

## THE HISTORY OF MARSALA

The businessman John Woodhouse was bound for Mazara del Vallo to pick up a cargo of sodium carbonate (for industrial purposes). Blown into the port at Marsala, he changed his mind and loaded the brig with the local wine. During the voyage back to Liverpool, he added small quantities of alcohol to preserve the wine. This was the regular practice with Port and Xéres (Sherry). The wine arrived safe and sound, and John sold it at a huge profit. "Marsala wine" had been discovered by Britain.

Woodhouse realised that others would soon begin importing "his" wine so, on his next trip, he sent his men out to buy up all the grapes from the best vineyards in the area: The Trapani Province, excluding Alcamo and the Egadi and Pantelleria islands (This is the DOC boundary today). The next step was to create a winery of his own in Marsala to produce the precious wine. He built a farmhouse like a fortress for himself, his men and local farmers, on the coastline of Marsala Country where he could survey the ocean for pirates and warships.

The British Royal Navy eventually became a big client. Admiral Lord Nelson used Marsala as the official wine ration for his men. A manuscript exists, dated 19 March 1800, carrying the signature of Woodhouse and the Duke of Bronte - Horatio Nelson's Sicilian title - stipulating the supply of 500 barrels, each with a capacity of 500 litres for the fleet stationed in Malta.

After Nelson's victories Buckingham Palace was keen to taste the wine that so fortified this sailors' spirits. The wine was since then included in the royal cellars and, as a consequence, in many other cellars as well.

Benjamin Ingham was the second Englishman to make his fortune out of Marsala. He bought a vineyard and built a winery nearby to make the wine. The fact that the winery looked like a fortress says something about how much money was being made. His nephew, Joseph Whitaker, carried on the family business, and soon there were many new wine producers in Marsala, each trying to get a share of the huge export market.

By now the markets had extended to America, with its large Italian immigrant population, and to Australia. In England, due to the royal interest and Admiral Nelson, the wine had become a fine wine, "worthy of any gentleman's table", as contemporary documents stated.

With Marsala went the ancient legend about wine having originated in Sicily as the gift of the Gods. Certainly the Phoenicians had come across it (in Western Sicily, especially the island of Mozia) as Carthage and the Arabs were later to discover it: three entire civilizations.

When Garibaldi's "Thousand" landed in Sicily in order to unify the country, two Royal Navy warships stationed in the port of Marsala protected his passage, some say in order to make sure nothing happened to the English wineries there. Garibaldi was brought to Sicily on ships owned by the 'Rubattino' merchant fleet, a company that had been created to transport wine. When Garibaldi marched into Palermo he was offered Marsala wine to commemorate his military achievement. Garibaldi was not a wine lover but he took a sip and seemed pleasantly surprised. The wine he was asked to taste is still today called Marsala G.D. (Garibaldi sweet).

During Prohibition in America, European sailing boats with goods for the United States carried large quantities of Marsala wine. The favourite variety was the heady liqueur-like wine the English had discovered in Sicily and found so similar to Iberian Sherry, Madera and Port.

The bottles made the wine look like a medicine, as though you needed a doctor's prescription to drink it. A lot of people assumed it was a way of getting round Prohibition. Now, of course, it has been proved that wine does have beneficial properties, especially on the cardiovascular system, so maybe the bottles were not so inappropriate.

Prohibition came and went. And really it was during those years that the world began to appreciate Marsala for the excellent, refined wine it is. A wine for connoisseurs.

There is a very interesting word which explains a great deal about Marsala. It is the Latin word *perpetuum*, in English perpetual. Wine produced in the Marsala region is aged in gigantic barrels. After a certain time part of the aged wine is removed and replaced with a younger wine of exactly the same kind (similar to the Spanish *Solera* method). Hence perpetual: the barrels are never emptied.