

Matriarch of Madeira; A Tribute to Dona Manuela Barbeito

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It was over three years ago when the Rare Wine Company's Mannie Berk and Vinhos Barbeito's Ricardo Diogo Freitas joined forces to honor the legacy of Mario Barbeito, Ricardo's grandfather and the founder of Vinhos Barbeito. Two memorable tastings, held on both coasts of the United States, were organized to commemorate the 25th anniversary of his passing.

As we fast forward to October of 2013, Mannie and Ricardo teamed up yet again, this time honoring Ricardo's mother and Vinhos Barbeito's former winemaker Dona Manuela Barbeito. Although now retired, having passed winemaking duties over to Ricardo, her talent and skill were on full display. A wide variety of wines were poured, many not commercially available -- drawn from her personal collection and now nearly extinct.

If Mario Barbeito, a former accountant who established the company during tough economic times, was the mind, then Manuela might be the spirit, artistically blending soulful wines of rare beauty. Her achievement becomes more impressive when one realizes that she was a female in a field where women were rare.

As for Ricardo, he appears to be the heart of Vinhos Barbeito, lovingly paying tribute to the past, but also pumping out fresh ideas with relentless drive. One only needs to hear him speak at one of these events, almost tearing up, to recognize how much love he has for his family and his family's business.



TASTING NOTES

The first flight consisted of the three wines from the 1992 vintage. These are the first frasqueira Madeiras made solely by Ricardo and offered a look into the results of Dona Manuela's past tutelage. While splendid wines, they are in short supply and only available in 500ml bottles.

1992 Sercial

Light amber in color, this wine opened the tasting with a razor-sharp slash across the palate. With grapes sourced from high-altitude Jardim da Serra vineyards, this lemony, citric, orange peel and butterscotch flavored offering showed great lift, precision and length. Although quite fruity, as expected for such a youngster, this had ample depth with lip-pursing acidity and just a hint of unusually refreshing VA. A gorgeously lean and svelte wine that captures the essence of what Sercial can offer. This was my favorite of the flight. (93)

1992 Verdelho

A bit reserved aromatically. While noticeably sweet compared to the Sercial, this was still a relatively dry and chiseled wine. Citric, with notes of nut butter and a pleasingly bitter "pithy" character that cut through the cheesy amuse-bouche served during the flight; a lovely, palate-scraping wine that seemed to be the crowd favorite. Sourced from Ribeira Brava vineyards that no longer exists. (91)

1992 Bual

This was fragrant, off dry, luscious and mouth filling with more than enough acidity for balance. A bit of torrefaction is noticeable, with notes of caramel, honey and baking spices. Offering excellent complexity and length, this really clung to the palate with venerable tenacity. Sourced from Campanario vineyards. (92)

The next flight offered various non-vintage Malvasia blends from Ricardo.

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20 Year Old Malvasia

An open, giving wine with a splendid floral and dried fruit nose. Some apricot-like tropical flavors here, with dried peaches and butter notes. Although the softest and smoothest wine in the flight, this still exhibited that trademark elegance that seems to be Ricardo's style. (91)

30 Year Old Malvasia, Lote Especial

Ricardo recounted how he labored long and hard to blend this wine, created as a tribute to his grandfather. Based on my samples of this wine over the last two years, his efforts have paid handsome dividends. Ricardo also mentioned that he felt this had "sweetened" up a bit with time in the bottle, but I can't say I personally noticed much of a difference... it still had that zippy, fresh, electric quality that I remember. This was more about its lacey, lifted, filigree texture than a list of flavor descriptors. Not a wine for dessert, but a wine to savor by itself. Pleasing, almost painful, acidity courses through this elixir. Ridiculous breadth and length. My favorite of the flight. (95)

40 Year Old Malvasia, Mae Manuela

While the 30 year blend was a tribute to his grandfather, this wine was created to pay homage to his mother. This had a serious, mature, "aged" quality to it; I believe Ricardo mentioned he blended in a bit of wine from the 1880s. Darker in color and taste relative to the 30 year blend; hints of a crème brulee with a chewy caramel and toffee note -- yet this was still bright and refreshing. While not as electric as the 30 year blend, this had a wider array of flavors and scents. (94)

The next flight presented three eclectic blends from the personal collection of Dona Manuela.

Private 50 Year Old Blend (Bottled 1989)

Quite dark in color, with correspondingly dark flavors. Treacle, antique wood and brown baking spices. For all its richness, however, this does still float on the palate with adequate acidity and moderate length. Medium bodied and delicious. (91)

Private 70 Year Old Blend (Bottled 1989)

This had a profile similar to the 50 year blend but perhaps a bit deeper, with an almost chocolate, “fudgy” quality. Uniquely rich and almost “boozey”. Palate-coating and full of character. Ricardo mentioned that his mother was fond of rum and perhaps some might have been some blended in – if that was the case, it does magically work. An intense, if perhaps unorthodox, experience. (94)

Private 90 year Old Blend (Bottled 1989)

A noticeable and almost distracting amount of VA on the nose, but the palate was clean, rich, thick and sweet. Quite a bit of treacle, coffee and burnt sugar. Perhaps it was the power of suggestion, but after Ricardo mentioned that there might have been some rum added in the 70 year old blend, I thought I caught a whiff of rum flavors in this wine as well. While this was as concentrated as the 70 year blend, I thought the richness was better balanced in that wine. (91)

The next flight featured a couple of turn-of-the-century Sercials. The 1902 came from Dona Manuela’s personal collection.

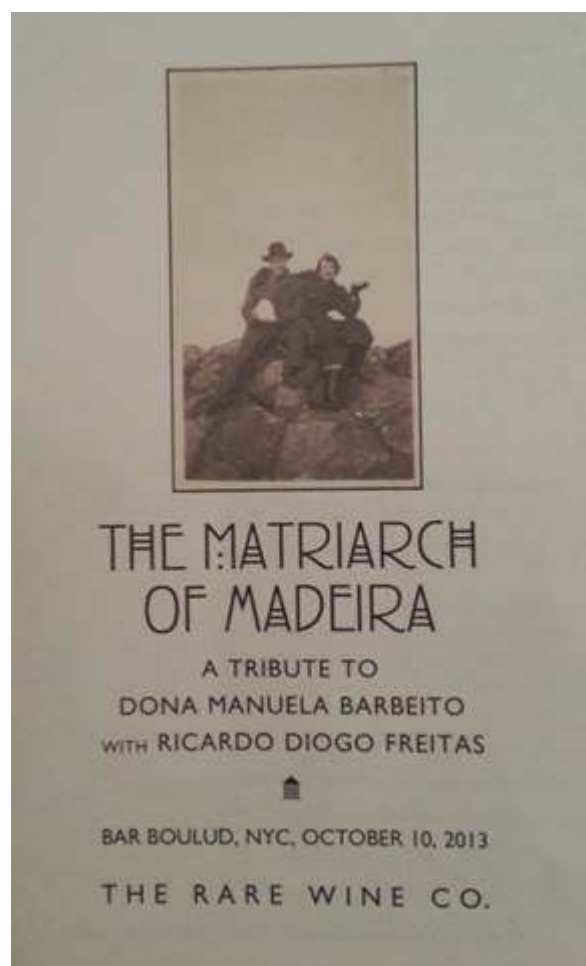
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1902 Sercial

My notes mentioned that this was bottled in 1904 and later moved to demijohn, meaning this did not see much time in cask at all. This was bone dry, lip puckering and very detailed. Some bitter nut skin notes with dried flowers and citrus pith. Although quite dry, this never came across as too severe. An electric wine that I found astonishingly refreshing. (94)

1904 Sercial

Very tight on the nose. Good acidity but not quite the joy ride that the 1902 Sercial provided. The flavors were on the light side of the spectrum, with citrus and earl grey tea hints. This got better in the glass, opening up and offering more breadth on the palate. Good length but, while I may be splitting hairs, not quite as stimulating as the 1902 Sercial. (93)



This final flight was all sourced from the personal collection of Dona Manuela. They were drawn from demijohn, which perhaps explained how fresh and clean they all showed.

1892 Bual

Lovely Bual, offering just the right amount of sweetness, with tangy, citrus-squirt acidity. Dried fruits, caramel and autumnal spices; this was practically a fruitcake in a glass. This possessed a powerful palate entry, rich middle and a lingering mouth-watering finish. A beautiful wine from start to end. (94)

1863 Bual

While the 1892 Bual was plump and filled with dried fruit flavors, this had a bit leaner profile: tanned leather, cognac, and tea leaf. A different, more svelte expression of Bual, but equally delicious. (94)

1887 Malvasia

Relatively dry for a Malvasia but this absolutely shimmered on the palate and reminded me a bit of the 30 Year Old Malvasia in both its ability to translate sweetness in subtle ways and its filigree structure. So much impact in a high toned, delicate and refined package. This was deceptively deep, layered and powerful; with ridiculous length, this became my wine of the night. (97)

1834 Malvasia

Compared to the 1887 Malvasia, this was more of what I typically expect from Malvasia: weighty, sweet, tangy, concentrated and dessert-like, but with adequate structure to maintain freshness. Dark cocoa, butterscotch, and caramel flavors intermingle with zippy tropical notes. A superb wine and a rare treat, but I should have had this before the 1887 Malvasia, as I kept thinking about the brilliant detail that wine possessed. (94)

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