

The Juice

The Madeira Thrill Ride

The most exciting wine in the world

By Jordan Mackay

Is it possible that the most exciting wine in the world is one whose grapes are grown on a subtropical island in the Atlantic 400 miles from the coast of North Africa, where the biggest cash crop is bananas? I think so. Fine table wines like Burgundy and Barolo are wonderful, but there's no wine capable of thrilling the human tongue quite like Madeira.

A sip of good Madeira—say, one made from the Sercial grape—is a roller coaster of taste, a bungee jump of sensation. The first whiff offers hints of hazelnuts, orange rind, and salted caramel—enough aromatic tantalization to get your salivary glands firing up. You take a trembling sip. At first your tongue is confused. Yes, those aromas you smelled are there in flavor, but the taste is not as unctuously sweet as you'd expected. In fact, what you first sense is almost savory, as salty as it is sweet. Then the sweetness arrives, and tastes of citrus, nuts, toffee, salt, and mineral bloom and swell on your palate. Just as you're relaxing into the caramelly goodness—whoosh! The roller coaster plunges as all that sweetness is whisked away on a thrilling jet of acidity, so swift, so irresistible, that by the time you swallow, your mouth is watering again, begging you for another sip.

How does a wine offer such drama? Well, it's rather a bizarre story, given that Madeira reached its height of popularity in the 18th century and has been in decline ever since. Like so many great things in life, Madeira wine was practically an accident. The Portuguese island, stranded in the Atlantic about 550 miles southwest of Lisbon, was a supply point on shipping routes, and wine was a common bit of cargo. Madeiran wines were not great—harvested at high yields and barely ripe. To keep the wine from spoiling on its long journeys, a bit of distilled spirit was added for stabilization. But the pitching and rolling on the sea as well as the intense heat encountered in equatorial waters actually made the wine better. In the 19th century, demand grew for the wines in England and the United States, so producers in Madeira soon were devising methods—by heating the wine or storing it in hot warehouses—to mimic the sea action and prepare their wines with less expense and hassle.

Vine diseases in the late 19th century decimated Madeira's vineyards, and since then bananas have taken over from vines as the island's most vital crop. Nevertheless, some very good Madeira is still made, as I was reminded in a tasting not long ago with Ricardo Freitas, who runs the excellent house of Barbeito.

One of the most prized features of Madeira has been its ability to withstand not only long sea voyages, but also the ravages of time. Girded by its acidity and its fortification with alcohol, Madeira never goes bad (which is nice—no need to finish the bottle as you would a table wine; you can drink an open bottle over weeks or months). In fact, old Madeira, aged for decades in casks, becomes amazingly complex over time. Freitas and importer Mannie Berk of the Rare Wine Co. wanted to offer drinkers a sense of

what old Madeira tastes like—a step beyond the good, but banal, younger blends usually found on the market—but without the cost associated with something that has been aged and nurtured for years. “A whole generation of people don’t know the pleasure of great Madeira,” Berk told me. “We needed to share that with them.”

So Berk and Freitas came up with a “Historic Series” of Madeiras, each made roughly in a style that was popular in various American Colonial regions. They simulated age by blending 15 percent of very old Madeira with Freitas’s younger stocks. The result is three cities and three grape varieties of Madeira. The Charleston Special Reserve is made from the Sercial grape. Drier Madeiras were popular in the South, so this is the driest in the bunch: It’s light in body, punchy with acidity, and smacks of maple syrup, dried figs, and orange rinds. Sweeter wines were favored in the Northeast, so Freitas and Berk created a Boston Special Reserve made from the grape called Bual. It’s richer than the Charleston, with deeper flavors of roasted nuts and caramel, but is again kept on its toes with a lightning streak of acidity. Finally, the New York bottling is made from the Malmsey grape and is the sweetest, and richest, of them all, with flavors of toffee, coffee, caramel, and brown butter.

A bottle of Madeira is one of the most useful things you can keep around your house (along with rubber bands, Scotch tape, and a flashlight). While you may pull it out to accompany desserts—“There’s no other wine to have with sweet foods,” says my friend, the sommelier Rajat Parr. “All other wines fall flat except for Madeira”—you will begin to find yourself nipping off it at other times. That Charleston Sercial is dry enough to be wonderful with roasted chicken. You’ll want a sip to see how it goes with a square of aged Gruyère (hint: It goes well). And then you’ll find yourself pouring a little swallow just on its own, as you settle onto the couch to watch a movie. Because once you’ve tasted good Madeira, you’ve turned your tongue into a roller-coaster addict, a thrill junkie of the first degree. Luckily, unlike BASE jumping and Class V rapids, Madeira is a thrill that can be had easily and inexpensively, and at little risk to your life.

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