

Versatile Madeira is dry or sweet, young or old, always unspoilable

by [Lynne Rossetto Kasper](#)



What happened to Madeira? Talk about a forgotten gem of a wine: overlooked, maybe under-priced. Why it isn't touted and talked about, I don't know. Wine critic [Patrick Comiskey](#), a writer for Wine & Spirits Magazine, recently returned from a trip to the island of Madeira.

Lynne Rossetto Kasper: Where is Madeira?



Malvasia wine

Patrick Comiskey: Madeira is an archipelago about 350 miles west of Morocco. It is part of the country of Portugal, so there is an established Portuguese culture there, but it really is a place unto itself. It's one of the most vertically challenged wine regions I've ever seen; it is so dramatically mountainous. I've never seen a place quite like it outside of Bali or perhaps Hawaii.

LRK: A lot of people have not tasted Madeira. Can you explain what it is?

PC: Madeira is a fortified wine. It's made with red or white grapes, but mostly red grapes. Color isn't really something that comes into play because the wine is deliberately oxidized and heated so that it always has a kind of amber or tawny color. It is a sweet wine, but the levels of sweetness change from wine to wine; you can have a dry Madeira, which has a touch of sweetness, or you can have a sweet Madeira, which is in fact quite rich and sweet. It always has a wonderfully caramelly, nutty flavor whether it's a young wine or a very old wine.

In younger wines, you get aromas of caramel, maple sugar, honey and sometimes molasses. Usually the fruit is something candied, like candied ginger or candied orange -- candied maraschino cherry even is not uncommon. There's always some wonderful warm baking spice component to the younger wines; you get hints of five-spice powder, nutmeg and cinnamon.

Most Madeiras are made with a grape known as tinta negra, though traditional Madeiras -- the Madeiras that have been revered throughout history -- are mostly made with white grapes. Those are in the minority now because those grapes are much more difficult to grow. However, they are still very much in the market.

This is roughly the range: Sercial is the driest, then verdelho is next. Verdelho is perhaps the most versatile, because it sort of straddles between dry and sweet. The richest ones are bual or malmsey or malvasia.

LRK: You can go from something that's quite dry that you might drink at the beginning of a meal or to something you might drink even with food?

PC: Absolutely with food. The drier wines are very, very wonderful with savory dishes. I talked to a number of sommeliers, and one of the prevailing pairings that came through was foie gras. In fact, one sommelier whom I spoke with was having what he called a foie-for-all coursed dinner. Another sommelier whom I spoke with noted that the drier Madeiras are really well-suited to various umami iterations. Whether it's mushroom soup or something that uses a reduced chicken broth, Madeira is a perfect match for something that utilizes that kind of richness of flavor.

LRK: Would you serve these chilled or at room temperature?



Madeira wine

PC: The younger wines are often lightly chilled; the drier wines also respond to a little bit of chill. Other than that, room temperature is just fine. The great thing about these wines is that once they've been heat-treated through this [estufagem](#) process, they are virtually unspoilable. They will not go bad. For that reason, you can have a wine in January and try it again the following January and you'll have essentially the same experience. That is obviously quite rare in wine.

LRK: You wrote that these were the wines of the original 13 colonies. We were drinking these wines all those centuries ago?

PC: These wines were very important to colonial America. Thomas Jefferson had a huge collection. George Washington drank Madeira every night with dinner. When the founding fathers signed the Declaration of Independence, they toasted their achievement with Madeira. Betsy Ross was a tippler. John Hancock apparently imported Madeira for a time. It is a huge part of American history and was well into the 19th century.

LRK: Are they very expensive?

PC: The entry-level wines are remarkably inexpensive. You can get a Rainwater Madeira for less than \$20 and you'll be very happy with it. However, these wines are actually aged in the wineries themselves, sometimes for hundreds of years, so it's not surprising for you to find wines that were made in the 18th century that you can still buy. And believe me, you will pay for it. But they are some of the most remarkable wines that I've had. I have had wines going back to the 1850s and they are extraordinary.

LRK: It's a romance for you, isn't it?

PC: Oh, indeed.

Comiskey's three Madeira picks

Here are three Madeiras worth seeking. Many of these can be found in smaller-format bottles so you can try more styles for less, but bear in mind they last for a very long time. And if you're feeling spendy, finer restaurants carry much older wines -- going back to the early 20th, the 19th, and even the 18th centuries. They won't be cheap, but they will be unforgettable.

- Broadbent Selections NV Rainwater Medium Dry Madeira (about \$15): A really well-made, entry-level, medium-dry Madeira. It's very fruity, with scents of caramel apples and flavors a touch rounder and deeper. More in the realm of tarte tatin lightly spiced with cinnamon.
- Rare Wine Company Historic Series Savannah Verdelho (about \$40): Made by Barbeito, in a drier style, with dried fig and hints of mocha, counterbalanced with high notes of candied orange. Very brisk flavors, mouthwatering finish.
- Blandy's 10-Year-old Malmsey (about \$40): The richest wine here, with a tawny color and nutty, honeyed accents, rich flavors of pears and molasses, very creamy, round and complete in the mouth.

