

Barbeito: Tradition Done Differently

Posted by [Isaac Baker](#) | Posted in [Grape Adventures](#) | Posted on 02-22-2016

During a trip to Madeira ea



During this month, I visited six of the eight producers on this volcanic Portuguese island. During each stop, I tried to conceptualize the producer's individual aesthetic within the context of the larger Madeira puzzle.

D'Oliveiras was the wise elder of the group. H.H. Borges was the precise, focused practitioner. [Barbeito](#) was the skillful fighter, full of excitement.

Barbeito has been around since 1946, but in a land so rich with winemaking history, that actually makes it the youngest producer on the island of Madeira. (A new producer is in the works, but hasn't yet brought any wines to market.) Barbeito is also the most innovative producer on the island, and the firm is offering up a host of options that should entice the next generation of wine-drinkers. Their wines (which total about a quarter-million liters per year) have a common racy appeal and attractive freshness. These wines scream "I'm fortified, but I'm so food friendly!" The colors are lighter, ranging from lemon rind to medium orange, and the labels are playful and bright.

The winery is located way up in the precarious hills above Funchal, a stark contrast from downtown street headquarters of Blandy's, D'Oliveiras and Borges. This facility, opened in 2008, is steely and modern, boasting top-notch equipment like a robotic lúgar (a machine that replicates the old tradition of stomping grapes by foot).

"Here we try to combine tradition with innovation," Leandro Gouveia, Barbeito's wine shop manager, told me during my visit.

Barbeito was the first Madeira house to use the grape variety Tinta Negra on the label. Tinta Negra, a red grape variety, is the most common grape on the island, but until recently the name was not permitted to be listed on the label. This stems from an old (but odd) perception that Tinta Negra is not a noble grape, like the heralded white varieties Sercial, Verdelho, Boal, Malvasia and Terrantez. Tinta Negra is handled just like a white grape, and despite its humble stature, the grape is behind some absolutely stunning wines, as Barbeito demonstrates.

Speaking of red grapes, Barbeito is also reintroducing Bastardo to the market. Yes, this awesomely named grape is a historical treasure in Madeira, but unless it's a bottle from decades (or even centuries) past, you're not likely to come across Bastardo on a label. Barbeito plans to release small amounts of Bastardo to see if it gains traction.

While I applaud Barbeito for trying some different things, the producer's innovation and experimentation is completely relative. Barbeito's efforts must be seen within the context of a tightly regulated wine industry that cherishes tradition above all else. This ain't California. You can't plant any grape anywhere, make a quirky wine and see if people will buy it. To bottle Madeira, one must follow a series of very specific rules over the course of many years. Every bottle of Madeira that goes to market has jumped through lots of hoops.

The Madeira Wine Institute, which regulates Madeira wine's denomination of origin, certifies seemingly every aspect of the grape-growing, winemaking and aging processes. Finished wines are analyzed in a lab to ensure their sugar and acidity levels fall within the approved framework, and a tasting panel approves every wine before it is sold. Sercial is dry and Malvasia is richly sweet — period. You can't bottle a dry Malvasia or a sweet Sercial. This sounds heavy-handed, but Madeira is a uniquely historic wine that is made with unique methods. And the MWI aims to keep it that way.

Rubina Viera, who heads up the Madeira Wine Institute's tasting panel, told me that respecting the special heritage and history of Madeira is crucial to the survival of this wine. "If we sacrifice our history," she said, "we will die."

Barbeito isn't sacrificing anything, but their efforts add a bit more texture to the overall canvas of Madeira wine.

Unfortunately, winemaker Ricardo Freitas wasn't around when I visited. (Levi Dalton recently interviewed [Barbeito winemaker Ricardo Freitas on his podcast, I'll Drink to That](#). If you're interested in Madeira and want a ton of in-depth information on Barbeito, this is an awesome resource.) Leandro Gouveia was an excellent host, however. He poured me a long lineup of Madeira wine to taste and answered my many questions.

First, we tasted some young wines, with the goal of analyzing the primary aromas and flavors. These wines had already been fortified to around 17% alcohol, two degrees below the usual bottling point of 19%. I was stoked to try these young wines because of the light they shine on the varietal characteristics of the grapes and the effect of Madeira's unique aging process.

2015 Sercial (sample)

This is a skin-fermented wine in an "extra dry" style already fortified to about 17% alcohol. Smells salty and steely with bright citrus juice and pith. So bright and insanely salty on the palate (I love it!) along with flavors of green apple, orange peel, raw almond and sea salt. Tart, lively, this gets the whole palate firing.

2015 Tinta Negra (sample)

Very interesting to taste a young example of Tinta Negra, before it fully develops into classic Madeira.

It's a ruby color in the glass. Smells of ruby red grapefruit, juicy raspberries, dusty earth and violets. Tastes strong, powerful, with tart red fruits and sweet floral notes. Reminds me of a sample from a fermenting vat, but stronger. This wine was fortified to 17% once it reached 10% alcohol from natural fermentation.

2010 Tinta Negra (sample)

Interesting contrast to the 2015 Tinta Negra with its golden orange color. After five years of oxidation, this smells of honey, wildflowers, orange peels and almonds. Tart, almost searing, acidity, this is a powerful and demanding wine. All sorts of nuts and dried floral components along with some dried apricot and pineapple elements. Really interesting.

2015 Malvasia (sample)

Awesome to taste a young Malvasia. Smells of so many apples and green flowers. Juicy fruit on the palate, so much tropical and floral elements. A vibrant, juicy wine with lots of sweet complexities. I can see why this is made into a dessert wine.

Below are my notes on the finished wines I tasted with Leandro.

[2004 Barbeito Madeira Tinta Negra Single Harvest Colheita](#) – *Portugal, Madeira*

Light gold color. Smells of orange peel, sea spray and honey. Rushing acidity on the palate, this tangy wine shows lots of richness as well. Interesting flavor profile of yellow and green apples, oranges, bright lemon, along with notes of pecans and sea salt. A vibrant, punchy style but it's also quite elegant. (92 points)

[2001 Barbeito Madeira Malvasia Single Cask](#) – *Portugal, Madeira*

Lovely gold color. Smells of tropical fruits, honey and sweet flowers. Rich and sweet but more tropical (less of the brown sugar and caramel). I get apricot jam, honey, date and lingering salted almond flavors. (88 points)

[1998 Barbeito Madeira Ribeiro Real Tinta Negra Colheita](#) – *Portugal, Madeira*

Orange colored. Smells of honey, orange marmalade and almonds. Bright acid on a richly-textured wine. Honey, almond, zesty orange, a distinctive note of red apple peel. So polished and fresh with a long finish. Complex and very enjoyable. (91 points)

[N.V. Rare Wine Co. \(Vinhos Barbeito\) Madeira Historic Series Mr. Madison's Malmsey](#) –

Portugal, Madeira

Sweet and floral on the nose with brown sugar and orange marmalade. Full, juicy and sweet but stays restrained and vibrant. Oranges, quince paste, honeys and almond amount to a moderately complex wine. (87 points)

[N.V. Rare Wine Co. \(Vinhos Barbeito\) Madeira Historic Series Thomas Jefferson Special Reserve](#) – *Portugal, Madeira*

Smells of orange peels, clovers and a crazily complex blend of nuts. High on the acid, this is a kicking wine, but it's also really rich and nutty. The complexity of the mixed nut flavors is really impressive.

Awesome stuff. A blend of different varieties in a medium-dry style. (91 points)

[N.V. Rare Wine Co. \(Vinhos Barbeito\) Madeira Historic Series Charleston Sercial Special Reserve](#) – *Portugal, Madeira*

Smells of dried nuts, honey and sea salt. Fresh, clean, nutty, well done with a spicy tangerine kick. (89 points)

[N.V. Rare Wine Co. \(Vinhos Barbeito\) Madeira Historic Series Baltimore Rainwater](#) – *Portugal, Madeira*

Fresh, lively aromas with spiced tea and flowers. Full but a fresher approach (18% alcohol). Smooth and easy to drink, but this is also surprisingly complex for this style. (88 points)

[N.V. Rare Wine Co. \(Vinhos Barbeito\) Madeira Historic Series Savannah Verdelho Special Reserve](#) – *Portugal, Madeira*

Orange and golden brown colored. Smooth honey and apricot jam aromas. Full and smooth on the palate, a lovely rich style but fresh acid keeps it together. Apricot, quince paste, honey, mixed nuts, this is seriously good stuff. (90 points)

[N.V. Rare Wine Co. \(Vinhos Barbeito\) Madeira Historic Series Boston Bual Special Reserve](#) – *Portugal, Madeira*

Rich aromatics of sweet brown sugar and pumpkin pie. Full, rich, yet lively and complex. This is one of the ziest Bual's I've tasted. Flavors of clove, brown sugar, figs and dates mix with bright citrus peel and salty notes. My favorite non-vintage Bual of the trip. (92 points)

[1992 Barbeito Madeira Sercial Frasqueira](#) – *Portugal, Madeira*

Salty aromas with dried orange and lemon pith. Tart and salty on the palate but smooth as well. Full of rocky, mineral notes along with dried nuts and caramel. Dry, tart, complex, very long finish. (93 points)

[1992 Barbeito Madeira Boal Frasqueira](#) – *Portugal, Madeira*

Whoa, holy volatile acidity! Smells of some crazy varnished wood, white tea, and orange marmalade. Spicy and tangy, this wine holds the VA well. Very fresh, almost tastes dry for a Bual. I get nutty and coffee notes followed by polished wood, baked pear, cinnamon spice. The finish is long and complex. Amazing how Madeira can turn make volatile acidity seem so damn attractive. (92 points)

[N.V. Rare Wine Co. \(Vinhos Barbeito\) Madeira Historic Series New York Malmsey Special Reserve](#) – *Portugal, Madeira*

Smells of polished wood and tart orange, some baked pear and sweet squash with cinnamon. Full of brown sugar and sweetness on the palate but this is still very balanced and maintains a salty tang on the finish. (90 points)



Note: The Ribeiro Reals are blended with 15% Tinta Negra from the 19th Century.

[N.V. Barbeito Madeira Sercial Ribeiro Real 20 Years Old](#) – *Portugal, Madeira*

Light orange color. Smells like sea spray, cut floral stems and raw almonds. Tart, crunchy and crusty on the palate, yet so complex. Tingling mineral notes mix with sliced orange, sweet tea, oyster shell and sea salt. A gorgeous Sercial. (94 points)

[N.V. Barbeito Madeira Verdelho Ribeiro Real 20 Years Old](#) – *Portugal, Madeira*

So floral and spicy on the nose, with clove, potpourri and sea spray. Sweet floral palate with rocking acidity, so pure and elegant but gorgeous richness. This is such a balanced wine with a pure beam of oceanic goodness that crashes over the yellow plum and mixed nut flavors. (94 points)

[N.V. Barbeito Madeira Boal Ribeiro Real 20 Years Old](#) – *Portugal, Madeira*

Smells like wood varnish and tart oranges. Rich and full but stays quite bright, too. I get yellow plums, baked apples and sweet floral tea. This doesn't strike my palate as much as the Sercial and Verdelho Ribeiro Reals, but it's still an impressive effort. (90 points)

[N.V. Barbeito Madeira Malvasia Ribeiro Real 20 Years Old](#) – *Portugal, Madeira*

Interesting golden color for a Malvasia (this golden color is a theme with Barbeito, it seems). I get cigar smoke, baked apple and wood varnish on the nose. Tastes like sweet candied tropical fruits but it's refreshing. I also get cognac-like elements and some polished wood. Lovely freshness for a Malvasia. (91 points)

[N.V. Barbeito Madeira Malvazia 20 Years Old](#) – *Portugal, Madeira*

Sweet aromas but pleasantly bitter as well with complex spice and orange rind. Stays fresh despite the richness. Dried apricot, candied orange, pine sap, layered spice and anise cookie flavors. Complex and layered with lots of intrigue. Whoa. (94 points)

[N.V. Barbeito Madeira Malvazia "Mãe Manuela"](#) – *Portugal, Madeira*

What an absolutely gorgeous wine. Props to Ricardo Freitas for putting this wine together to honor his mother – it's an amazing tribute. Smells of sweet clove, complex almond and pecan, baked