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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.

