

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 breathtakingly beautiful volcanic island of the same name which surges from the sea at a point 360 miles west of Morocco and 700 miles south of Portugal, which governs it. The history of Madeira's wine is nearly as old as that of the island. The island was first settled by Europeans—led by the Portuguese explorer Zarco—in 1419. 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.

America's First Wine

The popularity of Madeira in the American colonies got a huge boost in 1665 when the British authorities 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 and Savannah. 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 is 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 Savannah 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 also heated for several months, either in ►



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special vats or in the attic lofts of the Madeira lodges. This heating (called "estufagem") had its origins in the days when merchant ships called at Madeira on their way to the East and West Indies. Beginning in the late 1600's, wines from Madeira's vineyards were frequent cargo on ships sailing to the Americas, as well as to mainland Portugal, England and India. According to legend, the value of a trip to the tropics was learned when an orphan cask, forgotten in a ship's hold, returned to Madeira from a trip across the Equator. The wine was found to be rich and velvety, far better than when it left, and a tropical cruise became part of the Madeira winemaking tradition.

Throughout the 18th and 19th centuries, producers continued to send casks of their wines on long voyages, for no other reason than to develop greater character. The ocean traveling wines were called *vina da roda* ("wines of the round voyage") and those that crossed the Equator twice were considered the best. Some Madeiras were named for the vessels with which they sailed (Constitution, Balthazar, Red jacket, Hurricane, Comet) or the places they had been (East Indies, West Indies, Japan, Argentina). Although this practice ended in the first decade of the 20th century, heating is still a critical step in the making of all Madeiras. ►

The Styles of Madeira

The greatest Madeiras are the vintage wines, produced exclusively from grapes of a single year. These wines remain in cask for a minimum of two decades, after which they typically require 30 to 75 years to fully mature. Unlike Vintage Port, which is a blend of grape varieties, the classic Vintage Madeiras were almost always made from a single varietal, and usually one of the following four types:

Sercial — Sercial is grown at high elevations (up to one-half mile above sea level) and is the last variety harvested, usually in October or early November. The wine is fermented to relative dryness (less than 1.5% sugar remaining) and then brandy is added to raise it to between 17% and 20% alcohol. The taste of a fine Vintage Sercial is crisp and racy, its slight sweetness balanced by an exhilarating, mouthwatering tang of acidity. It is not only an extraordinary aperitif or after-dinner wine, it is the only Vintage Madeira that can be considered a dinner wine as well, traditionally being consumed with the soup course. A Sercial begins its life pale in color, but over the course of a century deepens and darkens to amber.

Verdelho — Sweeter than Sercial (up to 2.5% sugar), 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, with yellow and green highlights. A great Verdelho combines elegance

with power in a remarkable way: the taste is quite sweet, but the finish is dry, and the wine's formidable acidity gives it real structure and balance. Some of the greatest wines we have tasted from the late 1800's have been Verdelhos.

Bual (aka Boal) — For many Madeira lovers, Buals offer the best combination of richness and elegance. The sweetness of the wine (up to 3.5% residual sugar) 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 Malvasia/Malvazia) — This wine, the sweetest and richest of Madeiras, is made from the Malvasia grape, although the precise type of Malvasia has changed over the years. For centuries, Malmsey has been revered and hard to come by. In his 1961 book on Madeira, Rupert Croft-Cooke wrote that "Malvasia has never been grown in large quantities. As far back as 1757, more than a century before the Phylloxera scourge, a shipper wrote to his customer in America, 'As regards the Malmsey, the whole Island produces only about 50 pipes (casks) annually and they are the sole property of one Gentleman and the excessive high prices paid for them and the quantity being so small has made that Wine never been regarded as a branch of Trade.'" □

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A Century of Change

While the majority of Madeiras are blends of vintages and grape varieties, it is the vintage wines, and the now-vanishing if soleras," that are Madeira's claim to greatness. Vintage and solera 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 (the most like Vintage Port) and Sercial being the lightest and the driest.

There are other grape varieties whose names you may stumble across on old bottles of Madeira. Terrantez and Bastardo, in particular, are grapes that were widely grown up to the late 1800's and whose old wines can still be found on occasion. The virtual extinction of Terrantez and Bastardo grapevines 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.

The Oidium crisis began in 1852 and lasted about a decade; during this time some 90 percent of the island's vines were destroyed by powdery mildew, and the number of firms producing wine decreased by over 75 percent. There was a brief period of replanting and rebuilding in the 1860's, but then Phylloxera struck in 1872, reducing the island's vine acreage to about 1,000 by the early 1880's.

The Phylloxera crisis, too, passed, and by the turn of the century production had been restored throughout the island, albeit at somewhat lower levels. But the costs had been heavy. Madeira had largely lost its traditional markets—America, England and the British East Indian colonies. Relatively less of the classic grape varieties were now grown, as they gave way to more prolific, but less distinguished, varieties. And, of course, stocks of older wines had been largely depleted, after a half century during which little young wine was being produced.

Today, the world's supply of fine Madeira is negligible. However, those few examples that have survived from the 19th and early 20th centuries are among the world's most majestic wines, which no wine lover should fail to experience. □

"The Rare Wine Co. is today the best American source for older Madeiras." Steve Tanzer

Over the past twenty years, our passion for these noble wines has grown with each passing month. We believe that they are among the greatest, most individual wines this planet has ever produced. They possess a richness and grandeur shared by only a few wines.

And their ability to age makes them absolutely unique. Most wines are dead and gone at age 100; and at best they are barely drinkable. But after a century, a Madeira can be just reaching its prime, possessing the depth of great age, but also the vigor of youth.

The gradual depletion of the world's stocks of these irreplaceable wines has only encouraged us to try harder to find the wines that remain, and the

success of our efforts will be apparent by what is offered on these pages.

A Note on Prices and Quality

As they have grown in rarity, and the sources of supply diminish, the price of Madeira on the world market has skyrocketed. Though many of the older wines arguably are worth whatever you may be asked to pay, the rising tide—combined with Madeira's mystique—has also raised the prices of mediocrities to the levels of the greats. We are proud of the role we have played in sorting through which are the truly classic Madeiras, and in preserving their availability *and* keeping them affordable. □