



Barbeito wins the Tinta Negra race



Tinta Negra gets cool...

Not heard of the Tinta Negra race? Maybe you've not even heard of Tinta Negra, even though it is the principal grape variety of Madeira (it represents 80 to 85% of total production). Oh, and in case you're thinking wasn't that Tinta Negra Mole, the hapless variety underwent a name change to avoid confusion with Tinta Negra Mole from the Algarve.

But nomenclature has been the least of its problems. Even those who were in the know doubted its quality potential, which is why Tinta Negra was banned from Madeira labels. Until recently that is; the rules changed as of April (which month saw a couple of other changes – all Madeiras must now state their bottling date and a tip top end new 50 year old category has been introduced). And who else but Ricardo Diogo Freitas of [Barbeito](#) to be the first to put Tinta Negra on the label!



Number 1 Tinta Negra



I caught up with Madeira's most dynamic winemaker at [The Big Fortified Tasting](#) earlier this month. He explained that he was absolutely determined to be the first, "having always defended Tinta Negra," just like his grandfather who served it to his guests. So Freitas has fond memories of it and, rather tellingly told me, "what I like most in the grape variety is that no-one likes it, so it's a challenge." To which I might add, what I most like about him is his stubbornness and willingness to take risks and back the underdog!

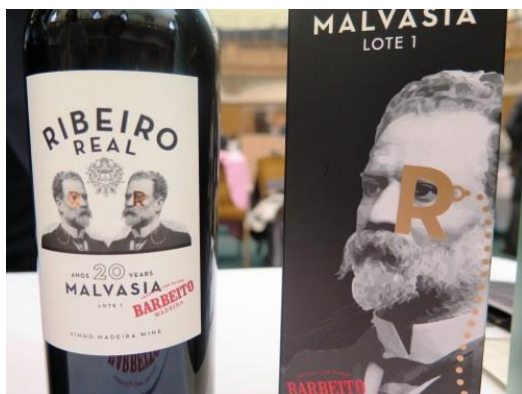
The challenge has involved recovering old techniques and ageing processes, a journey which began with Barbeito 1995 Single Harvest. It was the first Tinta Negra to be aged in canteiro (wooden casks) for decades. Where, he reports, Tinta Negra loses its colour to a surprising degree with age, since around 2007 he has started fermenting it in old school lagares with a modern (robotic) twist. The outcome? It has an "incredible" impact, Freitas says, helping the variety to resist oxidation (and the colour loss which comes with it).

As for the "new" Tinta Nega labelled Madeira, it is a colheita from 1996 – a blend of two barrels sourced from the Favila Vieira family's Ribeiro Real vineyards in Estreito de Câmara de Lobos which, says Freitas, "really complimented one another." Here's my note on it and Freitas' follow up to [Barbeito 20 Year Old Ribeiro Real Verdelho and Boal](#), both of which blew my socks off last year – it's a Malvasia.

Barbeito Ribeiro Real Tinta Negra 1996 Colheita Medium Sweet

Just 900 bottles were made. It reveals characteristics which I readily associate with the variety – orange peel, creamily soft caramel and a slightly malty edge. But what sets it apart from most is its uncommon levity and freshness (a trademark Barbeito quality executed par excellence here). It has lovely length with whiffs of lifted tobacco and struck match, which add both to its complexity and its sense of energy. Very good.

Barbeito Malvasia 20 Years Old Ribeiro Real



I've keenly anticipated this wine after the preceding Verdelho and Boal. I was not disappointed. Far from it. Like the other two, the blend includes 15% of very mature (70+ years old) Tinta Negra from Ribeiro Real. It's very tight on the nose, with lively and lifted hints of struck match and tangy fruit chutney with (acid) bite. Which makes its creaminess in the mouth all the more surprising; for Freitas, this softness (and a whiff of tobacco) betrays the



Sarah Ahmed
THE WINE DETECTIVE
The inside track on Portuguese and Australian wine

SEARCH...



BLOG

MY PORTUGAL GUIDE

MY EVENTS

USEFUL LINKS

Tinta Negra. The Malvasia – a bright, tight, firm “RSJ” beam – steals out from under this soft attack, pushing a super long, bracing, yet sweetly lingering finish. Most definitely refreshes the parts other wines cannot reach – a glorious out and out taste bud tickler. Try it and take yours for a work out!