

MADEIRA

THE SPIRIT OF ST. SIMONS ISLAND AND THE COLONIAL COAST

By Ray Crook

Ah, Madeira – that grand old wine wrapped in such rich history and fascinating lore! Considered by most people today an aperitif or desert wine, it also is used in cooking and wrongly likened by some to sherry. However, the now under-appreciated tangy spirit – a still, fortified, blended wine – graced the tables of commoners and parlors of elites for hundreds of years as the drink of first choice. Grown in vineyards off the Atlantic coast of northern Africa on the small Portuguese island of Madeira, the wine was discovered to improve on its long voyage to America. Enhanced by the stirring pitch and yaw found in the warm holds of vessels sailing through tropical waters of the West Indies, many tens of thousands of pipes (tapered oak casks containing 92 Imperial gallons) were delivered to American ports where they were enjoyed with increasing celebrity. After 1668, when Madeira was exempted by the British Crown from its ban on importing wines from foreign ports, a trade network developed in which the wine was traded for American products such as indigo and cotton. Its popularity increased steadily through the early 1800s with the establishment of close ties between Madeira and merchants in Boston, New York, Philadelphia, Baltimore, Charleston and Savannah. There was a decline in importation and consumption with the Civil War, but recently there has been a revival of interest in Madeira as one of the world's richest and longest lived wines. An awareness of Madeira's history and customs, sometimes delightfully pompous and always out of the ordinary, simply adds some cerebral depth to its taste.

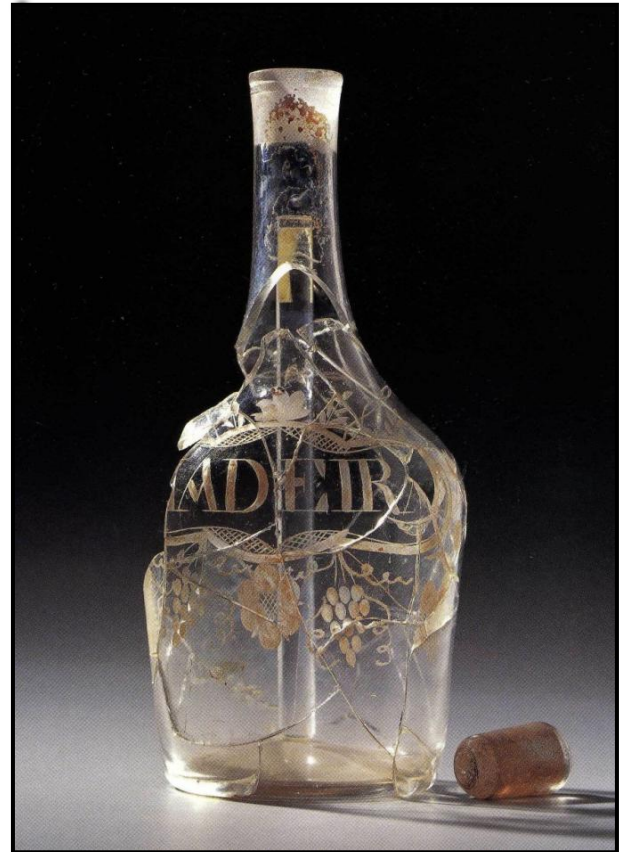
This wine's well-deserved fame is attached to a long list of American historical figures and monumental events. The work of the First Continental Congress was toasted with Madeira in 1775 and Francis Scott Key is said to have sipped of Madeira as he wrote the lyrics to *The Star-Spangled Banner* in 1814. The signing of the Declaration of Independence was attended by toasts with glasses of fine Madeiras specially provided for that occasion. The inauguration of President George Washington was toasted with Madeira, as was the naming of the City of Washington as our nation's capital. The legendary *U.S.S. Constitution*, also known as Old Ironsides, even was christened with a bottle of Madeira in 1797.

Most if not all of our Nation's Founders raised a glass of Madeira, and many did so quite often. George Washington, John Hancock, John Adams, Alexander Hamilton, Henry Laurens, James Madison, and Benjamin Franklin were only a few of the Colonial leaders who regaled their friends and guests with Madeira wine. Washington himself never drank more than one bottle of Madeira a night, as historians like to say, besides the rum, punch, and beer. Thomas Jefferson also

was among those who cherished his Madeiras and special social gatherings – Madeira Parties – began to center around serving the wine, the hosts competing in their ability to pour glasses from decanters filled from the finest imported pipes. Archaeological excavations at Monticello even have unearthed decanters specifically marked for their valued content. The one pictured, acid etched with engraved cartouche and grapevine patterns, was made sometime between 1760 and 1775, and was likely purchased for Jefferson in London.

A taste for Madeira wine developed early in Savannah and on St. Simons Island. When James Oglethorpe embarked in 1732 from England with 35 families to establish the new Colony of Georgia, his ship made a detour before continuing its venture. The *Ann* first sailed south to the island of Madeira, where the vessel took on five tons of the wine to serve the colony. While attempts also were made to grow Madeira vine cuttings in the Trustees' Garden in Savannah, none survived for long in the foreign climate and soil.

As Savannah blossomed as a port and center for commerce, some merchants and wealthy customers became very serious about their Madeira wine. One influential purveyor of Madeiras was the Habersham firm, beginning in 1744 when Robert Habersham exported rice to European ports and returned to Georgia with Madeira wine as ballast. His son, William, built upon the firm's import business in Madeira wine during the mid-1800s. He also developed a keen knowledge of, a discriminating palate, and an impressive collection of fine old Madeira wines. Rainwater Madeira, in a popular version of its legend, was created when an order of wine was left on the beach and its pickup delayed by a storm. The contents of that shipment, bound for William Habersham in Savannah, were diluted a little when heavy rains saturated the exposed barrels. Upon delivery to Habersham, he initially objected to the ruined wine but then reconsidered with approval and ordered more of the same. The new Rainwater variety soon became popular in the Savannah area and was distributed widely all along the eastern seaboard.



Madeira Wine Decanter Excavated by Archaeologists at Monticello (Courtesy of Department of Archaeology, The Thomas Jefferson Foundation)

The Colonial figures and early plantation owners of St. Simons Island appear to have enjoyed drinking Madeira wine, their guests regularly sending letters of apology for their over indulgence and occasional raucous behavior. None was better known for Madeira than the elder Pierce Butler of Hampton Plantation. The Major was widely celebrated in his day for having the most excellent stock of Madeiras and for many years he maintained a standing order for a pipe of the island's "best old wine." He may well have enjoyed his reputation as a *bon vivant* and often made gifts of his prestigious Butler Madeira to Philadelphia friends and colleagues. Among his famous visitors was Aaron Burr, who, after killing Alexander Hamilton in their famous duel, was provided refuge by Butler and consoled over glasses of Madeira.

Many plantation houses along the coast even had Madeira expressed in their architectural design. Thomas Spalding's early home at Orange Grove on the south end of St. Simons Island, for example, was designed with a wide fireplace containing niches on both sides to hold and warm bottles or demi-johns of wine or brandy.

During the 1830s, long after Spalding had moved to Sapelo Island, he and his St. Simons' neighbor John Couper of Cannon's Point experimented with growing imported vines and making wine. It is not known for sure if Madeira vines were among their many cuttings, but they did succeed in making a pipe of wine before deciding that the moist coastal conditions were not well suited for viniculture.

The economic turmoil and destruction of the Civil War had devastating effects on stocks of Madeira. The valued and prestigious wine had become both financial and social capital to wealthy merchants and the plantation elite along the southern coast. Fine Madeiras were as good as gold. Large caches of old Madeiras that had been amassed by affluent southerners were hidden from advancing forces, but both Union officers and Sherman's marauding "Bummers" nevertheless found and consumed or stole nearly all the prized bottles as war spoils.

Nostalgia for bygone days of prosperity that included Madeira became a subject of talk among old southern gentlemen, but a real Madeira Party now was a rarity. However, its American traditions were celebrated in the 1902 publication of *A Madeira Party* by S. Weir Mitchell. This slender leather-bound book soon became a classic and collectable, and has been reprinted in a few limited editions. It describes in affectionate detail the customs and traditions of a most social of gatherings, this one attended by a small group of fictional gentlemen with likely historical identities (including James Hamilton of St. Simons Island). Readers learn about pouring "with the sun" (clockwise), different selections being leisurely tasted, discussed and compared, and also get a sense of the ambiance through repartee like "There is but one wine" and the reply "And his name is Madeira, of course."

Mitchell's story rekindled an interest in Madeira wine for a new generation, and in a few places Madeira Clubs were formed to celebrate its heritage and recapture some of its sociability.

One such Madeira Club was founded in Savannah in 1950 as a men's social and intellectual association by Thomas Gignilliat, Dr. Thomas A. McGoldrick, Dr. Peter L. Scardino, Major General Haywood S. Hansell, Jr. and Dr. Antonio J. Waring. Meeting more or less regularly until the 1990s, the club had no written rules, minutes, officers, or dues. Meetings rotated among the members' homes and included a formal dinner served with Madeira wine, followed by a paper presentation and discussion.

For those who knew nothing about Madeira and have read along this far, perhaps now being a little intrigued about the charm of this grand old wine, you may consider yourself introduced to (or perhaps initiated into) its history and lore. However, to any who now want to sip a glass of Madeira for the first time, a warning. Those accustomed to a light, crisp Chardonnay or a warm, mellow Merlot could be surprised by the difference and wonder what was wrong with Pierce Butler. Madeira is an acquired taste to the modern palate. More than one attempt may be necessary before its flavor, aromas and subtle nuances can be appreciated. Try different varieties and never forget to decant from the bottle for 24 to 48 hours before serving. Any bottle of Madeira will be even more flavorful if the traditions and toasts of a Madeira Party are added to your tasting, especially if shared with a few good friends and family.

Madeiras are available in a large number of varieties and styles. Several continue to be produced today and others now only are available in old vintages. Briefly, for those readers who may want to sample this wine, the summary chart may be a useful guide into the world of Sercial (pronounced sair-s'yahl) and Special Reserves.

Currently, any selection of Madeira wine is hard to find in our local wine shops. While large urban wine stores offer Madeira blends starting at around \$20, first-quality Madeira costs much more. California wines labeled as Madeira are to be avoided regardless of their price. Authentic Madeira wines – including such notable labels as Broadbent, Cossart Gordon, Leacock, Justino, D'Oliveira, Blandy, and Barbeito – will today bear the seal of the Instituto do Vinho da Madeira (I.V.M), the official authority for quality control and trade relations regarding Madeira wine. The Rare Wine Company of California imports a large variety of vintage Madeira wines and has partnered with Madeira's Vinhos Barbeito to launch a Historic Series



A Few of the Vintage Madeiras at Garrafeira, a Wine Shop in Funchal on Madeira Island (Courtesy of Dr. Peter Reutter, © www.MadeiraWineGuide.com)

of classic blends for under \$50 a bottle. This series includes Boston Bual Special Reserve, New York Malmsey Special Reserve, and Charleston Sercial Special Reserve. The many Vintage Madeiras in their current inventory range from a \$90 bottle of 1987 D'Oliveira Harvest/Colheita Malvasia, to a 1910 Barbeito Sercial priced at \$295, and at the upper end a 1720 Borges Pather priced at \$2,995. Madeira wines are known for their extraordinary longevity. Even the oldest vintages usually are quite excellent to drink if they have been handled with care over the years. Certain vintages, rare and prized by the most ardent Madeira fans (or perhaps fanatics), are seen now only at auctions and estate sales. A bottle of so-called Napoleon Madeira, an immensely rare 1792 vintage, sold for \$6,844 in 2006 at a Zachys Wine Auction in New York.

I hope you will consider exploring Madeira wine, if for no other reason than because it is such a tangible connection between past and present – the heritage wine of St. Simons Island and the Georgia coast. You even may decide to add its charm and customs to your own traditions. Perhaps at the next suitable occasion you can serve, clockwise of course, a fine Madeira and then ask your guests “Are you all charged?” After that, as may be fitting, offer a traditional toast – “Here is to each other,” followed with a slight pause, “and to one other.”

Varieties and Styles of Madeira Wine

Varieties	
<i>Sercial</i>	Nutty, mellow, and dry with very little residual sugar, high-toned golden colors, subtle almond and citrus flavors, and high acidity. May have a harsh taste when young, but becomes smooth and rich with age. A favorite variety in Charleston, Savannah and the adjacent coast.
<i>Verdelho</i>	Rich, fruity, and a little sweeter than Sercial, with smoky notes and moderate acidity. A complex wine with nutty undertones, it becomes drier with age.
<i>Rainwater</i>	Pale and medium dry, a milder version of Verdelho. This variety became popular during the 19 th century in Savannah and other east coast areas.
<i>Bual</i>	Also rich and fruity, but less sweet than Malmsey, with a dark color and medium rich texture, rich aromas and a balance of sweetness and acidity. A favorite variety in Boston and the northeast coast.
<i>Malmsey</i>	Rich, dark, and full-bodied. The sweetest of Madeiras and is characterized by its dark color and rich texture, with hints of toffee and vanilla. The most famous Madeira wine globally, it became an American regional favorite in New York and the middle Atlantic coast.
Styles	
<i>Finest</i>	Wine that has been aged for at least 3 years; usually reserved for cooking. However, some – such as Leacock’s 3 year-old Rainwater – can be surprisingly good to drink.
<i>Reserve</i>	Designates a minimum of 5 years of aging in tanks or oak casks; may be blended from multiple vintages and usually subjected to heating (estufagem).
<i>Special Reserve</i>	Wines blended from multiple vintages that are naturally aged for a minimum of 10 years in the cast; aged long enough to acquire the fully distinctive Madeira aromas and tastes.
<i>Extra Reserve</i>	A rather rare and richer style aged for over 15 years in the cast.
<i>Harvest</i>	Wines from a single vintage that are aged for a shorter period than true Vintage Madeira. May be labeled with a vintage date but include the word "Colheita."
<i>Vintage</i>	This style must be aged in the cast for at least 20 years, followed by 2 years in the bottle before shipping. These are extremely resistant to oxidization and may be cellared, with periodic re-corking, for many years.
<i>Solera</i>	No longer produced, but many bottles survive of vintages from around the turn of the 20 th century up to 1985.