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**PRESIDENTIAL DRINKING**

# America's Love Affair With Madeira Wine

The fortunes of this historic beverage have gone up and down over the last several centuries.



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Looking on a world map, Madeira doesn't look like more than a small smudge off the coast of Morocco. The eye tends to skip right over the archipelago and go immediately to the mainland. But its signature fortified wine played a major role in shaping American palates and fueled the democratic dreams of the country's Founding Fathers.

Before you spit out your [bourbon](#) and [rye](#) in surprise, let me explain.

Sometime in the late 1600s Madeira began producing a low-alcohol white wine and by the 1750s its producers were fortifying it with some brandy.

The islands were a frequent stop for ships sailing to the new world, since crews could buy barrels of wine before making the trans-Atlantic voyage. The islands were also exempt from Britain's Navigation Act, which limited what wines and spirits could be sent to the colonies. "It took on a life of its own," says Mannie Berk, founder of the [Rare Wine Co.](#), which stocks an impressive selection of vintage and modern Madeira. As a result, it became "a real wine of luxury." Those who could afford it drank Madeira instead of the more common and less expensive beer, cider or [rum](#).

For the Founding Fathers, "it was *the* most important drink," says Berk. In fact, Thomas Jefferson gave the aging of Madeira considerable thought. According to the Thomas Jefferson Foundation, he made a number of calculations for aging it in the winter of 1775. "If a pipe of Madeira yields 30 doz. Bottles, we drink it at 7. Years old for 3/ a bottle, which includes the 7. Years interest. Such a bottle holds 15 common wine glasses...A pipe of new Madeira will yield 40. Dozen, which brings the price (there being no interest) to 20/ a doz. Or 20d the bottle when drank new." (Later in life, according to documents at his former home Monticello, he did switch to easier drinking wines from Italy and France, stating in 1817 "[t]he taste of this country [was] artificially created by our long restraint under the English government to the strong wines of Portugal and Spain.")

Jefferson wasn't alone. [George Washington](#) was a big fan of Madeira and made sure his house was stocked with gallons and gallons of it. He was known to enjoy several glasses of it after his dinner, according to an article written by Mary V. Thompson, a research historian at Mount Vernon Estate and Garden.



FOX PHOTOS

During America's Civil War, Madeira was massively popular in the coastal South, according to Berk, where alcohol was in great demand but the supply was, obviously, severely limited. However, soon after the war was over, winemakers across Europe were faced with a grape blight caused by the aphid-like phylloxera. Sales of Madeira were further hampered by the Russian Revolution, which caused havoc in one of its largest markets. The Madeira producers might have been able to survive except in their other large market, the U.S., the temperance movement was picking up steam and the sale of alcohol would, of course, be soon outlawed by [Prohibition](#). The combination of these factors was just too much for the producers to handle.

Madeira virtually disappeared from liquor store shelves and bar menus for decades. It wasn't until the 1990s, according to Berk, that American drinkers became interested in it again.

Given that it is Presidents' Week, I suggest you pick up a bottle of Madeira today and toast our Founding Fathers with their beverage of choice. Cheers!