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FOOD

Your Next Lesson: Madeira

Wine School

By ERIC ASIMOV DEC. 22, 2016

Prepare to enter another world: the world of Madeira.

Madeira will be the first fortified wine we taste, and the first sweet wine. Even among fortified, sweet wines, Madeira is singular.

For one thing, it is virtually indestructible, made in such a way that the usual enemies of fine wine — heat, light and air — are shrugged off like flecks of dust. It was this invulnerability that gave Madeira the strength to withstand the rigors of ocean voyages and become the most popular wine of colonial America.

The popularity of Madeira, which comes from the Portuguese island of the same name, plummeted in the late 19th century with the arrival of phylloxera, a ravenous aphid that ravaged vineyards throughout Europe. The vineyards were replanted after a solution was found, but revolution, wars, the Depression and Prohibition in the 20th century prevented Madeira from regaining its former markets.

Today, in the United States at least, Madeira has experienced a modest revival. But fortified and sweet wines have largely fallen out of favor, so its popularity remains limited.

Cheap Madeira is generally made out of a blend of grapes, but the best

bottles tend to come from four principal grapes in ascending order from driest to sweetest: sercial, verdelho, bual and malmsey, which is better known elsewhere as malvasia.

I'm going to recommend three wines, as I usually do, but this month will be a little different. All the wines come from a special set of Madeiras called the Historic Series, created by their importer, the Rare Wine Company of Brisbane, Calif., as examples of styles of Madeira that might have been popular in the 18th century. They are:

Charleston Sercial Special Reserve

Boston Bual Special Reserve

New York Malmsey Special Reserve

Each of these bottles runs around \$50, which is a lot to spend on a single bottle. So I won't recommend you buy all three, unless you are curious and have spare change. Instead, I suggest you pick one and make the investment. The reward is an excellent introduction to a historic style of wine. As a bonus, you can drink what you want when you want without fearing that the wine will go bad. Open bottles can last for years.

If it's still too much, you can find less expensive Madeiras, like Blandy's 15-year-old Malmsey, for around \$35. It's certainly good, but chances are you won't find a sercial or bual. I don't recommend the cheaper mass-market bottles.

How to serve Madeira? Please, don't haul out the brandy snifters, just use ordinary wine glasses.

The sercial is dry enough to drink with meals. I remember it as an excellent combination with a grilled skirt steak. The malmsey is quite sweet. It goes wonderfully with cheese and chocolate. The bual is somewhere in between: You can try it with savory and sweet.

You may not want to drink as much Madeira as you would table wine. It's

19 percent to 20 percent alcohol, which makes it more suited to ocean voyages than overindulgence.

Correction: December 23, 2016

An earlier version of this article misstated the location of the Rare Wine Company. It recently moved to Brisbane, Calif. It is no longer in Vineburg.

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