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MADEIRA: TWENTY YEARS ON THE COMEBACK TRAIL

Charles Antin

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*Cyprus and Paphos vales, the smiling Loves
Might leave with joy fair Madeira's groves;
A shore so flowery, and so sweet an air,
Venus might build her dearest temple there.
-From Camoens' Lusiad, 1569, Volume I
Canto V*

I've got no idea who Camoens is, but I've used this passage twice now, both times in introductions to Madeira auctions we've had at Christie's. Its old-timeyness appealed to me; it's a dusty and obscure old thing, just like the Madeira itself. My idea was to reinforce a persistent image of Madeira, the thinking being: give the people what they want. Musty professors of Portuguese epic poetry, wearing monocles, sipping sweet Madeira by the fireplace—this would be our target audience. But after tasting some of these wines, I realized musty and old-fashioned isn't what Madeira is. In fact, Madeira ticks all the boxes for a contemporary wine trend.



It's available but rare, unique but tasty, and is made via the kind of complex production process that wine geeks love. In fact, in terms of relative obscurity, it's got some things in common with sherry, a wine that has as always been popular in Spain and England, but only shook off negative stereotypes in the US somewhat recently. Is it possible that Madeira will follow the same path?

One of the great things about Madeira—and one of the things that makes its obscurity surprising—is its versatility. Like sherry, there's a misconception that Madeira is always sweet. Sometimes, it is. Malmsey and Boal Madeira (named after the grapes they're made from) are sweet, but both are usually made with puckering acidity, which balances the sweetness. Other grapes, Verdelho and Sercial, produce usually off-dry and dry wines, respectively (Terrantez is sweet and Bastardo is on the dry side, but these grapes are quite rare). What this means is, you've got a Madeira for every occasion. Personally, I'm not a big fan of pairing sweet wine with dessert. I like Sercial with dinner (the char on a piece of protein is a great friend to the toffee flavors of Madeira) or as an aperitif. The sweeter Madeiras don't need accompaniment—I like them as dessert, not with dessert.

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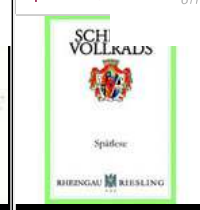
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The Etruscans were one of the first inhabitants in present day Tuscany, Italy. Their civilization is traced back to 800 B.C., modeled after the Greeks; they cultivated and venerated wine.

COMMUNITY ACTIVITY

Madeira's invincible, too, thanks to its unique production process. The Portuguese island of Madeira (these days under two hours by plane from Lisbon), was once a convenient stopping-off point for shipping vessels bound for the Indies. Fortified wine in barrel was placed in the ballast of these ships where it slowly heated and oxidized en route to the new world. Oxidization and heat are usually the worst-case scenario for wine maturation, but in the case of Madeira, shippers discovered that their clients actually preferred the toffee and caramel flavors of the dark brown wine. Eventually, the estufagem system was created, which replicates the heat and oxidization process without the hassle of hiring a bunch of sailors.

Finding good Madeira in the US isn't always as easy as walking to your neighborhood wine store, but it isn't too tough either. For this we have Mannie Berk to thank. Mannie owns the Rare Wine Company, and is a longtime proponent of Madeira. To Mannie, sherry's not the right comparison. "Hipster wines come and go," he says. "What you really want to do is establish a presence in the market with a broad base of appeal, and I feel strongly that Madeira is ahead of sherry in that respect. From a New York point of view sherry has been successful, less so in the rest of the country, whereas what we've seen with Madeira is that it's been growing in most of our markets." Mannie should know--in addition to Madeira, his company also works with Valdespino, a prominent sherry bodega.

What's great about this growth is that Mannie's dealing in higher end juice—his "historic series" Madeira, named after cities where Madeira was once popular (Boston, Charleston, Savannah) is generally in the \$40-\$50/bottle range. "Entry level" Madeira is available for \$15/bottle, so Mannie's Madeiras are a step up in quality and price. If you want to go further afield, vintage Madeira is often offered at a reasonable price at auction. Usually it's a bottle here or there, but every once in a while, as in the Christie's online auction in March 2015, a large collection is brought to the block (in December 2014 we sold a 1715 Terrantez for close to \$30,000, but this is an outlier). The great thing about Madeira is that even at a few hundred dollars, it's not as expensive as it looks. You can buy a 19th century bottle at auction and since that bottle is invincible, you can have it open for months without any negative effects. So, if you're only drinking a few ounces at a time, the per glass price isn't so bad.

According to Mannie, the amount of Madeira being sold in this country has changed "dramatically" in the past ten years, and he expects to keep on track to improve any more. Part of this is thanks to restaurants offering Madeira by the glass—this offers consumers the opportunity to have the "epiphany moment" without committing to a full bottle. It's also thanks to believers like Mannie, and a general desire in the wine world for new (or in this case, old) and unique. If you haven't tried Madeira yet, your epiphany awaits.

Madeira to try

Broadbent Madeira

Since 1996, Bartholomew Broadbent has worked with Juan Teixeira to make a wide range of Madeiras. The heart of the line up is a series of 10 year olds—a Boal,

Pelago Marche IGT (2009)	WISHLISTED 10:43AM 2/25/15
Fattoria le Terrazze Rosso Conero Sassi Neri (2010)	WISHLISTED 10:39AM 2/25/15
Trescone, Lamborghini (2011)	WISHLISTED 10:36AM 2/25/15
Benozzo Rosso IGT (2011)	CELLARED 10:34AM 2/25/15
The World's Next Biggest Wine Regions	REPLIED 10:03AM 2/25/15
Madeira: Twenty Years on the Comeback Trail	COMMENTED 09:29AM 2/25/15
Virtual tastings and rumors of virtual tastings...2015	REPLIED 09:26AM 2/25/15
Hello Enophiles!	REPLIED 08:32AM 2/25/15
Marietta Cellars Christo Lot Number 2	REVIEWED 08:06AM 2/25/15
Twelftree Shiraz Blewitt Springs Single Vineyard (2010)	WISHLISTED 06:46AM 2/25/15



Malmsey, Sercial and Verdelho. The bottle called “Rainwater” is a great introduction to Madeira, especially at only \$13/bottle. So the story goes, the bottling gets its name from Madeira that was watered down by rain while sitting on the docks in Savannah.

Rare Wine Co. Madeira

In 1998, the Rare Wine Company began working with Ricardo Freitas, owner of the legendary Madeira house Barbeito, to make Madeira based on what was popular in the US in the 18th and 19th centuries. Each bottle is named after a city that loved its Madeira, and priced around \$50. Try their whole line up, but start with the excellent Charleston Sercial, to see what dry Madeira can be.

Blandy's

John Blandy arrived in Madeira in 1808. Since then, centuries of Madeiras have been bottled under the Blandy name, including many rare bottlings. Start with the 15 year old Malmsey, sweet like toffee but with mouth watering acidity, and then spring for some of the dated wines from the '60s and '70s for added complexity.

Charles Antin is an auctioneer and Wine Specialist at Christie's. He writes on beer and wine for various publications.

Tags: Portugal, Madeira, Christie's, wine auctions

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COMMENTS



Luis Vaz de Camões (sometimes anglicized as Camoens: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Os_Lus...
FEB 25, 2015 AT 9:29 AM

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