

CONNOISSEURS' GUIDE TO CALIFORNIA WINE



Sunday Serendipity

Posted: November 14, 2010

Have Some Madeira, My Dear

By Stephen Eliot



Madeira is one of the most complex and fascinating wines to be had, and, in the United States today, few truly great wines are so misunderstood or underappreciated. Given the wine's historical significance in America – glasses of Madeira were raised by its framers to toast the creation of the Declaration of Dependence, and Madeira was considered the most prestigious of all wines by wealthy Americans in the 18th and 19th centuries – I have often wondered at how domestic markets seem so stubbornly bound to ignore its existence. Lately, there are new glimmers of interest, and, while I would not support claims that we are suddenly in the

midst of a full-blown Madeira renaissance, I am heartened by the increased availability of first-rate bottlings and by the growing enthusiasm with which they are being received.

Much of the credit for Madeira's rising fortunes must be given to the Rare Wine Company of Sonoma and its founder Mannie Burke. Mr. Burke and company not only manage the most extensive list of fine vintage Madeiras to be had in this country, they have teamed with Ricardo Diogo Vasconcelos Freitas, owner of Madeira's Vinhos Barbeito to create a line of remarkable offerings drawn from stocks of old wines that are meant to mimic the great wines of the past. The Rare Wine Company "Historic Series" is the end result of this collaboration, and, simply put, every one of the many wines that have I have tasted has been nothing short of remarkable. Principally comprised of examples of Madeira's four great varietal's and named after the great American cities where the Madeira trade once flourished, the Historic Series includes the Charleston Sercial, Savannah Verdelho, Boston Bual and New York Malmsey. The wines are priced in the fifty-dollar price range and are several orders magnitude deeper and more compellingly complex than the usual five to ten year old entry-level Madeiras on the market.

Of special note and the spur for this Sunday's posting, the Rare Wine Company has just released a limited commemorative set of all four wines bottled in specially commissioned half-bottles. There are only 750 sets produced, thus their finding may not be all that easy, but at a retail price of \$95.00, they strike me as nothing less than an out and out bargain. Long-time lovers of Madeira and those whose interest is piquing are well-advised to check out the market and buy what they can while supplies last.