### *Authorised Additives and Practices*

- Rum da Madeira may contain caramel solely for the purpose of colour correction. Water may be added for dilution, provided it does not compromise the nature of the product. No other sweeteners, flavourings, or additives are permitted.
- Bottling must occur in accordance with packaging regulations regarding volume and material, and bulk sales are only authorised under special permit from IVBAM.
- Each batch is subject to analytical and organoleptic evaluation prior to commercial release to ensure compliance with internal standards and typicity.
- The final product must be bottled at a minimum of 37.5% ABV.



### **PONCHA: SIMPLE BY DESIGN, SERIOUS BY NATURE**

Poncha is Madeira's most emblematic cocktail and remains one of the primary traditional uses of Rum da Madeira. It is typically prepared using unaged agricultural rum, fresh lemon juice, and bee honey, creating a vibrant balance between acidity, sweetness, and alcohol.

The original form, known as the Fisherman's Poncha, combines rum, sugar, and fresh lemon juice in a more direct and austere preparation that highlights the raw intensity and structure of the spirit.

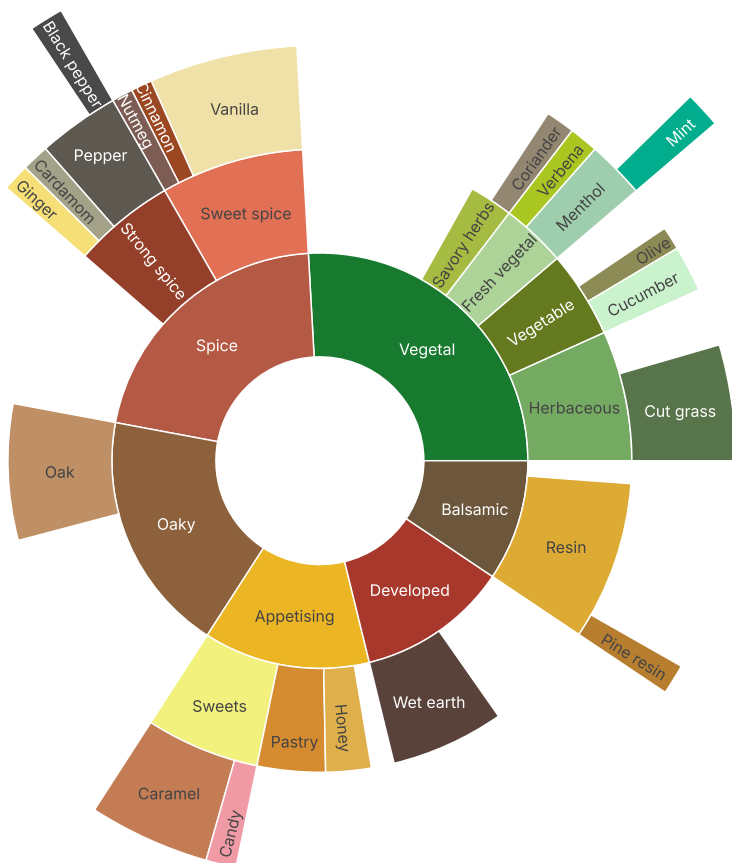
Traditionally mixed using a wooden tool called "caralhinho", Poncha emphasises the freshness, energy, and natural vibrancy of Rum da Madeira. In both forms, the drink showcases the spirit's vegetal, citrus, and lightly saline profile, often with a clean and persistent finish.



## Key Points

- ✓ Rum da Madeira is a product with Geographical Indication (GI) and can only be produced on the island of Madeira, Portugal.
- ✓ It is exclusively made from freshly pressed sugarcane juice, without the use of molasses or other sugarcane by-products, hence the term 'agricole'.
- ✓ Only sugarcane grown on Madeira is permitted
- ✓ Fermentation begins after milling and typically takes between 24 to 72 hours.
- ✓ The rum is distilled in copper stills (discontinuous or continuous), preserving the aromatic richness of the raw material.
- ✓ Maturation, when applied, occurs in oak barrels and must take place on the island.
- ✓ Both unaged (white) and aged expressions exist, with age statements validated and controlled by the regional authorities (IVBAM).
- ✓ Caramel is allowed only for colour correction, and water may be added for dilution. No other additives are permitted.
- ✓ The rum must be bottled at a minimum of 37.5% ABV and only on Madeira.
- ✓ It is the only agricultural rum produced in Portugal.

# Typical Attributes: Rum Da Madeira



## Tasting Tips



Rum da Madeira is most expressive on the nose and mid-palate. Focus on the clarity of fresh cane character, particularly vegetal, grassy, and lightly fruity notes, often accompanied by a distinct mineral or saline edge. Assess dryness, structure, and aromatic precision, as well as the integration of oak in aged styles. Particular attention should be paid to the persistence of a clean, vibrant finish

## Typical Organoleptic Profile

<b>Robe</b>	Clear to golden amber (depending on age).
<b>Aroma</b>	Freshly cut cane, vegetal, grassy, tropical fruit, with hints of olives, spice and wood in aged versions.
<b>Palate</b>	Vibrant, dry and expressive. Aged versions show notes of vanilla, dried fruits, and warm spice.
<b>Finish</b>	Lively and aromatic with a clean, persistent finish.

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*Text and graphics by Ulric Nijs*

*Sensory analysis in association with:*

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