

GUEST CORNER ARTICLE

The Rare Wine Company and Vinhos Barbeito

A 20th Anniversary Celebration



Article and photos by Marco DeFreitas © December 2015

Introduction

It began in 1995 with a fax. Mannie Berk, owner of The Rare Wine Company, was searching for wines to shore up his inventory of older Madeiras. A visitation request was sent to Manuela Vasconcellos Barbeito de Freitas at Vinhos Barbeito. When Mannie arrived, he was met by Dona Manuela's son, Ricardo Freitas, and from there began a partnership that not only provided The Rare Wine Company a pipeline to older Madeiras, it also changed the future landscape of Madeira consumption in America.

The Partnership

The wines of Madeira were going through tough times, but Mannie felt a kinship with Ricardo, who, like him, had a belief in the wines and what they could eventually achieve in the marketplace. Ricardo's relationships on the island was key in acquiring hidden stashes of old wine, which eventually found their way into the hands of The Rare Wine Company's customers. While this was advantageous for the "already converted", what could be done for the consumer who knew little about Madeira and could not afford acquiring such precious bottles?

In an attempt to mold Madeira into a more mainstream beverage, Mannie and Ricardo set about the task of creating wines with an aged character at a cheaper price. Mannie would develop an idea for a particular wine and Ricardo would employ innovative blending techniques to achieve those ends. Older wines would be blended with newer. Tinta Negra Mole, which was less expensive and generally perceived as a "lowly" varietal, was treated with respect and carefully vinified. From this collaboration was born The Rare Wine Company's "Historic Series" of Madeiras. They were attractively packaged, produced in substantial quantities and provided quality above what was previously available at their price points. These wines sold well and placed Madeira on more wine store's shelves, providing a relatively affordable entry point for the consumer previously unacquainted with the genre.

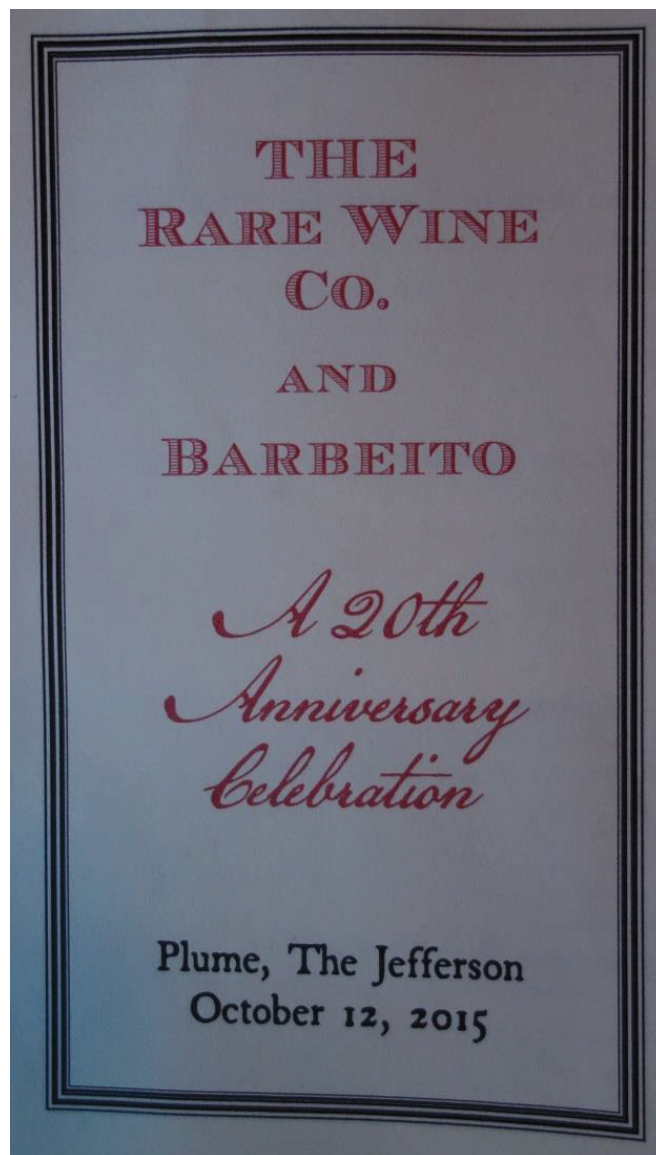


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The Celebration

With the realization last year that the twentieth anniversary of their partnership was at hand, both Mannie and Ricardo began planning a commemorative wine dinner to celebrate their two decades of collaboration. Several wines were chosen that held special meaning to Ricardo, some never before poured at any previous Rare Wine Company event. This affair eventually materialized in Washington DC, at the lavish Jefferson Hotel, well known for its extensive selections of Madeiras by the glass. Columbus Day was the chosen date ... a particularly appropriate day. Ricardo's grandfather, Mario Barbeito, founded Vinhos Barbeito and was always fascinated by Christopher Columbus, who lived for some years on the Madeira archipelago. Mario even established a Christopher Columbus museum on the island, but unfortunately it suffered severe damage during the devastating floods of 2010.

This commemorative dinner began with both Mannie and Ricardo recalling their first encounters. Aside from scrambling at the last minute to accommodate Mannie's vegetarian diet, Ricardo was shocked by the sheer quantity of wine that Mannie requested and recounted the logistics required to hand-bottle it all. Ricardo's mother was equally astonished at how much of her prized 1795 Terrantez, 1834 Malvasia, 1863 Bual, etc. were being sold. These are wines that early customers of the Rare Wine Company are well familiar with and surely lament their rarity in the marketplace today. The rise in prices of these wines, if they can be found at all, are indeed a testament to the increasing popularity of Madeira which can, at least in part, be attributed to that first fax in 1995.



The Wines

1992 Sercial

This was the first vintage (frasqueira) Madeira produced by Ricardo. I had previously tasted the trio of wines produced that year, which also included a Verdelho and a Boal, and while all were excellent, my favorite has always been the Sercial. This wine showed as well as it always had: bright, electric and citric with sharp but not austere acidity. Lots of treble notes here with lemons, honey and limes. I kept thinking to myself ... "Classic Sercial". This is a wine that encouraged Ricardo trust his instincts. Conventional wisdom states that you must have at least 9% potential alcohol in the grapes to produce quality Madeira, yet this only possessed 7%. Ricardo had faith in the wine and the results amply support his decision to vinify it. My only gripe is that I can only find it in 500ml bottles. **(92)**

Terrantez Reserve (bottled in 2000)

This was a bit sweeter than I normally associate with Terrantez, which I don't mind as long as the wine is balanced - and this is indeed well balanced. More bass notes here than on the 1992 Sercial that preceded it; a bit more caramel and toffee, but the acids are fine and smooth. It was tangy and rich with an ethereal quality that simply floats on the palate. This was a generous, silky and focused wine. **(93)**

New Orleans Special Reserve (1st Bottling from 2006)

When Mannie tasted a particularly extraordinary, yet limited, Terrantez from Ricardo, he tasked the winemaker with blending it to stretch quantities without diminishing quality. Fifty cases were eventually bottled and, according to Mannie, the taste is quite comparable to the original Terrantez; this was a wine that truly cemented Mannie's trust in Ricardo as a master blender. The eventual composition consisted of 25% Terrantez with some older Tinta Negra Mole blended in. This was my third taste of this wine over eight years and it was perhaps its best showing yet; simply thrilling, with incredible drive and thrust on the palate. Flamboyant nose, dryish and pleasingly bitter on the palate with spectacular length. An intense, complex, mouth-watering wine. **(95)**

The Wanderer

This was made from 100% Tinta Negra Mole of about 60 years of age and bottled in 2006. Having initially tasted this, Mannie pleaded with Ricardo to bottle it by itself without any blending. After bottling, Mannie admitted to finding it disappointing and boring and, I believe, never offered it for sale. Tonight he used this wine to refute the notion that Madeira does not change once it goes into bottle. According to him, it had indeed changed and transformed into something quite enjoyable. I found it to have an unique herbal bouquet. The palate was medium bodied with notes of citrus, old wood and furniture polish. There was a sourness on the finish that surprisingly was not off-putting. I liked this quite a bit, but didn't love it; certainly an interesting wine and well worth trying. **(89)**

1889 Verdelho

This was bottled in 1989 with a "Christopher Columbus" label; one hundred bottles were produced. Quite dark in color and medium dry; classic Verdelho sweetness level. What impresses here is the concentration without weight. You can almost feel the palate-staining dry extract in the mouth, yet the acidity is correct and provides adequate lift for all the richness. The length here is quite impressive as well. A superb wine in a muscular style. **(94)**

1912 Bual Quinta do Sao Joao

Produced from grapes grown on the Western side of Madeira, in Jardim do Mar; bottled around 2000. The appearance was a bit cloudy and the nose reticent. The palate offered up flavors of fruitcake, baking spices and white raisins. The mouthfeel was a bit soft and needed a bit more focus. This did get a bit better with time in the glass, but I found this outclassed by other wines poured next to it. **(88)**

1891 Bual Favila Ribeiro Real

This had been in demijohn since the 1960s and bottled 3 months ago; sourced from Ribeiro Real, a relatively large vineyard by Madeira standards. It seems as if I've been sampling an unusually large number of wines from Ribeiro Real of late and they have all been quite excellent, but this is perhaps the best yet. This is one for acid lovers; you can almost feel the acidity on

the nose, as strange as that seems. This is my style of Bual: rich, layered, pungent and intense, yet no heaviness whatsoever due to a truckload of lip-pursing acidity. The finish lingers for what seems like forever, with stinging acidity. Did I mention the acids? I almost wonder if there is too much acidity here (nah!). Bottled only 3 months ago, I suspect this will settle down and only become more harmonious with time. Loads of potential here. **(97)**

1866 Bual

This was a bit of a deceptive wine for me as it appeared a bit soft at first (perhaps due to tasting it after the electric 1891 Bual?). After settling in with this a bit, it eventually showed its true nature. It does seem a bit on the sweeter side with notes of figs, raisins, tropical fruits and orange marmalade – but the structure is there. This almost showed like a fine, sleek Malvasia. A lovely, spherical, symmetrical wine where nothing really pokes out. The finish was fine, detailed and precise. Nothing aggressive here, just pure class. **(95)**



1837 Bual

This was the first wine in the tasting that showed marked torrefaction. Browner notes here with fudge, caramel, coffee and autumnal spices. A deep wine with breadth of flavors: tobacco leaf, smoke, burnt sugar and lemon zest. A hint of volatile acidity - but not crossing the line to "varnish". A lovely wine for a cold winter's night. (94)

Malvasia 40 year old Mae Manuela

This was a bottling to pay tribute to Ricardo's mother, containing 7% of an 1880 Malvasia (which by itself is one of the finest Malvasias I've tasted). While 7% may not seem like a lot, it appears to have added remarkable depth. So fragrant, with wild botanicals and a cornucopia of dried tropical fruits. This exhibited correct sweetness and balance. This wine underscores my belief that Ricardo is making some of the finest Malvasias out there ... crisp, chiseled and filigreed Malvasias that are lifted, fresh and pure (the 30 year old Malvasia that Ricardo made in tribute to his grandfather shows a similar freshness and lightness of touch; definitely worth seeking out). Nothing syrupy here; a truly refined wine that showed better today than when I tried it on release. (96)

1955 Moscatel

According to Ricardo, this was probably bottled 15 years ago. It's always fun to try a Moscatel and this one is no different. Classic Moscatel notes of orange, tangerines, flowers and apricots. A lighter styled wine and a bit soft for my tastes. Enjoyable, but not a standout for me. (89)

1950 Malvasia Favilla Viera

I've had the fantastic 1920 Favilla Viera Malvasia a number of times and this 1950, which I've never tasted before, compares favorably. This has a dense core of honey, caramel, dried citrus fruits and brown butter. Clean, fresh tasting wine with a punchy, saline, saliva-inducing finish. Remarkable maturity for such a relative youngster. Absolutely delicious. (94)

1926 Malvasia Vasconcelos

Ricardo commented on the uniqueness of this wine, being fortified with sugar cane rum (although I didn't really pick up any overt rum notes). Overall, this was a lovely, well balanced, svelte Malvasia. Not a lot of power here, but lots of lime zest, sultana raisins and light rancio. Excellent wine. **(93)**

1900 Malvasia

A wine I know well, as it was one of the first serious Madeiras I purchased back when I first started collecting wines. I haven't had this for some time and forgot what a black hole of sugar this was. Dark like cola and stuffed with caramel, toffee, fruitcake, fudge and coffee. This was tremendously sweet with a hint of volatile acidity; the structure is just barely harnessing the sweetness here. This really sticks out in the Barbeito portfolio with its unusually aggressive sweetness. Certainly a polarizing wine, as some would surely find it too much of a good thing - but if you have a sweet tooth, this is for you. While I did enjoy it and can see this as a wine I would serve with dessert rather than by itself, I'm not sure I can drink more than a glass of this concentrated elixir. I can only imagine what could have been if it spent less time in cask. **(93)**

1882 Malvasia RR

Ricardo filled 177 bottles from demijohn in February of 2015. This was a group favorite the last time I had it, about six months ago, and it once again offered an impressive performance. This exhibited the more typical Barbeito restraint when it comes to Malvasia. Focused and precise, with figs, marmalade and tart lemons. While a sleek wine, there is no lack of power here. A pungent, tangy wine with outstanding attack, breadth and lift. This really fires off in all directions with head-spinning intensity. A deep, deep wine and a reference point for what Madeira can achieve. **(97)**