



Thirst

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Madeira, a holiday treat, enjoying revival

Jon Bonné
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(page 1 of 2) SINGLE PAGE



A Tinta Negra Mole vineyard on the island of Madeira photographed winter 2010.

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- Champagne: How to choose new favorites 12.12.10
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Where the link between the holidays and Madeira came about I have no clue, but what a logical tradition. And it's not just that this most noble of fortified wines from Portugal has a timeless spirit about it; that it so finely matches winter's flavors; or that, once opened, it lasts for months - a holiday treat that stretches right on toward summer.

1

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Madeira, of course, is the great unheralded wine for the table. If

Port is for the fireside, at the end of a long Christmas Day, or placed with a dish of spice cookies (in a holiday scene straight out of Edwardian times) Madeira is far more vital, ready to stroll through the entire day, no matter your tradition.

Prepping a massive slab of beef? Uncork a Bual. Headed for the annual Chinatown feast? Grab a bottle of Verdelho to tote along.

"Unheralded," actually, is a bit unfair. For Madeira, produced on the volcanic Portuguese island of the same name 600 miles off the European coast, is undergoing a renaissance of sorts, having found a

trusty band of American partisans.

"This year was a fairly dramatic turning point for Madeira in this country," says Mannie Berk, owner of the Rare Wine Co., the import firm likely responsible for much of the current revival. "I just got the sense that Madeira got hot."

Tied to U.S. history

It's more accurate to say that Madeira has found *another* band of Yankee partisans, for the wine is thoroughly entwined with the early portion of American history, the chosen tipple of most of the founding fathers, particularly Thomas Jefferson.

Often recounted is that it was used to toast the signing of the Declaration of Independence; less mentioned, but perhaps more salient, is that Boston rioted when John Hancock's ship, laden with Madeira, was seized by the British in 1768. Imagine that happening with [Pinot Noir](#). (Now we riot when the French sell us Merlot and call it Pinot.)

This patriotic twinge hasn't hurt as a selling point. Indeed, one of Berk's genius strokes was to launch his Historic Series of Madeiras. These five, produced by the ascendant house of Barbeito, highlight the five noblest grapes of the island - Sercial, Verdelho, Bual, Malmsey and the nearly-lost Terrantez - but they do so in an American context, each honoring a U.S. city that did a steady trade in Madeira. The Savannah, for instance, underscores the city's one-time fondness for a medium-dry Verdelho.

Berk estimates that sales of his Historic Series doubled this year, a true success in the general doldrums of fortified wines.

There is a reason for this, and not just because Madeira has enjoyed a raft of writerly attention, including a forthcoming opus in "The Art of Eating." If most other such drinks are firmly in the realm of dessert, Madeira has made an effective case to remain throughout the meal - aided, in no small part, by sommeliers and wine buyers putting a glass into the hands of the uninitiated.

It is aided, too, by the very making of Madeira, which harnesses all the hardships that other winemakers strive to avoid. As author Richard Mayson, an authority on [Portuguese wine](#), put it, "Madeira is fine wine *in extremis*."

Originally, the making of Madeira was hastened by its sea voyages of the 1600s. Fortified to avoid spoilage, the island's wines - already grown in the subtropics - were found to benefit from a hot, humid round trip across the equator.

Temperature is key

This heating was eventually replicated in the winery, where a system of temperature-controlled vats or an intricate shuffling of casks through the warm rafters partially cooked the wine. Rather than destroy it, this process - called *estufagem* - creates a virtually indestructible wine. Having already been exposed to oxygen and heat, a good Madeira can endure for centuries.

Literally. Berk, whose business was founded on a London stock of Madeira he found in 1988, has a penchant for sharing his oldest and rarest treasures. Last year, to match the opulent dishes served at Quince in San Francisco, he unleashed a bottle of the 1850 D'Oliveira Reserve Verdelho, endlessly complex and woolly, packed with the scents of brandy and walnuts. It was a youngster compared to the 18th century bottles that Berk occasionally totes around the country.

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"I love the fact that you can drink ancient wines, from before my dad was born," says Paul Einbund, wine director of the Slanted Door Restaurant Group, who built Madeira collections for the restaurants Coi and Frances. "I've got wines coming from the 1700s. You just can't do that with other wines."

Winemaking revival

There is also a revival of sorts in Madeira's winemaking itself. For decades the island's four main shippers have been entwined in a joint partnership, the Madeira Wine Co. (now linked to Port's Symington family), which produces largely similar results across its brands. Bottles of, say, Blandy's and Cossart Gordon are basically twins until long aging begins to give them distinct personalities.

But the d'Oliveira and Henriques & Henriques labels remain independent, making exceptional bottles and releasing old stock; wines from the tiny Borges house have begun to appear here.

Barbeito owner Ricardo Freitas is rethinking the traditions of Madeira. Aside from the Historic Series, he has released a series of wines that highlight not just a single vintage but a single cask of wine. (See The Chronicle Recommends, Page K8.)

Madeira's unique flavor - an intersection of caramel sweetness, robust fruit, a saline minerality and mouthwatering acidity, all in various levels depending on its base grapes - links it to virtually anything you could place on the table. Restaurants such as Spruce in San Francisco, or Washington, D.C.'s, Plume (in the Jefferson Hotel, natch), serve a wide range of Madeiras by the glass. It has nestled its way into tasting menus.

At Benu in San Francisco, head sommelier Yoon Ha reworked what might be a classic pairing of sherry (or Shaoxing rice wine) with a heady broth when he matched chef Corey Lee's ham-enhanced "shark fin" soup, incorporating crab and black-truffle custard, with a 1968 Blandy's Verdelho.

But Ha also favors Madeira, especially sweet styles that have gained a savory edge with 20 or 30 years of age, with hard cheeses like aged Gouda; and dry Sercial as a foil for oily fish like anchovies.

"The key for me in Madeira is finding some of that same pungent earthiness in the food so that the flavors in the wine aren't so stark and alone," Ha says. "There's a lot more application than we're accustomed to."

Age builds character

But the real key to Madeira's charm is age - decades of it, to build character. Even the cheapest Madeira is at least 3 years old; Berk's Historic Series averages about 15 years age, with a solid proportion 40 years or older. Consider that if you happen to blink at the \$50 price tag.

The return on investment is that, even if opened, a bottle can endure as long as you can hold off drinking it. I asked Berk how long he would recommend keeping an open bottle.

"Honestly," he replied, "I've got bottles at home that have been open for 15 years. The only reason they're still open is I can't bring myself to finish them."

Rarely has there been a better case for a wine that telegraphs the holiday spirit.

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Madeira: The Chronicle recommends

Jon Bonné

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Craig Lee / Special to The Chronicle
Left-right: Leacock's Madeira, Justino's Madeira Old Reserve, The Rare Wine Co. Historic Series Madeira Charleston Special Reserve as seen in San Francisco, California on December 15, 2010.

Our panel lineup of 32 Madeiras underscored that the overall quality of this other fortified [Portuguese wine](#) has rarely been better. These 14 all excelled, but outside of the cheaper 3-year-old efforts (often marked for cooking) you'll find it easy to discover very good Madeira on local shelves.

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For once, there's no concern about whether it's freshly arrived. Because it is oxidized by its nature, Madeira has the benefit of being a survivor - able to evolve in the bottle for decades.

Though prices aren't cheap, it's worth remembering that most of these wines average at least a decade old; also that, once opened, they remain fresh for months. That makes them a perfect holiday gift - one that can be opened right away and enjoyed straight into summer.

The Rare Wine Co. Historic Series Charleston Sercial (\$46.50): Importer Mannie Berk reached out to Ricardo Freitas, owner of the house of Barbeito, to produce his Historic Series line, which remains the best value in Madeira. This is the driest in the Historic lineup, made from the Sercial grape, and its slight austerity makes it remarkably versatile. Leathery and wound-up, with a salty mineral power - think of it with a holiday roast. (Importer: Rare Wine Co.)

The Rare Wine Co. Historic Series New Orleans (\$60): If you can choose just one bottle, this is the one. This year marks only the second time that [New Orleans](#), made mostly from the virtually nonexistent Terrantez grape, has been released. It's almost meaty, full of scents of lobster mushroom, dried apple, quince and citron. Impressively dry in its character, with hints of robust, aged sweetness and a hearty wood character, like smelling a favorite oak chest. (Importer: Rare Wine Co.)

The Rare Wine Co. Historic Series New York Malmsey (\$46.50): The New York [Malmsey](#) (a.k.a. Malvasia) is the sweetest in the Historic Series lineup. Despite notes of roasted pineapple and agave nectar, it's packed with savory tones - winter melon and sea salt, with a raging acidity that balances the sweet profile, making it thoroughly versatile. Almost steely at its core. (Importer: Rare Wine Co.)

2000 Barbeito Single Cask 44a Malvasia (\$54): Barbeito's Ricardo Freitas is pioneering another effort: the bottling of individual casks of Madeira, not unlike the Equipo Navazos endeavor in Jerez. Cask 44A showed an impressive evolution after a hot 2007 summer, prompting a decision to bottle it separately. Intense and fresh, full of iris and chamomile aromas, with darker mineral accents, sesame, pear and Seville orange. Racy and unique. (Importer: Rare Wine Co.)