

Barbeito

A Family's Enduring Passion for an Ancient Wine

Of the hundreds of families who've produced and shipped Madeira over the past two centuries, only four remain: Blandy, Borges, D'Oliveira and Barbeito.

The first three of these are proud survivors from the nineteenth century—their legacy insured by having stockpiled old vintages during the Phylloxera epidemic of the the 1870s.

The Barbeitos, on the other hand, entered the business much later, in 1946. Yet, their accomplishment is nearly as great, given not only the number of firms that have since vanished, but the fact that they entered the business during a particularly dark time for Madeira.

During World War II, production and sales had ground to a virtual halt. The U.S. market disappeared because of a government ban on poorly made Portuguese glass bottles. And for six years, marauding U-boats made it nearly impossible to ship wine to Madeira's most important market, the United Kingdom.

LOOKING AHEAD

As a result, far more companies were leaving the business than were joining. But Mario Barbeito had faith in the future. He also believed—just as Charles Blandy, H.M. Borges and João D'Oliveira had done decades earlier—that the value of great Madeira could only go up as it became older and production of young vintages declined. And so, a former accountant for Borges, Barbeito went around the island buying substantial stocks of priceless old vintages from important families.

But while Barbeito saw those vintage wines as a nest egg for the future, he was content to let the wines age. He wisely built the business in the early years around more modest Madeiras.



Barrels of Madeira at Barbeito in the 1950s.

It was left to his daughter Manuela—when she gradually took over the business from him in the 1970s—to begin selling her father's priceless old vintages.

Thanks to her efforts, now-famous Barbeito wines like 1795 Terrantez, 1834 and 1875 Malvasia, and 1863 Bual began to make regular appearances at auction in London. This built a lasting reputation for the Barbeito name among Madeira collectors.

RICARDO FREITAS

In the early 1990s, Manuela Barbeito began to turn over the reins of the company to her son Ricardo Freitas. Armed with a history degree from the University of Lisbon, Ricardo not only brought a deep respect for Madeira's classical roots, he also brought new energy and new ideas to the company. One of these ideas was to restore the role that Madeira once had as a companion to food.

Ricardo also joined with The Rare Wine Co. to create our pioneering Historic Series Madeiras, which have pumped enormous new vitality into the once-vibrant American Madeira market.

Of course, Ricardo is continuing his grandfather's and mother's legacy of sourcing great old wines, and preserving them for future generations. But he is also creating his own legacy: a series of Madeiras he calls his "Signature" wines.

These handcrafted wines combine the best elements of Madeira's classical tradition with Ricardo's own quest for purity and vineyard and varietal expression. Made in tiny lots, their astonishingly graceful style has prompted British wine critic Jancis Robinson to call Barbeito the "Lafite of Madeira."

RICARDO FREITAS SIGNATURE MADEIRAS

HANDCRAFTED MADEIRAS FROM THE ISLAND'S NEW STAR

Over the past two decades, The Rare Wine Co. has almost single-handedly restored America's deep affinity for Madeira, and one of our closest partners has been the young managing director and winemaker of Vinhos Barbeito, Ricardo Freitas.

We began working with Ricardo about 15 years ago, while he was still in his twenties. And so we've had the privilege to watch him emerge as the young star of Madeira.

HIS GRANDFATHER'S INFLUENCE

Ricardo grew up surrounded by the magical old vintages that his grandfather and founder of the firm, Mario Barbeito, collected and sold. This background, plus Ricardo's skill as a winemaker, made him the perfect partner for our Historic Series project: a series of traditionally styled Madeiras that have become the most widely admired, and best-selling, fine Madeiras in the United States.

But while helping to make the Historic Series a reality, Ricardo has been engaged in his own labor of love, his **Signature Madeiras**. These pioneering Single-Harvest and Single-Cask Madeiras have created a sensation in Europe. (UK journalist Jancis Robinson recently wrote that the "delicately vivid" style of these wines may make Barbeito "the Lafite of Madeira.")

It is with a great deal of pleasure that we introduce these extraordinary limited-production wines to America.

GROUNDBREAKING WINES

While The Rare Wine Co. Historic Series pays homage to the great Vintage wines of the 19th and early 20th centuries, Ricardo sees his Single-Harvests and Single-Casks as launching a new epoch in Madeira's long history. These wines—made just a barrel or two at a time—take on the island's establishment, destroying several shibboleths in the process.

For example, Ricardo is demonstrating that the island's long-abused workhorse grape, Tinta Negra Mole, is capable of producing transcendent wine on its own, without blending with any of the more

At right, Ricardo in the cellar of the Afonso family, one of his favorite growers in Cama dos Lobos.



famous "noble" varieties. While other producers mute the expressiveness of this grape through estufa-heating and the use of caramel, Ricardo uses no caramel and ages only with the gentle canteiro method (which exposes the wine to no direct heat). The result has been pure Tinta Negra Mole wines of rare grace.

PURITY REVEALED

Ricardo has also demonstrated that selected single barrels of young Madeiras, if carefully made and aged by the canteiro method, can be a marvelous drink even at a young age. While the bottling of single barrels would be conventional in other regions of the world, in Madeira it is considered odd for anything other than a vintage wine to be bottled without blending. In a recent interview, he said that other producers "thought we were crazy, until they saw how well the wines were received."

With his marvelous 1997 Single Harvest wine, he dusted off the notion of the single-vineyard Madeira, allowing a wine to express a unique terroir. Such wines have rarely been made throughout Madeira's history and have been nearly unheard-of in recent decades.

Finally, Ricardo took the unusual step of combining noble varieties in a fixed proportion, with his VB (Verdelho-Boal) blend. The wine has been a huge success, and is now nearing the end of its warmly received second release.

A NOTE ON QUANTITIES

Ricardo's methods result in small quantities, usually about 100 cases per release. With typically three to four new releases per year, these are some of the most compelling wines being made on Madeira today, but also among the scarcest.

“*Barbeito ... could be regarded as the Lafite of Madeira ...*”
Jancis Robinson