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Why Madeira Is The Next Great Thing In Wine

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Four varieties of Madeira

There is a wine that once opened, will still taste fresh and fabulous decades later. At the young age of 150 years this wine is just in its prime. It also has a unique claim to American patriotism, being the beverage most enjoyed by the Founding Fathers (who surely raised a glass after finally signing of the Declaration of Independence). This wine's avid collectors include big names, George Washington and J.P. Morgan (who boasted the world's largest collection.) And, when Thomas Jefferson and others celebrated the Louisiana Purchase, this wine toasted the deal. Zinfandel and California Cabernet, please step aside: aged, oxidized and baked to perfection, Madeira is really America's wine.

Long relegated to the dusty back corners of wine stores, Madeira is finally experiencing a much-deserved renaissance...and hopefully a new chapter in American wine history. Crafted and grown on the island of Madeira, this wine's new-found popularity is a change brought on largely by attentive restaurant sommeliers and chefs. Case in point, at the end of an exquisite meal at [Napa's Auberge du Soleil](#) our server wheeled out a cart laden with nuts, caramels and several Madeiras. Always game for a new taste in wines, we tried the 1948 Bual. It was one of those life-changing sips; just getting my head around the fact that the wine was created before my existence was impressive enough, but the perfume of apricots, butterscotch and caramel was my undoing. Appalled at my lack of exposure to such a compelling wine I jumped on a chance to taste even more Madeira at a recent tasting during the Atlanta Food & Wine Festival.

Hosted by Mannie Berk, founder and owner of [The Rare Wine Co.](#), the tasting was standing room only (none could resist as the wine's enticing perfume wafted down the corridor like a siren song, luring in the curious). By the end of his presentation the clamor and buzz was palpable but Berk was unsurprised. "This happens every time, people just go nuts when they taste quality, really old Madeira. I see it all the time, this is one of those wines that so few people know about. Once you've experienced good Madeira you'll never be the same, there is nothing like it." Yup.

Madeira is hot right now in large part due to Mr. Berk, who set his sights on restoring Madeira's reputation over 20 years ago. After tiring of a life in politics he gambled his future on a lot of rare Madeira that he bought for a song (because demand was listless) and started his company. Today he agrees that one main reason for the spreading buzz is the interest of restaurant sommeliers and chefs. "A few years ago the chances of seeing Madeira by the glass on list were so small. We've changed the discussion a bit though. In the past Madeira has always been a sweet wine, but in early 1800's America it was mostly dry. By re-introducing Verdelo and Sercial, drier versions of Madeira, we've thrilled the restaurant community because high acid wines with personality are just what sommeliers are looking for." Now Berk is excited to see them as aperitifs, in tasting menus and of course with dessert. Berk also credits his [Historic Series](#) of Madeira's for the rise in popularity: special bottles featuring select American cities (Savannah, Boston, New York and Charleston, to name a few). Each series is crafted from a clever blend of very old wines and younger wines so they deliver on the quality experience without a staggering price point. Most are available for around \$45 (make mental note now to put this on Christmas list). Unfortunately Madeira has seen some dark times over the last century. The Civil War and Prohibition striking a twin death knell to this once famously popular American drink. According to Berk, Madeira was indisputably "the most popular wine in American, it's what everyone drank."

Of course the reason for the wine's original popularity has its roots in an attractive tax-incentive. In days of old, all products sold in the English Colonies had to suffer the regulations of being shipped on British ships from British ports and taxed accordingly. Madeira was an exception to this rule, and because it escaped the British taxes Madeira enjoyed a significant price advantage over other wines. The island of Madeira was one of the last European stops before heading across the Atlantic, it was common for merchants to toss a barrel or two on board. During the ocean voyages Madeira rolled around inside the barrels and 'baked' (becoming maderized) in the ship hold. Rather than taste cooked and awful, the wines developed added richness and complexity while retaining their hallmark acidity. Hence a star was born. Today, Madeira is available all over the country with close to 100,000 bottles in circulation, a number Berk finds "simply astonishing for Madeira of that quality." Previously the market was lucky to have 10,000 bottles in circulation. The time to collect, buy and enjoy is now before the it catches fire and prices soar.

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