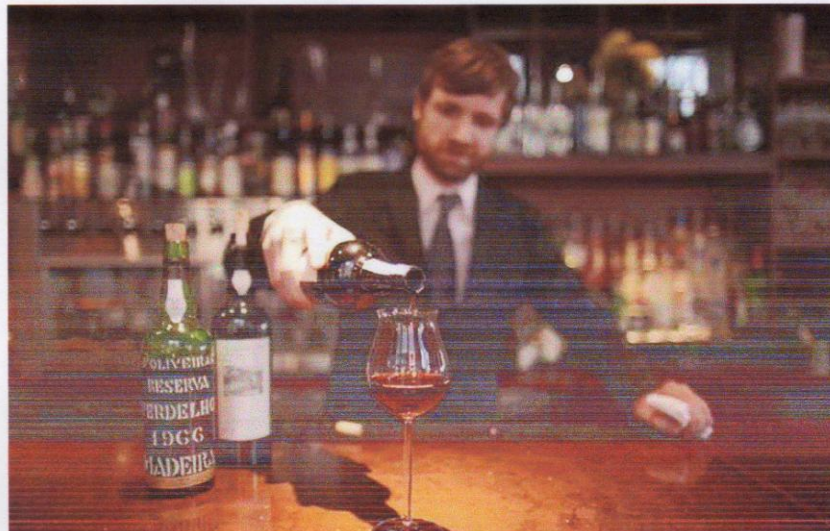


Madeira making a comeback, with a bit of help from Ben Franklin

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Benjamin Franklin has been credited with so many other innovations, it should come as little surprise that he also is associated with one of the hottest new trends in Philadelphia drinking: Madeira.

Scratch that. Madeira was actually one of the first trends in Philadelphia drinking, 250 or so years ago. George Washington and his guests regularly guzzled several bottles of it each week at the President's House. During the Revolution, Col. John Cadwalader would prep his troops with a refreshing slug of Madeira before heading out to march. And Franklin, among the first writers to recommend fortifying the wine with brandy, declared that he'd prefer being immersed with his pals in a cask of Madeira to an "ordinary death."



Steve Wildy pours Madeira at Osteria, one of several Philadelphia restaurants that will offer the Benjamin Franklin Special Reserve. "Madeira has this crazy high acidity dialed all the way up alongside crazy high sugar - but all of it in balance," he says.

"Having a very ardent desire to see and observe the state of America a hundred years hence," he wrote, he could "then be recalled to life by the solar warmth of my dear country."

It's a century-plus overdue. But that prophecy is about to come true, at least in spirit, when 540 bottles of Benjamin Franklin Special Reserve Madeira bearing his image land in the States, virtually all of it coming to Pennsylvania restaurants. And as an ambassador for this forgotten fortified wine long overshadowed by port and sherry - but suddenly on the cusp of a resurgence - this one is a doozy.

"Madeira has this crazy high acidity dialed all the way up alongside crazy high sugar - but all of it in balance," says Steve Wildy, wine director for the Vetri restaurants. "The Ben Franklin is, like, insane. There are so many things going on in there."

In the spirit of the "Historic Madeira Series" blended by Ricardo Freitas of Vinhos Barbeito for the Rare Wine Co., this one-time special bottling was meant to evoke a particular "Bual"-style Madeira preferred locally during colonial times, definitely sweet but also tanged with bright tartness and exotic notes such as nutmeg and bay-leaf spice. There is also the distinctive nuttiness that comes from Madeira's unique aging process, which involves a deliberate exposure to heat that completely oxidizes and preserves the wine.

"I associate Philadelphia with opulence, as it was a very wealthy city and taste was important," says Mannie Berk, president of the Rare Wine Co. "So this should be a rich, generous, voluptuous wine to reflect the culture of Philadelphia 200 years ago."

Madeira was loved by the colonists in part because it was affordable. Favorable shipping routes allowed it to be imported directly from the Portuguese island of Madeira, 400 miles west of Morocco, where most European ships bound for the New World stopped for provisions and trade.

America's regional preferences, though, were as varied as the styles of this versatile wine, says Berk. In the warmer climes of southern cities such as Charleston (also represented in his historic series), drier Madeiras made from the Sercial grape were preferred, their flavors toned with salty nuts and coffee. In cooler northern cities such as New York, meanwhile, the sweeter, toffeed Madeiras made from the Malvasia grape (also called "Malmsey") were more popular.

The Franklin bottling, which will raise money for the Christ Church (where Franklin is buried) Preservation Trust, is something of a happy medium. It's made primarily of the Bual, the second-sweetest of Madeira's four noble grapes, blended with a smaller share of the three others (Sercial, Verdelho, Malvasia), including some wines that are 80 years old.

"It is unlike anything," says Wildy. "It has that total geek factor, because you can taste layer upon layer, and just sit there and think about it. There's a nutty sherry-like thing on the finish that is hard for some people to get a grasp on. But as people get more into what's unique out there, Madeira fits that mold."

Indeed, Madeira is so novel now because it practically disappeared from the U.S. market. Battered by waves of misfortune - the increased availability of French wines, vineyard blights, a Civil War that decimated the South's great cellars, and, finally, Prohibition - it nearly died out completely, save for a few "Madeira Clubs" that lingered in Philadelphia into the early 20th century.

"Philadelphia was one of cities where Madeira survived the longest," says Berk.

A number of other brands featuring younger Madeira, such as the hand-painted Broadbent series, Blandy's snazzy Alvada, and Freitas' lively and elegant VB blend from Barbeito, are helping to reestablish a presence of intriguing, accessible options in the market. Wildy, meanwhile, who sells five of the Historic Series Madeiras at Vetri and Osteria, is hardly the only wine director gushing about Madeira these days, intent upon its revival.

Terence Lewis, beverage director at Barbuzzo, has five Madeiras that sell briskly at \$14 to \$16 a glass, including a New York Malmsey that's a perfect match for the restaurant's signature salted caramel butterscotch budino.

"It can get monotonous selling pinot noir and chardonnay," he said, "so I'm excited about this."

Madeira sales have been spiking recently at Tria, too, though it has long been a stalwart on the wine list there, an ideal companion to the cheese plates since Tria opened seven years ago.

"It's my favorite wine - and also the first wine I ever tasted," says wine director Michael McCauley.

Luckily, McCauley began his Madeira education at the top back in 1990, sipping a \$32 glass of vintage 1902 Bual from D'Oliveiras while working as a busboy at Jake's: "It tasted to me like cappuccino and crème brûlée."

That combination of intense flavors and timeless longevity, with bottles that can easily endure a century unopened, are part of Madeira's allure for new devotees like Paul Dangel, a computer programmer for Independence Blue Cross who recently attended a Madeira class at Tria conducted by Berk.

"Drinking a bottle like that is like meeting a person out of the past - there's the immortal aspect," he says.

His enthusiasm was so piqued, he's decided to revive an old tradition: "I would love to start a Madeira club in Philadelphia - the time is right for this."

After eight years without a vacation, Dangel has also decided it's time to travel. On May 19, he's boarding a plane bound for Madeira. "I've been bitten by the bug," he says. "Now I need to go see the place for myself."