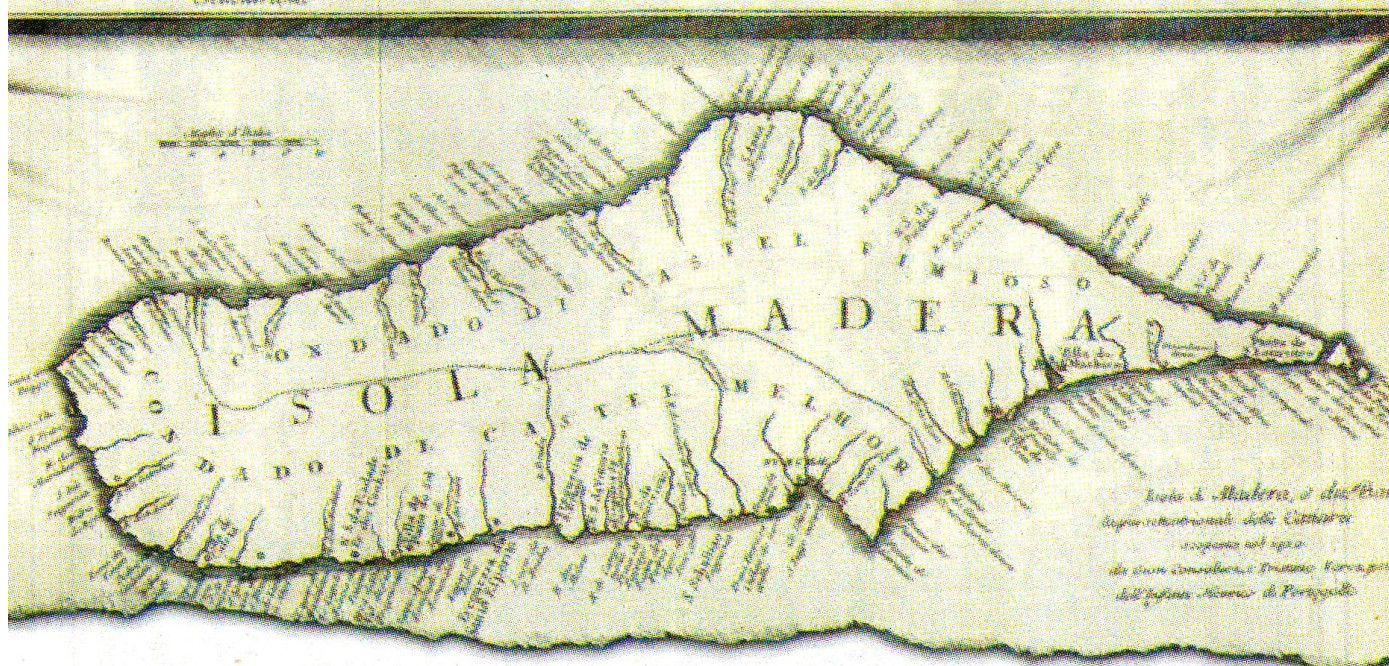


A TASTE OF HISTORY

Savannah Madeira

by Jason Restivo



Take Tinta Negra Mole, Complexa and Bastardo and heat it to 140 degrees, thereby increasing the alcohol and sweetness, and what do you have? Madeira—a fortified wine named for the island from which it comes, just off the coast of Portugal. While waiting to be picked up and delivered half way around the world by traders and importers, the barrels were left out in the rain on the beaches of Madeira Island, and it was this exposure to the elements which raised the alcohol content of the wine.

The Madeira was then loaded and carried on ships destined for the coastline of the New Americas, where a great appreciation for this juice from the vine began with the first colonies.

Savannah was a vital, thriving port during colonial rule and appetite for this sophisticated wine originated with the city's elite and tradesmen. High Society reveled

in this new wine and became connoisseurs of the now famous "Rainwater" Madeira. Despite the fact that Savannahians initially complained, it wasn't long before this Madeira was the only style the aristocrats of Savannah preferred. Prominent families such as the Gastons, Telfairs, Tattnalls and the famous Habershams, enjoyed this glorious beverage daily.

Over time, the passion for the Portuguese wine waned as spirits and home brewed beer pushed its way to overtake the American palate. The drink rumored to have toasted the signing of the Declaration of Independence, the Constitution, the Louisiana Purchase, and the composition of the Star Spangled Banner, was neglected and then pushed aside, only to be used as a cooking ingredient in sauces, making Madeira just a memory.

Only recently, America returned to this beverage of our forefathers, with Madeira now popping up in small wine publications and enthusiasts now collecting this historical label. Last year, the Rare Wine Company, led by Mannie Burke, honored the city of Savannah with its own celebrated label of Madeira, thereby paying tribute to the great success of relationships in early colonial trade and consumption throughout the city. Just this past April, Burke graced our city to bring the news— Madeira was back and with great purpose. Thus, we witness the rebirth of the Savannah Madeira.

The Savannah Madeira, Verdelho to be exact, is a drier style—the opposite of its sisters to the north, which are a sweeter style of wine. The Verdelho flavor profile matches Savannah's southern cuisine perfectly. Classic sweet cheeses and spiced local pecans brought together by the richness of local honey, is just the beginning of what pairs well with Savannah Madeira. The soft acids almost cry out for the tenderness of fried green tomatoes and the delicacy of local seafood, making for a wonderful, fulfilling pairing. Traditionally, it would have been paired with a cream brulee or shared with friends around a campfire. Today's sophisticated Madeira can vary from sweet to dry making it perfectly acceptable to be paired and served with multiple courses, not just desserts.

Recently, I visited a popular spot downtown to treat myself to a dessert and listen to some great music. I found myself down in the belly of the oldest mansion, now restaurant, in the city—The Olde Pink House. I looked forward to warming myself with a brandy of some sort, but was delighted to find instead, this Madeira being embraced and adopted as a staple of hospitality. Surrounded by walls of faded hand-made brick on my right and an exposed floor joist

carved by our great, great grand fathers above me; I conjured images of myself sipping in the same surroundings that Mr. Habersham and other early colonial celebrities must have enjoyed themselves. This was Savannah history I could taste and smell. I felt I was home, home with the Savannah Madeira. I invite you to join me in experiencing this historical wine in this historical place, the tavern of The Olde Pink House.

If you would rather enjoy this uniquely southern wine at home, Jim Montgomery at Johnny Ganems on Habersham also has the Savannah Madeira stocked on his shelves in expectation and for your own personal enjoyment. Its rich history makes a great conversation piece when entertaining guests or also at the end of the day, at home, after the kids are in bed.

It is all too often that the greatest enjoyment in the wine world disappears when the bottle becomes empty. I know this happens in my home, as rarely is any wine left in a bottle once open. In your own home, I do encourage you to try and cork your bottle early. You will notice that good wine becomes a whole new creature when you save some for the next day. This is particularly true about Savannah Madeira, as the shelf life of great wine is long, due to the fortification process.

So until next month, "put a cork in it" and see what happens later.

