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I Spent Valentine's Day with an Old Heart Throb - A 216-year-old Wine That is Still Youthful!



What do US Presidents Andrew Jackson, Abe Lincoln, and Grover Cleveland have in common?

They were in office, respectively, when each of three wines I just tasted were made – in 1834, 1863 and 1885.



And each of these wines is still vibrant, balanced, ethereal, alluring, and -- trust me -- each is more rare than a \$2 bill.

The wines I tasted yesterday are Madeiras, unique, fortified wines from the Portuguese island of Madeira, in the Atlantic Ocean.

Unlike most wines, which have a reasonably short shelf life, and which lose their potency and give up their pleasure if held too long, Madeiras are prized specifically because they CAN last 200 to 250 years. In fact, the older the old ones get, the better they become!



I tasted 16 -- call them ancient -- near-perfect-to-perfect, Madeiras yesterday, the oldest being an 1800 HP Barradas Reserva Particular. That's a 216-year-old wine and it was *unctuous*!



Mannie Berk, head of Rare Wine Co.

The tasting was organized by Mannie Berk, head of the Rare Wine Company, which operates out of Brisbane, California. Driven by a passion for Madeira, Mannie has become the lone crusader for Madeira in America, searching out centuries-old wines from the island of Madeira.



Twenty-two fans of Madeira assembled for yesterday's tasting, each paying \$700 for the privilege of sipping the wines.



Ricardo Diogo V. Freitas, head of his family's wine business, Barbeito

At the tasting, held at Central Kitchen restaurant, in San Francisco, the special guest speaker was Ricardo Freitas, whose family has produced some of the longest lived, tastiest, most balanced Madeiras the world has ever known.

Ricardo's grandfather, Mario Barbeito, oversaw the evolution of the 1834, 1863 and 1885 Madeiras we tasted yesterday; I scored each of them a perfect 100 points. You can't make a better fortified wine. Period. My notes follow at the end of this story.



22 Madeira mavens attended the unusual event. One person flew in from Seattle for the day, just to attend; another flew in from Calgary, Alberta, and another came from Los Angeles just for the day. That's how rare – and attractive – Madeira tastings can be.

Madeiras are really the Jurassic Park dinosaurs of the wine world, creatures which we thought died out -- if not dried out -- a long time ago, but which, when tasted, enthrall us with their toffee, treacle, fudge, orange peel, and caramel top notes, elongated on the palate by a backbone of racy acidity.



Classically, old-style Madeiras are named after the principal grape from which each is made; from driest to sweetest, we have: Sercial, Verdelho, Bual, Malvasia (also called Malmsey), Bastardo and Terrantez (now called Folgasao). The workhorse grape for mundane Madeiras today is Tinta Negra.

Madeira starts out like most other wines, with grapes being pressed; but during fermentation, while a specific level of residual sugar remains, fermentation is halted with the addition of alcoholic spirits.



Mannie Berk, Ricardo Freitas and avid Madeira collector, Bob Stern, discuss the merits of one of the wines poured yesterday.

What happens to Madeira then is a lifetime of suffering, if not downright torture; the wine is heated and stored in conditions that would make Guantanamo Bay feel like a Four Seasons Hotel.

In the old days, fortified Madeiras were shipped across the Atlantic and Indian Oceans to thirsty ports. Shipped barrels often sat on the deck of a ship, baking under the hot sun, the contents churning.



The resultant beverages had the hallmarks of the wines we tasted yesterday – a gorgeous golden, brown hue resembling very old Sauternes, and a compelling combination of caramel-y flavors suffused with a spine of brisk acidity.

And, once opened, the more air you introduce to the wine, the greater the volume of pleasure you will get from it.

One more curiosity: unlike every other wine in the world, which we are admonished to store on its side to help preserve the cork, Madeira mavens advise us to store old Madeiras upright.

“Even if a bit of air gets into a bottle of Madeira, it will only help the evolution of the wine,” says Mannie Berk, who led yesterday’s swirl and sip tasting. Unlike so many of the professional tastings, which I attend, there was very little spitting going on.

As one guest said, “With wines this special, this old, and this charming, I’m not spitting – I’m ‘renting’ these wines for a brief moment – I am NOT spitting them out!”



In addition to the unique taste of Madeira, when you drink a 200-year, or older, wine, there is this fact:

Every person on earth who was alive when this wine was made is now gone. There is NO ONE on the planet alive today who was alive when these wines were made. **EVERY SINGLE HUMAN ON THE PLANET AT THE TIME THIS BEVERAGE WAS PRODUCED IS HISTORY.**

So, yes, with old Madeiras, you are truly drinking a piece of history.



Ricardo noses one of the older Madeiras; one of the 16 bottles opened was corked. Groan!

The highlights of the 16 Madeiras we tasted yesterday for me were three Barbeitos, produced by Ricardo's family. They did him proud:



1834 Barbeito Malvasia

A truly sensational wine, balanced, elegant, exhibiting glorious notes of raisin, and brown sugar with a bright undertow of acidity and then, a slightly saline finish. A perfect 100-point wine.



1863 Barbeito MMV Malvasia

MMV are the initials of Ricardo's mother, who recently died, but who, for her lifetime, guarded the evolution of this wine, which, only recently, was moved from storage to bottle.

This wine has many of the characteristics of the wine above, though it is 29 years younger.

Coffee, treacle and burnt orange peel top notes arouse your senses; there is richness and warmth in the mouth; this is a generous wine wanting to please. Until I tasted the other two wines, highlighted here, I had already thought of naming this 1863 my Wine of the Year -- and yet we're only in February!

I have reconsidered, and think that all THREE of these wines will make napaman's short list of Best Wines of the Year,

Check back here in December to see what else gets added to the list. But it won't be more dramatic, more concentrated, -- and, for sure, not older! 100 points.



1885 Barbeito Verdelho

Verdelho is a grape that mostly produces a drier-style Madeira. Even so, this wine offers delicious brown sugar top notes on the middle palate, sports great acidity and has a long, long, focused finish.

If this Madeira were an Olympic marathoner, it would be one of those Kenyans gracefully racing to the finish line, getting there ahead of the pack, without ever losing a heartbeat, or an ounce of breath. 100 points

If you'd like to learn more about Madeira, or check out availability, go to rarewineco.com.

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