

OLD WORLD OLD SCHOOL

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TUESDAY, FEBRUARY 1, 2011

Intriguingly sweet stuff from Barbeito



I bet that I could count on one hand the amount of times sweet wines (not demi-sec or Spatlesen, but full on sweet wines) have received their due here. There's a very good reason for that: most sweet wines (dessert wines, if you must) just don't interest me. Too heavy, too much sweetness, not enough acidity, not enough bottle or barrel aged intrigue to balance out the flavor profile and encourage another sip. Following are examples of sweet wines which generally fit into this category for me:

- Ruby port
- White port
- Tawny port
- Late bottled vintage (LBV) port
- Vintage port (young, middle aged and 50ish years old - older than that I cannot say)
- Pedro Ximenez
- Sauternes
- Muscat de Beaume de venise
- Banyuls
- Rasteau vin doux naturel
- Australian "stickies"

German Riesling BA's would be an exception, as would good Eiswein and TBA, but given my little tasting experience with them as well as their high prices, I would say that these wines

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reside in a sort of sweet wine limbo. Oh, and I should mention that good examples of the terrific Hungarian dessert wines, Tokaji Aszu, would absolutely be welcome at my table.

What about great Madeira, though? Somehow, against all odds (southerly latitude, fortification to 19-20%, popularity amongst rich, silver haired, late 18th-19th c Americans) these are arguably amongst the most intriguing of sweet wines. How could this be? Well, the simple answer would be terrific balancing acidity, even for the sweet Malvasia wines. A more complete explanation could be found in the wine I am sipping (perhaps more honestly, downing, given that I'm considering a third small glass of it this evening), the Barbeito/Rare Wine Company New York Malmsey.

Barbeito's Ricardo Freitas, as far as I'm concerned, is a winemaking genius. Surely the peculiar terroir of the island of Madeira is contributing something, here, but terroir and estufagem (slow heat exposure method critical to the creation of Madeira) can only give you so much. Having tasted some other blended, non-vintage Madeira, none are as complex, classy, and acid driven as those of Barbeito. Currently I'm drinking the sweetest of Rare Wine Company and Barbeito's Historic series blended Madeiras, the New York Malmsey. Containing wine as old as 50 years, there is little here to suggest a wine this old, the flavors are so vibrant. Sure, the wine is initially cola sweet. Pay attention, though, and there is a wonderful spicy quality, old wood aromas and flavors, and a truly bright, candied orange peel character to the finish. This tastes traditional and authentic, if I may be so bold as to say so (and if you will indulge me the right to describe wines I already know to be this way).

I'm about to pour one more (small) glass. Right about now I should stop....

POSTED BY JOE MANEKIN AT 2/01/2011 06:00:00 AM