

A 104-Year-Old Wine

Sometimes the finer things in life don't change

With this month's issue devoted to "Change" (a word now used to describe everything from the presidency to the economy to the Oscars), 95W1ne decided instead to tackle something that hadn't changed in over a century: a 1904 Madeira I recently got my hands on.

Madeira is a fortified wine (think Port, not Thunderbird) named not for a Tyler Perry character but rather for its place of origin, a small Portuguese island off the eastern coast of Morocco. The Madeira wine tradition dates back to before the Age of Exploration and while the island produces some dry red and white wines of note, it is most well-known for the dark, thick, sweet dessert wines produced from the Bual and Malvasia (Malmsey) grapes.

What makes Madeira unique, however, is how the wines are produced. After pressing and fermentation, neutral grape spirits are added to the juice, which is then exposed to heat and gentle oxidation for anywhere from 90 days to upwards of 20 years. This recreates the same conditions 15th- and 16th-century Madeiras underwent during months-long voyages back and forth across the Atlantic to the West Indies, where the wines were subjected to constant movement and extreme temperature changes. This process, called *estufagem*, is the reason Madeiras are so hearty and robust and can remain alive and fresh-tasting decades after being barreled or uncorked, if stored properly in an air-tight decanter.

Madeiras—particularly Malmseys—were the drink of choice among the Washington/Jefferson/Madison set in

post-Colonial America, but their popularity waned dramatically during the late 20th century, when they were considered merely cooking wines and only hardcore connoisseurs drank them seriously.

Which begs the question: just how did 95W1ne get his hands on a 104-year-old bottle of the stuff?

Through the miracle of Christmas. And happenstance. While on a guided tour of a lovely Riverside home during a recent holiday party, I stopped to admire the house's wine racks—or more specifically, what was in them. Imagine my surprise when I discovered a dozen bottles of 1904 Madeira sitting among some 1950s-era Dom Perignon and other priceless gems (apparently the house—and the wine—had been handed down through several generations, and our host, the home's owner and not a wine drinker, had never inventoried his inherited collection).

After informing our host and mentioning 95W1ne's interest in Madeira (thanks to an article from *Gourmet* magazine circa the 1960s), he offered to grab a bottle for us. Given the wine's age, I expected that he'd pop it open and let everyone at the party have a taste before resealing it, but imagine my surprise when he returned and handed me the bottle as a gift. Suffice to say, this gesture left 95W1ne overwhelmed, overjoyed, and utterly speechless. Christmas had come early.

So what does a 104-year-old wine taste like? Like nothing you've ever put into your mouth before: complex, rich, deep, and ever-evolving across the palate (okay, so maybe it does change some—it is wine after all!). Ms. 95W1ne and I opened the bottle on Christmas night and had a small glass each (we decided on one glass every Christmas—our new tradition). Though as black as French Roast coffee in the decanter, we were shocked by the wine's amber/caramel-cola color in the glass, revealing its age around the edges in a pale gold straw color. The bouquet was vibrant and alive for a wine that old, resplendent with caramel, orange peel, and Middle Eastern spices, similar to a tawny Port. The first sip hit you immediately with rich, sugary tones of toffee and candied fruits, but there was a roundness and acidic heft to the wine that kept it from being too sweet, perfectly balanced. As the wine traveled down the palate, the sweet flavors evolved into a dark, almost bitter espresso that coated the tongue and lingered long after the wine was swallowed. In a word: divine.

Madeira is a wonderful wine tradition that shouldn't be lost on today's hectic, instant-gratification, change-for-the-sake-of-change society. I recommend finding the oldest bottle you can or picking up a recent vintage and enjoying one small glass once a year, to remind yourself that sometimes the finer things in life don't change over time. 🍷



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