

SMITTEN BY A SIP

This old-world elixir is tasty enough to enchant any lover of wine.

When my wife and I were married eight years ago, my father hosted a rehearsal dinner at a fine-dining restaurant on the courthouse square of Oxford, Mississippi. We ate pimento-cheese canapés and sage-stuffed bacon-wrapped rainbow trout. And then, just before the speeches, we were served slices of lemony chess pie and thimbles of Madeira.

I recall the chess pie was great. And I remember the Madeira as pleasant and sweet but lacking the spine of acidity that I recently learned characterizes great Madeira. It did, however, come from the tradition. It was fortified wine crafted on the island of Madeira, southwest of Portugal in the Atlantic Ocean. It was the same drink that was once the favored American tippie. It was what the Founding Fathers used to toast the signing of our Constitution. And it is thought to be the drink that Francis Scott Key sipped when he wrote "The Star-Spangled Banner."

I didn't taste really good Madeira until three years ago. I was at Hearth, the brick-walled restaurant on the Lower East Side of New York, the one with the great wine list and the chef who turns out dishes like pan-seared skate wing with pomegranate vinaigrette. Instead of dessert, I wanted blue cheese. But instead of port, my friend suggested Madeira, specifically a New York Malmsey from the Rare Wine Company's Historic Series. These wines are recreations of historic Madeiras. Each is blended to match the Madeira that would have been enjoyed in the 1800s in New York or Charleston, in Boston or New Orleans.

I was, in a sip, smitten. I loved the way the butterscotch punch of the Malmsey stood up to the salty and funky counterpunch of the cheese. A few weeks later, the same friend who introduced me to Malmsey got me a bottle. Soon, I was pulling my stash out at the end of dinner parties, trying to win converts. And as I traveled, I kept my eyes open for more bottles in that same series, eventually lugging home the leaner, more lemony Charleston-style Sercial, and angling for a bottle of rich and elegant Boston Bual.

More recently, I had the chance to meet Mannie Berk, the impresario behind the Historic Series collection. He's an intellectually curious man with gray hair, horn-rimmed glasses, and a kind demeanor. At his suburban Connecticut home we drank through various vintages, some dating back to 1850. Sitting in his white-on-white kitchen, Mannie took me on a virtual tour of the volcanic island of Madeira.

But first he told me how America came to fall in love with the wine. "The popularity of Madeira got a huge boost in the Colonies in 1665, when the British banned importation of products made or grown in Europe, unless shipped on British vessels from British ports. Products from Madeira were specifically exempted," Mannie explained. Thus, British ships heading west to the Colonies from Madeira could trade in Madeira wine.

We tasted, as Mannie put it, "down the mountain," traveling from the highest elevations, where a grape like Sercial ripens less quickly (and thus doesn't take on as much sweetness), to the lowlands, where thanks to the warmer climate, a grape like Malmsey reaches maturity (and high sugar levels) comparatively quickly.

On Mannie's kitchen counter stood several dark-green bottles filled with umber liquid. As we sipped and swirled, Mannie talked about how Madeira, like port, is a fortified wine. Fortification comes by way of added brandy. The extra boost stops fermentation early by killing the yeast that distills the grape's sugar into alcohol. The wine is sweeter and more shelf-stable, and it can improve in bottle for decades, even centuries. He told me how traders first recognized that casks of fortified wine from Madeira, when shipped across the equator, benefited from the heat of the passage and emerged at the other end "rich and velvety and more nuanced."

But mostly we sipped and talked of the past, back when Madeira was en vogue, back before the Civil War decimated the Madeira trade. At Mannie's table, I

tasted an 1850 vintage, made from Verdelho, the grape that yields the second driest Madeira after Sercial. As we compared tasting notes and talked of caramel and clove, cinnamon and banana, Mannie told me 1850 "was a legendary vintage."

He was right. That 1850 vintage was the elixir of legends. But developing a taste for that stuff would spell financial ruin for me. What will, however, stay in my wine cabinet within easy reach of the dinner table are the four bottlings in Mannie's Historic Series. At \$40 to \$50 a bottle, they are indulgences I can justify — at least until my wife and I celebrate our tenth anniversary and I can rationalize buying an antebellum bottle that pairs perfectly with chess pie.



BY
**JOHN T.
EDGE**

On the
kitchen
counter
stood
several
dark-
green
bottles
filled with
umber
liquid.

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Historic Series
Madeiras are
available in better