



Madeira Wine and its role in American Independence

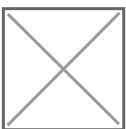
Description

“*Have some Madeira, m’ dear, you really have nothing to fear*” the lyrics of this old song perhaps, in a way, sum up the spirit of the American Revolution. Although this can be construed as a mere oenological perspective, however the role of Madeira Wine in the events leading to the American Independence are certainly well documented.

m4

To the scribe in me, this certainly indicated towards a story to be told (or re-told to be fair). And since stories are the foundation on which the wine world rests, therefore I undertook some research on it. So sit back and relax, pick up your glass of Madeira maybe, and allow me to take you back into history on this amazing journey (time travel, as some would call it) to re-count some interesting facts about “Madeira and its role in American Revolution”.

The fourth of July, which is celebrated as the “American Independence Day”, commemorates the signing of the “Declaration of Independence” in 1776. This was when the thirteen American colonies declared themselves as a new nation – the United States of America – breaking free from the British Empire. In America, Independence Day is celebrated with much fervor and enthusiasm with parades, carnivals and fireworks display with colors representing the American flag.



The history of Madeira itself dates back centuries. The wine came (and still does) from the Portuguese island named “Madeira” and was widely transported throughout the world in the hull of the ships which carried it. The hot ambient temperatures during the sea voyages accelerated the aging process of the wine stored in the hull and also caramelized the sugars. This produced a lusciously sweet, amber colored wine with flavors of caramel, honey and raisin.

n1

As the story goes, in 1768, fortified-wine importer, alleged smuggler, and a future signatory to the Declaration of Independence — John Hancock was accused of unloading a cargo of contraband Madeira at Boston harbor after tying up the customs officer. The British seized Hancock's ship (named Liberty) and asked him to pay taxes on the shipment. Now during that time, the tensions were already existing due to high general taxes imposed by the British Crown and as a fallout an angry mob retook the barrels in the name of liberty, thereby leading to the event being termed as "Boston Riot". The re-seized wine was consumed by the public in a night long celebration. The consumption of wine can also be said to have released constraints and inhibitions of people and encouraged them to transgress authority, thereby emboldening the revolutionary streak.

In another interesting note, Betsy Ross is rumored to have a side table with a glass of Madeira whilst sewing the stars and stripes onto the American Flag.

betsy-ross-illustration

Perhaps the most prominent leader in American Revolution, George Washington was also notable a Madeira fan. During his presidency he further developed a fondness for "India Madeira," or wine shipped from the Portuguese island of Madeira to India. Wine lovers were discovering that Madeira improved by "cooking" in the hull of ships during long ocean voyages. Washington was willing to pay a premium for this wine had his India Madeira transported from Philadelphia to Virginia when he finally retired. He is said to have drunk his last glass just months before he died in 1799.



Such was the cult of Madeira during those times that the America's founding fathers, reputedly at the insistence of Thomas Jefferson (also a Madeira fancier), raised a toast with Madeira Wine at time of signing of the American Declaration of Independence.

Personally, I have tasted Madeira only during my WSET training, but having researched about hugely significant role played by this fortified wine in the American Revolution, I now eagerly look forward to my next glass of this nector.

Cheers and Happy Fourth of July