

“Have Some Madeira, M'dear:”  
*The Unique History of Madeira Wine  
and its Consumption in the Atlantic World*

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Have some madeira, m'dear. You really have nothing to fear.  
I'm not trying to tempt you, that wouldn't be right,  
You shouldn't drink spirits at this time of night.  
Have some madeira, m'dear. It's really much nicer than beer.  
I don't care for sherry, one cannot drink stout,  
And port is a wine I can well do without...  
It's simply a case of *chacun a son goût*  
Have some madeira, m'dear.<sup>1</sup>

When I first stumbled across madeira wine I had never heard of the wine or the above song. When people over fifty, and by people I mean Provost Jim Lakso and Professor Mike Boyle, found out I was researching madeira, they inevitably broke into this song. Perhaps it says something about the fallen status of a wine — once seen as premier on these shores — that is only remembered today as a tool of seduction. But in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, madeira collecting seduced many wine connoisseurs.

This, like most talks, is in three acts. First, I am going to tell you the back story of how I came to research this topic. Second, I will give a sketch of the history of the most unique wine of the Atlantic World, madeira; I will offer the surprising history of how madeira wine went from common rotgut to the favorite drink of Jefferson,

Franklin, and most coastal Southern planters. Beyond that I will explain how that very history illustrates the trade of goods and taste in the Atlantic world in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. The third act will tell the tale of madeira's decline due to viticulture problems, and the elite clubs of madeira aficionados that continued to prize it in the twentieth and even twenty-first centuries. And, most importantly, I will tell you why any of this matters.

#### ACT I: HOW I CAME TO WORK ON MADEIRA WINE

While engaged in my dissertation research at archives in Columbia and Charleston, South Carolina, I read the papers of South Carolina rice planters. While looking for rice, I bumped into mentions of madeira, of which, as I've already confessed, I had never heard. The first time I saw it I made a note, but shrugged it off; I wasn't there for whatever madeira might be, I had come to understand rice! But, when I changed cities and found madeira a second and then a third time in planters' papers, a hint of a pattern emerged, and when you come across something you don't understand in the course of research, that is when you must pursue the new question. So, from that point forward, as I researched rice culture, I maintained a parallel research project on madeira and I promised myself that when I finished my dissertation I would pursue madeira aggressively and publish on the subject. All this took place in due course.

#### ACT II: A BRIEF HISTORY OF MADEIRA WINE

One of the secondary points I would like for you to take away from this talk is that madeira wine is an excellent example of the emergence of what historians term the Atlantic World. For Americans, coming to an understanding that the United States is part of the Atlantic World represents a move among historians to internationalize the context in which we understand United States history. So, the Atlantic World encompasses the complex relations of trade, communication, empire, colonization, and forced movements of peoples (namely African and Native Americans) that took place after 1493 in the Americas, Africa, and Europe.

Madeira is an accident of the Atlantic World system. The small volcanic islands of Madeira fell into Portugal's lap when a storm helped two of Prince Henry the Navigator's ships land at the islands in the 1420s. By 1500 the Madeira Islands, while better known for growing sugar cane, exported a low quality wine to Europe. As the

West Indies came to dominate sugar production, Madeirans increasingly focused on wine production. No one seemed to have thought the wines much good.<sup>2</sup>

Still, the Madeira Islands served a useful role in the Atlantic World complex. The trade winds required vessels to swing down near the islands to make the Atlantic crossing from Europe, and Madeira's largest city, Funchal, made an excellent final port of call to take on wine, water, fresh food, and ballast. Once on the other side of the Atlantic, the enterprising ship captain could then sell some pipes (casks of 95 gallons) of the wine in the Caribbean, Savannah, Charleston, Baltimore, or any American port. Now, there is little enough remarkable about that. But here is where unintended consequences came into play. Unlike every other wine, which would have been bruised by the thousands of miles of rocking in the super-heated ship's hull as it sailed down into the tropics, madeira became dramatically improved. The heating and movement under sail mellowed the wine, taking away its rougher edges.<sup>3</sup>

In the eighteenth century, when the benefits of heating the wine became apparent, Portuguese winemakers on the mainland and on Madeira experimented with fortification. Much like sherry or port, fortifying madeira with brandy, thus raising its alcohol content, helped its popularity to soar. Fortification also is credited with making madeira the wine that lasted the longest in bottle or cask. While most wines fit for aging reach a peak and then decline fairly rapidly, madeiras hold their quality for decades and even centuries. Perhaps the most amazing examples are the bottles of madeira from the sunken ship *Able*, which went down near Savannah, Georgia, in 1840. Divers retrieved the wine from the wreck in the twentieth century and tasters from the Savannah Madeira Club pronounced it fine with "astounding vigor...a nose which was still firm [and]...a good degree of ...richness on the palate." The tasting took place in 1980, 140 years after the ship sank.<sup>4</sup>

By the time of the American Revolution, madeira production had changed to include heating the wine in *estufas* on the island before shipping. Still, long voyages by ship enhanced the value of madeira. For example, a New Orleans hotel charged five times more for a supply of madeiras that had twice been to the East Indies.<sup>5</sup> Collectors often denoted the name of ships in which wines traveled the world. In the notable cellar of R. F. W. Allston, an antebellum governor of South Carolina, three-dozen bottles of 1834 madiera were called *Enterprise* madeira for the ship on which it sailed.<sup>6</sup>

## TYPES AND CHARACTER OF MADEIRA WINES

There are four major types of madeira based on four grape types. Sercial is the driest, followed by Verdelho. Boal is sweet and Malmsey is the sweetest. In addition to these vintage grapes there are blends, most notably rainwater madeira, a creation credited to William Neyles Habersham of Savannah, an oenophile of the highest level. In addition, five vintage varieties are the solera madeiras, which are blends often created by private owners of cellars such as that owned by Habersham.<sup>7</sup>

## SOUTHERN PLANTERS AND MADEIRA

Elite Americans of the late eighteenth and nineteenth century favored madeira. Benjamin Franklin enjoyed Madeira and John Hancock traded it, but Thomas Jefferson really had a taste for the wine. In research I published previously, I calculated that the third president spent about \$42,000 (in today's dollars) on madeira just during his eight years in office.<sup>8</sup> Southern planters like Jefferson truly took to it. In January 1771, John Drayton, one of the wealthiest rice planters in colonial South Carolina, requested his madiera dealers supply him with “a couple of pipes of the best madeira for my use, of the finest flavor. Silkey-soft & smooth upon the palate — no ways ruff, sweetish & a little more Malmsey in it than usual.”<sup>9</sup>

The transportation cycle of madiera was such a vital component of its history that the French learned of madeira because Charles Maurice Tallyrand developed a taste for it while sojourning in New York in the 1790s as an exile.<sup>10</sup> I just bring it up, because in this case as in most aspects of madeira lore, it breaks the usual rules. Imagine a French gourmet discovering a wine in America!

## CRISES OF THE LATER NINETEENTH CENTURY

The Civil War proved a crisis for madeira. Southern planters were the main collectors and the Union naval blockade prevented most madeira from entering the South. Then came the destruction by bombardment or fire of southern cities such as Richmond, Columbia, and Charleston. In the chaos of conflict, soldiers and scavengers looted many madeira cellars. Not all collections were lost, however, and it was the discovery of these stories of survival that led me into my own madeira investigations. I will relate one example of planters' efforts to save their madeira for themselves.

The Charleston Jockey Club had been among the elite horse racing organizations in North America before 1860. Among its considerable assets, it held a substantial cellar of madeira and sherry for its race events. In 1865 Charlestonians assumed that William T. Sherman would soon march his army into the city that started the war and exact some punitive justice. Able leaders of the Jockey Club feared for the madeira collection in such an event, so they loaded the entire wine collection and transported it to Columbia where they stored it in a most unlikely place. They used a basement room of the state Insane Asylum and bricked up the entry door to boot. Sherman surprised Confederates, bypassed Charleston, and instead captured Columbia where, despite substantial destruction of property, the madeira remained safe until after the war. Eventually, the Club, who never had funds or horses for another race, sold the entire collection at auction to endow the Charleston Library Society.<sup>11</sup>

Two additional crises struck at the source of wine production itself. First, in the 1850s the fungus *oidium tuckeri*, which kills grape vines, spread throughout the islands. Within a decade, sulfur dust had been proven an effective antifungal agent. However, in the 1870s, as the vineyards again flourished, *Phylloxera*, a vine louse from the Americas, decimated the vineyards anew. Tastes in wine changed in the United States, too, as the sweet strong madeira wines fell from favor in the twentieth century.<sup>12</sup>

### ACT III: MADEIRA'S LEGACY

Still, in some small corners of its old dominion, madeira aficionados kept the faith. Silas Weir Mitchell preserved some of the traditions of madeira tastings and madeira lore in his little 1895 book, *A Madeira Party*. The book recounts a madeira party that took place in Philadelphia prior to the civil war, when madeira was in its heyday.<sup>13</sup>

In 1959 a small group of elite men in Savannah formed the Savannah Madeira Club which survived at least into the 1980s. Their most famous party took place in 1976. Wishing to capture the Bicentennial spirit they dressed for dinner at a famous Savannah home for a classic madeira party as described in Mitchell's book.<sup>14</sup>

### TODAY

Madeira wine appears to be having a mild renaissance. Eric Asimov, the wine critic for the *New York Times*, used his “The Pour” column to talk up madeira in November 2007.<sup>15</sup>

Manny Berk, founder of the Rare Wine Company, has been a tireless promoter of madeira through tastings and talks, but especially through marketing madeira at his website. The wines, especially quality older vintages, are dear. In his current stock, for example, the cheapest option is a Barbeito VB (Verdelho-Boal) Madeira NV 500ML \$35.00, but at the top end is an ancient Terrantez Madeira from 1795 for \$3,495. If you wish to keep up with younger vintages coming onto the market, say ten- and fifteen-year-old madeiras, your best bet is a relatively young, but well executed blog called, obviously enough, MadeiraWineGuide.com.<sup>16</sup>

So what difference does any of this make? It matters in part because the story of madeira makes an excellent case study of how the Atlantic World remade things, including places, commodities such as wine, and taste. But I have argued elsewhere that madeira is a wine surrounded with a long history of almost cultish connoisseurship (maybe I am a bit guilty of this myself). Madeira’s history, then, is an elegant example of the ways in which people approach the act of collecting, develop and live out a sense of taste, and learn the role that esoteric knowledge plays in that experience. While Jefferson, Habersham, and Silas Weir Mitchell derived great pleasure from drinking madeira, Mitchell and Habersham, at least, also reveled in possessing this hyper-specialized knowledge and rarefied sense of taste, too. It served their egos well. And, to put myself on the couch, no doubt telling you about it serves mine, too.

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<sup>1</sup> Flanders and Swann, “Have Some Madeira, M'Dear,” from *At the Drop of a Hat*, EMI, 1960.

<sup>2</sup> Alex Liddell, *Madeira*, London: Faber and Faber (1998), 3-12. Malcolm Bell, Jr., “The Romantic Wines of Madeira,” *Georgia Historical Quarterly* 38, no. 4 (1954) 322-36.

<sup>3</sup> David Hancock, “Commerce and Conversation in the Eighteenth Century Atlantic: The Invention of Madeira Wine,” *Journal of Interdisciplinary History* 29, no. 4 (1998): 107-26. Liddell, *Madeira*, 30-34.

<sup>4</sup> Madeira Club Papers, Georgia Historical Society.

<sup>5</sup> Frank Prial, “A Brighter Future for a Wine with a Past,” *New York Times*, January 10, 2007, D10.

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<sup>6</sup> “Wine Book — Meeting St[reet] R. F. W. Allston 1858” in the Robert F. W. Allston Papers, South Carolina Historical Society.

<sup>7</sup> Bell, “Romantic Wines,” 333-336. Liddell, *Madeira*, 149-150.

<sup>8</sup> James H. Tuten, “Liquid Assets: Madeira Wine and Cultural Capital among Lowcountry Planters, 1735-1900” *American Nineteenth Century History*, 6:2 (June 2005), 177.

<sup>9</sup> Letter from John Drayton to Newton and Gordon, Madeira, January 26, 1771, in private collection.

<sup>10</sup> Maurice Bensoussan, “Gourmet In Exile” *Slow* 53 (2006), 140-143.

<sup>11</sup> See the Jockey Club Papers at the Charleston Library Society. Randy Sparks, “Gentleman’s Sport: Horse Racing in Antebellum Charleston,” *South Carolina Historical Magazine* 93, no. 1 (1992): 15-30. James Tuten, “Cellars Down South” *Slow* 53 (2006): 132-139.

<sup>12</sup> Liddell, *Madeira*, 49-54.

<sup>13</sup> Silas Weir Mitchell, *A Madeira Party*, Sacramento: Corti Brothers (1975).

<sup>14</sup> See the Madeira Club Papers, Georgia Historical Society.

<sup>15</sup> Eric Asimov, “The Pour: Vintage Madeira’s Enduring Charms,” *New York Times*, November 7, 2007, D6.

<sup>16</sup> The Rare Wine Company is at <http://www.RareWineCo.com/index.htm>, information for this article retrieved April 1, 2008. For Dr. Wolf Peter Reuter’s Madeira blog see <http://www.MadeiraWineGuide.com>.