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## A Brighter Future for a Wine With a Past

By **FRANK J. PRIAL**

AMERICANS these days drink wines from almost every state, continent and grape. Yet at one time they drank essentially only one: Madeira, a rich fortified wine from the Portuguese island in the Atlantic that gave it its name.

In Colonial days, thanks to British blockades, other wines were all but impossible to obtain. But by the mid-19th century, long after the crisis had passed and fine wines could be imported from all over the world, Madeira was mostly forgotten in the wine trade.

Mannie Berk would like to change that. A self-described Madeira fanatic, Mr. Berk, a 56-year-old Dallas native, is trying almost single-handedly to revive America's interest in what was once, perforce, its favorite wine.

"From the early 1700s until the Civil War," Mr. Berk said, "affluent Americans were as proud of their Madeira collections as they were of their art and real estate. Our love affair with Madeira stands as the earliest example of wine connoisseurship in America."

Mr. Berk is founder and president of the Rare Wine Company, with offices in Sonoma, Calif., and Guilford, Conn. The company offers an impressive range of great wines, but fine old Madeira is its reason for being. "A friend got me onto Madeira back in the early 1980s," Mr. Berk said, "and I was hooked."

In England in 1986, researching a book on old vintages, Mr. Berk heard that Hedges & Butler, a prominent London wine house, was disposing of stocks of aged Madeiras that had lain in its cellars for decades. "With some financial help from a friend, I bought as much of them as I could," he said. "And that was the beginning of the Rare Wine Company."

Mr. Berk landed some 400 cases of Madeira, mostly from the 19th century. Unavailable anywhere else, they probably would never have gone on the market again. But he had more ambitious plans than just selling these finds. "I wanted to make Americans more aware of our Madeira heritage," he said.

Even so, he added: "Young Madeiras coming into the States in recent years have been pretty mediocre. They don't give consumers a true sense of Madeira's possibilities."

Madeira is capable of achieving an astonishing old age. A vintage Madeira must age at least 20 years in cask before it can be sold.

So in 1998 Mr. Berk began working with Vinhos Barbeito, one of his suppliers, to produce blends with the rich flavors and subtle bouquet of older Madeira but at an affordable price. From this grew the company's "Historic Series": Madeiras named for American port cities with historical ties to the island and its wines.

The series has four wines so far. Three — Boston Bual, New York Malmsey and Charleston Sercial — have been released. A fourth, New Orleans Special Reserve, is to be released this month.

Bual, malmsey (Malvasia) and sercial are the principal grapes in the first three blends. About 25 percent of the New Orleans blend will be terrantez, an extremely rare grape almost but not quite wiped out by phylloxera in the 19th century.

"It took a good four years to come up with our first blends," Mr. Berk said. "The key was including about 15 percent of very old — 50 to 60 years — tinta negra mole with about 85 percent of the principal grapes." Tinta negra mole is not one of the noble grapes of the island, but it ages well, he said.

While rare vintage Madeira can sell for hundreds or even thousands of dollars a bottle, the Historic Series wines sell are priced at about \$40 for the Boston, New York and Charleston wines, and will run about \$60 for the New Orleans. Proceeds from the sale of the New Orleans wine will go to post-Katrina culinary and cultural activities in its namesake city.

The first three varieties are dark in color, rich and nutty, with flavors of oranges and lemons, brown sugar and maple syrup supported by just the right amount of acid for perfect balance and harmony. The Charleston Sercial is the driest, lighter in color than the others, and the New York Malmsey is the sweetest. The Boston Bual splits the difference with a spectacular aroma of dark sugar and orange.

These wines develop slowly after the bottle is open, but soon the room is filled with the aromas of coffee, chocolate and dried fruit. One critic detected "almost truffley flavors." Right on the mark.

Madeira, like port, is a fortified wine created by adding brandy during fermentation. The brandy stops the conversion of the grape sugar into alcohol and carbon dioxide. As a result the wine, like port, has about 18 percent sugar.

Unlike port, Madeira is heated by leaving it in casks for three years or more in the sweltering attics of the Madeira houses in Funchal, the island's subtropical capital. The best casks are set aside as vintage wines, some not to be sold until they are 60 or 70 years old. Lesser wines are blended for sale at 5, 10 or 15 years of age.

Merchants learned in the 18th century that when Madeira was shipped in sailing vessels, the heat of the tropics and the motion of the ships enhanced the wine's mellowness and richness. A 19th-century wine list from a New Orleans hotel offered a Madeira said to have made "two voyages to the E. Indies," for five times the price of more ordinary Madeiras.

The effects of Madeira's long decline are still evident. The island once had 60 producers, but has only 8 now.

Still, interest in good Madeira has been growing. Most restaurants serious about wine now offer it.

Gramercy Tavern in New York offers five Madeiras by the glass, one of them a 1922 Boal Reserva from D'Oliveiras that sells for \$75 a glass. New York restaurants featuring the Historic Series Madeiras include Gordon Ramsay at the London, Hearth, Del Posto, Telepan, Blue Hill and DB Bistro Moderne.

Shops offering at least one or two of the Historic Series include, in the city, Astor, Crossroads, Harlem Vintage, Garnet, Crush, 67 and, in Westchester, Zachys.

While many wine shops offer Madeira blends starting at around \$20, first-quality Madeira costs much more. At Sherry-Lehmann in New York a 1974 Sercial from Blandy's is \$175, and a 1920 Bual is \$795.

Of course, the Rare Wine Company can top that. Mr. Berk has a 1720 vintage for \$3,000.

That early American wine connoisseur Thomas Jefferson probably savored the 1720, but later in life. It was only 23 years old when he was born.

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