

Madeira

"I know no wine of its class that can beat Madeira when at its best ... In fact, I think Madeira and Burgundy carry combined intensity and complexity of vinous delights further than any other wines. There is possibly something of the unlawful about their rapture..." George Saintsbury, Notes on a Cellarbook (1920)

On a 1950 visit to Madeira, Sir Winston Churchill was honored by the island's British community with a dinner party. As a special tribute, his hosts opened a rare 1792 Vintage Madeira bottled in 1840.

When served in 1950, the wine was 158 years old, but in fine condition, still boasting Madeira's trademark rich, sweet, velvety taste and roomfilling aromas of butterscotch, cocoa and coffee. Sir Winston insisted on serving the guests himself, asking each in turn, "Do you realize that when this wine was vinetaged Marie Antoinette was alive?"

Madeira's longevity earns it a special place in the realm of old wine. What other wine requires over a half century to mature? And what other wine, when a century old, still benefits from several hours of breathing and can stand up to weeks in a decanter, without losing its complexity or its richness? And how many wines can live for two centuries and still offer not only the pleasure of their antiquity, but also the enjoyment of drinking?

Madeira's Mountain Vineyards

Madeira is produced on a spectacular volcanic island of the same name which surges from the sea at a point 360 miles west of Morocco. The history of Madeira's wine is nearly as old as that of the island. The island was first settled by Europeans in 1419, and by 1455 a visitor from Venice wrote that Madeira's vineyards were the world's most beautiful. Within a century, the wine from these vineyards was well established in markets throughout Europe and by the 1600's it had become the most popular wine in Britain's North American colonies.

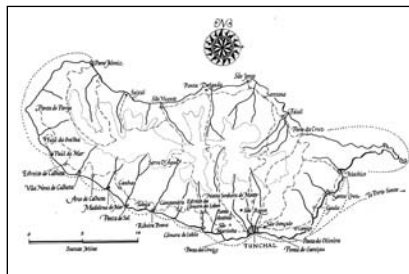
The popularity of Madeira in the American colonies

got a huge boost in the 1660s when the British crown banned the importation of products made or grown in Europe, unless shipped on British vessels from British ports. Products from Madeira were specifically exempted. British merchants in Madeira took full advantage of this by establishing close ties with merchants in Boston, New York, Philadelphia, Baltimore, Charleston, Savannah and New Orleans. A steady trade developed in which wine from Madeira was traded for such American products as indigo, corn and cotton. This trade continued unabated until the early 1800's, except when politics and war interfered in the 1770's.

For two centuries, Madeira was the wine of choice for most affluent Americans. Francis Scott Keyes said to have penned the Stars Spangled Banner, sipping from a glass of Madeira. George Washington's inauguration was toasted with Madeira, as was the signing of the Declaration of Independence. Wealthy families from Boston to New Orleans established extensive collections of Madeiras. Madeira became high fashion, and "Madeira parties" (forerunner of today's winetasting) became major social events.

How Madeira is Made

Madeira is produced from grapes grown on terraces cut into the island's steep mountainsides. Like Port, Madeira is a "fortified" wine to which brandy has been added. But unlike other fortified wines, Madeira is subjected to warmth, either in special vats or in the attic lofts of the Madeira lodges. This heating had its origins when, in the 18th century, it was found that Madeira that had sailed through the tropics was far improved in character. ►



THE RARE WINE CO.

150 Years of Change

While the majority of Madeiras are blends of vintages and grape varieties, it is the vintage wines that are Madeira's aristocracy. Vintage Madeiras are not simply a selection of the best wines from the best years, they are made from particular "noble" grape varieties after which the wines are named. These names—Malmsey, Bual, Verdelho, Sercial—not only describe a grape variety; they also describe a style, with Malmsey being the sweetest and richest and Sercial the lightest and the driest.

There are other grape varieties whose names you may stumble across on old bottles of Vintage Madeira. Terrantez, Bastardo and Moscatel are grapes that were grown up to the late 1800's and whose old vintages can still be found on occasion. Their virtual extinction in the late 1800's coincided with the decline of the Madeira wine trade and resulted from the same causes: two diseases of the vine, Oidium and Phylloxera, both of which also struck the vineyards of Europe, but in Madeira caused much greater, and more lasting, destruction.

By the turn of the 20th century, production stabilized but was never restored to levels seen at the end

of the 18th century. And Madeira continued to lose popularity, as few young wine drinkers were exposed to its pleasures.

The Historic Series

In the late 1980s, The Rare Wine Co. became committed to restoring America's appreciation of Madeira—not only for its history but for its greatness as a wine. In the two decades since we began our work, interest in rare older vintages has exploded, reaching levels not seen since the 19th century. But we have also seen renewed interest on the part of restaurants and everyday wine drinkers in this most American of wines.

This new interest has been spurred in part by availability of our "Historic Series," which was introduced in 2002. These unique Madeiras contain both young and very old wines in their blends, which imparts many of the nuances of old vintage Madeira, but at an affordable price.

To emphasize America's deep historical connection to Madeira, each wine in the series is named for a U.S. city with ties to Madeira. To date, four wines have been released in the series: New York Malmsey, Boston Bual, Charleston Sercial and New Orleans Special Reserve. □

The Styles of Madeira

Historically, four grape varieties have been responsible for most of Madeira's best wines.

Sercial — Sercial is grown at high elevations and is the last variety harvested. The wine is fermented to relative dryness and then brandy is added to raise it to between 17% and 20% alcohol. The taste of a fine Sercial is crisp and racy, its slight sweetness balanced by an exhilarating, mouthwatering tang of acidity. A Sercial begins its life pale in color, but over the course of a century deepens and darkens to amber.

Verdelho — Sweeter than Sercial, Verdelho is grown near sea-level and fermented to dryness before fortification. Verdelho begins its life golden in color, but a 100-year-old wine wears a magnificent walnut-brown robe. A great Verdelho can be quite sweet, but the finish is dry, and the wine's formidable acidity gives it

exciting structure and balance.

Bual (aka Boal) — For many Madeira lovers, Buals offer the best combination of richness and elegance. The sweetness of the wine is balanced by the tang of acidity; the texture, after suitable maturing, is silky and elegant; in a fine example, the finish is relatively dry and refreshing. The Bual vines, grown up to a quarter-mile elevation, are not very prolific and only small amounts of this classic grape variety are produced.

Malmsey (aka Malvazia) — Malmsey is the richest and sweetest of the classic styles. It has always been made from Malvazia grapes, although the type of Malvazia used has changed throughout history. Malmseys deliver an avalanche of opulent flavors and aromas, making them among the world's most beloved dessert wines. □