

Acid-Loving Winemaker Makes Madeiras That Match Spicy Cuisine

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Review by John Mariani



April 20 (Bloomberg) -- "When I was a little boy I liked to eat lemons," says **Ricardo Freitas**. "I think maybe that's where I got my love of acids."

Freitas, 45, is using his fondness for acidic flavor to update centuries of tradition as managing director and winemaker for his family's **Vinhos Barbeito** on the Portuguese Island of Madeira.

"Madeira has a long history with many rules in place," he told me over a lunch at **The Modern** in New York. "But I always believed that acidity is the key to making a brighter, more refreshing wine than the old heavy, tannic, oxidized style."

Freitas's Madeiras have twice been judged one of the world's 10 best wines regardless of category at the annual **Vinexpo** in Bordeaux, and his basic 10-year-old Verdelho Madeira was judged the top fortified wine in the world at the 2009 exhibition, surpassing an array of Vintage Ports. His secret?

"Less technology and more thinking," he says.

Having tasted half a dozen of his wines over lunch, I discovered that not only are they far easier to drink than traditional-style Madeiras but that they go better with food than as dessert wines or after-dinner drinks.

One complete surprise was to find how well Madeira went with Chef Gabriel Kreuther's very spicy casserole of braised tripe with chickpeas and red hot harissa aioli -- a dish I would never think of accompanying with a sweet Madeira.

Signature Series

But Freitas's Signature Series Barbeito VB, a blend of equal parts verdelho and boal, was only medium sweet and the acid so beloved by Freitas was perfect at cutting the richness of the dish.

Other bottlings, like the 2001 Barbeito Boal Colheita Madeira Casks 48+84 (\$45/500 ml) -- those palindromic numbers signaled good fortune to Freitas when he found the casks -- went splendidly with a foie gras torchon with dried cherries and duck prosciutto, while a duck confit à l'orange, with its own bittersweet edge, was wonderful with the nutty "Charleston" Sercial.

This last, along with a "Boston" Boal and "New York" Malmsey, are part of what Barbeito calls its "Historic Series," commemorating the prestigious reputation Madeira had in the U.S. in the 18th and 19th centuries.

Along with the firm's American importer, **The Rare Wine Co.**, Barbeito creates its wines from single harvest and/or single casks in limited production, with just a barrel or two made at a time.

Old Practices

Freitas regards each step of the Madeira-making process, including fortifying the wine with spirits, as an opportunity for questioning old practices.

"It took me five years to convince my mother to stop using caramel to color the wines," he says of an age-old technique. "I believed the caramel added its own flavor and I wanted the wines to taste only of their grape."

To this end Freitas demonstrated that Madeira's workhorse grape, tinta negra mole, can make fine wine without blending. He also ages his wine using the slower canteiro method, without the direct heat most producers use in the estufa ("hothouse") that accelerates the maturation of the wine. Barbeito's slower maturation keeps oxidation to a minimum and, as I found out over lunch, allows the wines to be enjoyed with savory food.

Priciest Wine

When an age is indicated on a Madeira bottle, it usually refers to the oldest wine or the average age of the wines in the blend, as with Barbeito Malvasia 30-year-old Special Lot Madeira (\$125/750ml), which Freitas made as a tribute to his grandfather Mario Barbeito, the company's founder.

The average age of the wines is 30 years, with some older and some younger.

Freitas promises this is the only time he will make such a blend; with only 1,550 bottles, it's the company's priciest bottling.

Barbeito will also vintage-date the wines to indicate a single barrel Madeira like its 1994 Malvasia Single Cask '23c' (\$50/500ml), bottled by hand in 2006, with 942 bottles made.

In the fall of 2007, upon finding that a cask from 2000 had become quite concentrated after the summer's heat caused evaporation, he bottled the wine immediately to maintain its refinement and richness, which might have been compromised by further aging.

We did enjoy the Madeiras with some artisanal cheese and desserts like a milk chocolate and hazelnut dacquoise with raspberry sorbet, the more conventional point in the meal to drink

the fortified wines. But Freitas, who seemed as surprised as I was by the match-ups with the first and main courses, proved to me the versatility of his wine with food.

I'm not sure I'm ready for an entire meal accompanied only by Madeiras -- whose alcohol content is 19 percent and higher -- but with an individual dish, especially one with spice and a little sweetness, they are delicious alternatives to dry whites or reds.