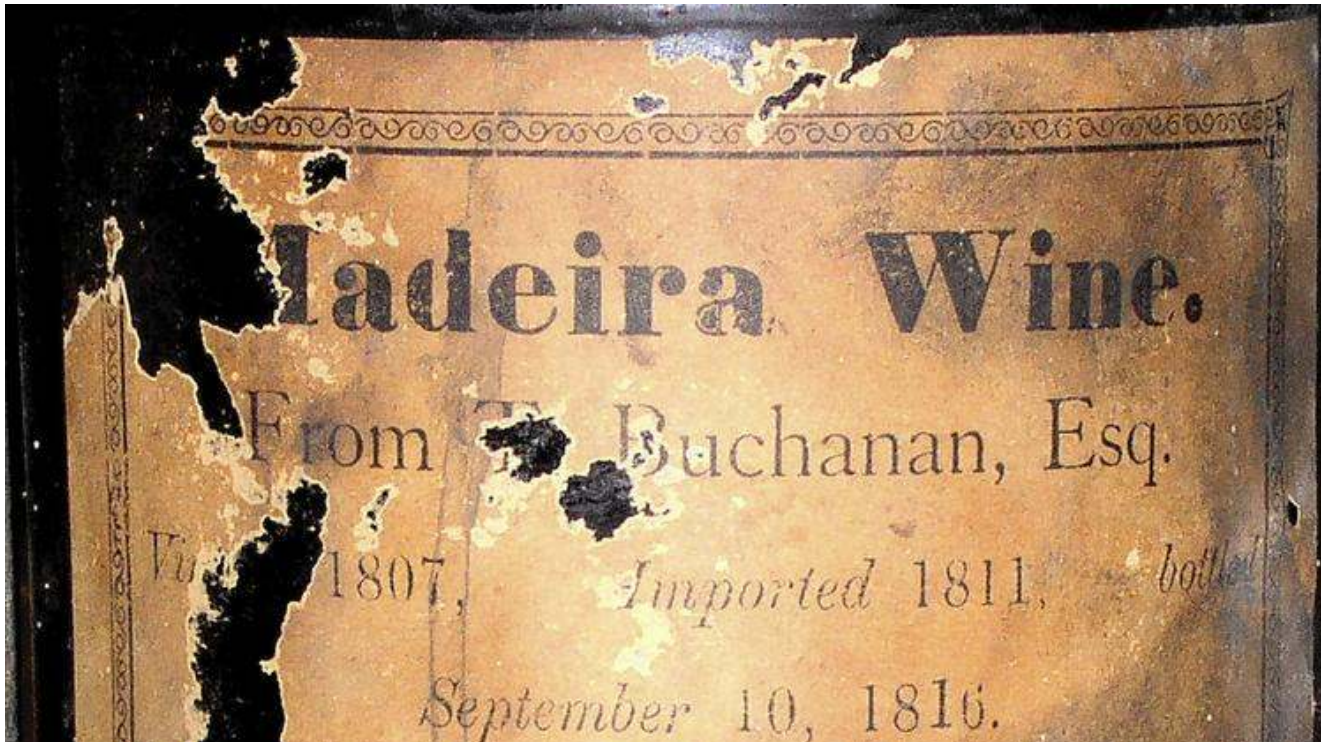


Madeira: A historic sip



A Madeira wine belonging to Thomas Buchanan, vintage 1807 that was shipped to the U.S. in barrel in 1811 and bottled in 1816. The 1816 label is among the earliest surviving paper labels on a bottle of any type of wine. (Emanuel Berk, founder Rare Wine Co.)

By Bill St. John, Special to Tribune Newspapers

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Madeira is the Doctor Who of wine. With it, in it, through it, you will travel through time as with no other wine.

Its own soul is old, this fortified wine from Portugal's mid-Atlantic island, being born into bottle only after years — sometimes decades — of aging in cask. Once aged, it is virtually static. Its very nature is a dictate of time.

This Independence Day, however, the best time travel coordinate to set is July 4, 1776. The signing of the Declaration of Independence, at the insistence of its author, Thomas Jefferson, a grand fancier of Madeira, was toasted with the wine. The early colonies were Madeira's largest market, drinking one-fourth of its production of wine.

According to Noel Cossart, in his book "Madeira, The Island Vineyard," George Washington was purported to drink a pint at dinner daily; Betsy Ross sewing her flag and Francis Scott Key composing "The Star-Spangled Banner" sipped while they tasked.

Cossart relates how a far more delicious riot than that later wet by tea occurred in Boston Harbor in 1768 when John Hancock's sloop, Liberty, laden with Madeira wine, was disallowed from offloading its cargo. The harbor commissioners had trumped up a new tax — this would be called poor timing — and the public, looking to be deprived of their beloved Madeira, took matters, and their Madeira, into their own hands and mugs.

What had begun in the late 1600s as a pale, high-acid white wine shipped from one of the few regions of Europe allowed to trade with the nascent country, became, by the 1750s, the Madeira we know today.

David Hancock, in his book "Oceans of Wine: Madeira and the Emergence of American Trade and Taste," shows how Madeira's fortification and aging, its varying styles from light to heavy, dry to sweet, all became a kind of extra-regnum, intra-nations economy of supply and demand, between the American colonies, European shippers and Portuguese winemakers, sometimes in concert with British merchants.

It is a fascinating history, of how a wine became an economic conversation in response to various aesthetic and commercial motives, all outside the overarching trans-Atlantic, merely two-sided War of Independence.

The new Americans wanted their wine; they wanted it in this style; and they wanted it for their chosen purposes. Hoorah.

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Recommended:

Blandy's Alvada 5 Year Old Rich: If you want to get a start in Madeira, and do not turn your nose up at sweet wine, this is a safe, good value beginning. Serve it cool — that will help tone down its obvious sweetness and, because it is soft of acidity, unlike many a Madeira, it will be a rich, fruity sip, with a long, nutty, toffee-ish finish. Quite a delicious dessert. **\$15-\$20** (500 milliliters)

Broadbent Madeira Reserve 5 Years Old: You might consider this medium-sweet, amber-tinted, effusively scented Madeira for savory (not merely sweet) dishes such as pork roast with apricots or a mild lamb curry with coconut milk. Its lemony acidity is so abundant and refreshing, it'll clean up nicely. **\$20-\$25**

Miles 10 Year Old Rich Malmsey: No question, this is sweet but balanced with and tied tight by Madeira's telltale acidity, as if a conductor's baton tap called all to order; iodine-brown, viscous, an aroma of burnt caramel sneaking up the back end. **\$40**

The Rare Wine Co. Historic Series Baltimore Rainwater: Once the most popular style of Madeira in the U.S., rainwater must have been what Old George tiddled as his daily pint: light-bodied, slightly nutty, spryly refreshing (terrific acidity) and can take a chill. It is a "session" Madeira and it goes down good. While a one-off because of the style, Rare Wine Co.'s version has serious nuance, length and persistence and is worth its charge for that complexity alone. **\$45-\$55**

The Rare Wine Co. Historic Series Thomas Jefferson Special Reserve Medium Dry: This is a remarkable wine, a Madeira of ever-unfolding complexity, nuance, invitation and depth. It honors Jefferson's own blend, a taste he preferred and invented for himself: one-tenth "superfine" old sweet Malmsey to nine-tenths drier Madeira such as verdelho, as he wrote, "a dry wine dashed with a little sweetness, barely sensible to the palate." Because Rare Wine Co. has at its disposal stocks of very old refined Madeira, it can create blends of this fashion. What stands out for me: scents of chalk, wet stone, cellar pavement overlying the dark chocolate and toffee pudding base notes; the orange threading in the dark tawny coloring; a flick of sugar and — snap! — the squeegee of Madeira's acidity to swipe it away. **\$65**

1988 D'Oliveira Terrantez Reserva: Like liquid fruitcake, that is, a combination of the aromas and savors of dried candied fruits, brown baking spices, nuts (walnuts especially) and of the cake that the English call sticky toffee pudding; the color of Grade A amber maple syrup, with the same gold-orange edge; soft and creamy texture, clipped shut by acidity just like a squeeze of lime. **\$90**

If your wine store does not carry these wines, ask for one similar in style and price.

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