



## INSIDE MADEIRA

CELEBRATING THIS DELICIOUSLY BURNT OFFERING BY BEN NARASIN

I fell in love with Madeira on my 40th birthday. My mother-in-law had a collection of very old wines which, as a vodka drinker, she stored out of sight in her garage. While I assumed all the wines were shot, the bottles were compelling at least in appearance, and I moved them into my cellar. Among them were six bottles of roughly 100-year-old Madeira. I say roughly because there was no age declaration, but I estimated that after showing the bottles to a collector. Of all the wines I had, I expected the least out of these. The 1959 Sauternes held the most promise. When I turned 40, I decided to open one of each. While the Sauternes were noble, the Madeira stunned with its thick, almost syrupy texture and deep caramelized flavors that still maintained an acid balance.

In truth, the Madeira's lasting structure and untainted flavors — its surprise and substance — were the catalyst, rather than the exact tasting notes, to my subsequent search for more information. I even took the leftovers to lunch a few days later with a California-cult-wine-collecting friend and it still dazzled.

How a wine could last this long and be this good was fascinating to me, so I set out to understand more of this wine I really knew nothing about. The story of its birth, and its incredible longevity under proper storage conditions, I soon discovered is one worth knowing.

Madeira was a wine created by accident. Madeira, an island north of the Canary Islands off the coast of Africa, is part of Portugal. As the story was told to me during a recent trip there, some barrels of wine fortified with grape spirits had been shipped to the New World in the 17th century and were refused. The wine then made the long, hot trip back — passing through the tropics — in the hold as ballast. When the barrels were opened and tasted, the acidic, light, fortified wine had transformed into something entirely new, a wine with softness, depth of flavor, and a pleasant burnt quality. Madeira (which means "wood") as we know it today was born.

For more than a century, Madeira was created by literally shipping it back and forth around the equator in large casks, called pipes, to enrich it. These wines came to be known as "vinho da



Don't fall! Workers pick grapes on the terraces.

roda," or "round-trip wine."

Madeira proved so seaworthy it followed the Pilgrims to America and became the wine of the original colon. George Washington drank a pint of Madeira daily with dinner, and Betsy Ross had a glass on the side table as she sewed the flag; Jefferson, America's first Robert Parker, was a fan. All that

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vineyards of Madeira. STEFANO SCATA / GLOW

and much more lore is explored in Noel Cossart's book *Madeira, the Island Vineyard*, which was just revised and re-released by Emanuel Berk and his Rare Wine Company, a major US importer of Madeira.

In the mid-18th century, a process was developed to replicate the acceleration and enhancement achieved

by the hot ship holds: heated rooms, hot attics, and copper serpentine coils filled with hot steam or air placed in barrels. Modern Madeiras are still made this way.

Modern-day heating of the wine is through the process of "estufagem," where a serpentine of copper coils inside the tank or a thermal jacket surrounds it

115 degrees for at least three months before bottling.

An earlier method of "canteiro," whereby casks were placed on support beams in high, hot attics to age for at least two years, has fallen into disuse because of its inefficiency. "Nobody stores in attics anymore, except tourist destinations for show purposes," says



Thick, syrupy Madeira, on sale for a song. DANITA DELIMONT / GETTY

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importer Bartholomew Broadbent. "After the three-month warming, we store some in cellars at cellar temperature, some at ground floor level at room temperature and some in higher elevations which are warmer. This gives us a range of styles from which to blend wines."

The net effect of the heating historically has been to oxidize the wine and create the distinct brown color of Madeira. The color and oxidation, both of which would be flaws in a still wine, are quintessential features of Madeira.

Madeiras are aged in wood casks of varying sizes, and typically ancient heritage. Barrels can "be second hand from cognac, port or Scotch whisky producers," says Broadbent. "Some barrels are sold by port shippers to whisky producers, then re-sold to Madeira producers. The seasoning can be amazing and have a great impact on the Madeira."

The youngest Madeiras must be aged three years. Age-designated Madeiras can be three, five, 10, 15, or 20 years or more in age, and the stated age defines a minimum, not an average (or style) as in port. Vintage Madeira



Harvested grapes, ready for crush. MAURIC ABREU / AURORA PHOTOS

requires 20 years or more.

Colheitas means "vintage" in Portuguese, but it does not mean vintage Madeira as defined by local rules. Vintage Madeira must be aged least 20 years, but Colheitas do not. Interestingly, true "vintage" Madeira the vintage year on the bottle, but not the word "vintage," as the term was trademarked by the port producers who are now the only ones in Portugal able



Madeira is blended in wood casks, often bought from cognac, port or whisky producers. NORMAN HOLLANDS / GETTY

to use it. And you wonder why this country's finances are a muddle?

In the days of round-trip wines, Madeiras were named simply for the ship they sailed in. With the development of the trade, and still today, they are often named for the type of grapes used to make them. Each has a typical flavor across the Madeira spectrum: dry, medium-dry, medium-rich, and rich. Four grapes, and wine names, dominate:

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"Sercial" wines are dry or even extra dry. These are the lightest in color, often sharp with notes of almonds, and they make an excellent aperitif. Rare Wine Co.'s Charleston sercial is an excellent place to start for sercial. It shows a medium iced tea hue and delivers mildly sharp notes of bitter almond and orange peel; also soft tannic grip with a snap of bitter in the finish. (\$45-\$50)

"Verdelho" is medium dry. This variety is more structured, while maintaining balanced acidity. It often takes on a golden hue. Again, Rare Wine Co. provides a good base-line for the breed. It offers the spiciness of nuts and the tang of quinine on the nose. Modest sharpness, notes of caramel, hint of cold tea, and pleasant acidity play against sweetness. In the finish there is a nutty intensity mixed with citrus pith. (\$45-\$50)

"Boal" is medium rich and more full-bodied. There's more presentation of fruit and a movement to more sweetness and raisined characteristics. The color also darkens toward topaz. Boal is where Madeira tips over from aperitif to after-dinner

chocolate, or cigars. This is the starter sweet wine of Madeira.

"Malvasia," which the British took to calling "malmsey" and now can be labeled as either, is the rich, lush wine of my 40th birthday, and still my favorite. The darkest of the group, it's often like polished mahogany. A presentation of dried fruits, and even fruit cake, as well as meaningful caramelized notes is typical. While an excellent after-dinner combiner as well, a good, old malmsey is enough on its own to need no accompaniment.

You need not seek out ancient malmseys to become infatuated with the breed. Blandy's 1994 Malmsey Colheita (\$54-\$59) is a sweet and lush elixir. The sweetness is moderated by slightly sharp notes, balanced acidity, and pleasant components of burnt brown sugar and honey.

Vinhos Barbeito Malvasia 20 Year Old Lot 10292 (\$80) offers a sweet, caramelized nose with touches of dried fruit. The wine spreads from topaz to amber in color. Its perfect tension between crisp acidity and slightly syruped sweetness make it an exceptionally balanced Madeira, suitable

to a range of palates.

For all its importance in the birth of our country, Madeira has little exposure here today. Ancient Madeiras, 100 years old or more, can be seen with some frequency on the auction circuit, and often sell for less than \$200.

Both Broadbent and Rare Wine Co. have done much to democratize this wonderful wine. Broadbent offers a series of Madeiras of different ages under their own name, with their 10-year Malmsey a perfect entry point to that style at an approachable price just shy of \$50.

The Rare Wine Co. has created a "Historic Series" of blended Madeiras across the various categories, named after US cities important to the Madeira trade. "The idea was to create a series of affordable Madeiras that would get whole new generation of American consumers excited about this wine," says Berk. The wines have no age statement but contain a blend of very old wines intermingled with newer product to create an approachable age-flavored style that can be consumed on purchase.

They are named for cities with

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