

BARBEITO MADEIRA

You can reach for the stars if you climb the Cabo Girao at 589 metres above sea level. Alternatively you can taste vinous stars if you call Sergio^[1] to take you up a little higher to the **Vinhos Barbeito** winery. There you can learn about the insanely complex process of turning underripe wines (from grapes most of the world ignores) into wonderfully complex and engaging fortified stars that you would have to be a fool to ignore. There is clearly method to the madness, though, as **Barbeito** produce our favourite Madeiras with the most personality-charged house style of any quality Madeira you are likely to encounter.



On the drive up the mountain above Camara de Lobos you get an idea how bonkers the geography of the inhabited parts of Madeira are. Wherever a house can be squeezed onto the vertiginous slopes there is one. Everywhere else there are innumerable tiny terraces: bananas at low levels and grapes higher up. It is this height of the vineyards, together with Madeira's

perpetually mild but windy climate that is responsible for the unripeness of the base wines.

I was rather surprised when our charming host, Leandro Gouveia, told us the minimum potential alcohol they would accept from their network of 130 farmers was 9%, with an average of 11% and a peak of 13%. It would be a pretty dodgy negociant in Burgundy who would accept 9% potential alcohol grapes at harvest. Things are different

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By David Strange
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here.

When the grapes are brought in by **Barbeito**'s contract farmers they are crushed and de-stemmed, before putting into pneumatic presses for a gentle squeeze. Some have varying degrees of skin contact and this, I feel, adds a lot to the house style. The wines are then fermented in stainless steel vats until they reach an appropriate level of residual sugar, another determinant of house style, before fortifying them with 96% alcohol. **Barbeito** produce 170,000 litres of Madeira each year.

This house style was discernible in the 2014 fortified but as yet un-madeirised base wines we tried. You may be aware that, traditionally, wines made from the Sericial grapes are dry, Verdelho grapes medium-dry, Bual medium-sweet and Malvisia/Malmsey sweet. This is true at **Barbeito**, but extremes are not sought. The Sericial has some sweetness and the Malvisia not extremely sweet. Considering what I am about to say next, I feel a bit odd saying the base wines formed a continuum of moderation.

Moderation my arse! Yes, there are no excesses of sweetness or dryness, but **Barbeito** make wines of coruscating acidity and, thanks in part to the skin contact, epically sapid astringency. Even at the base wine stage, that we tried in the VIP tasting room, the wines burn with a star-bright personality of thrilling individuality. They are Madeiras for people who revel in the joys of difference.



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This brilliantly compelling house style was clearly present in two base wines at the extremes of Madeiran popularity. There is almost no Bastardo grown on Madeira but **Barbeito** are trying to re-establish this almost extinct varietal. Tasting the base wine that had some skin contact showed it would fit into the house style very well: fruity, with currants and berries, but astringent with grip and bite.



At the other extreme of Madeira acreage is Tinta Negra Mole, which all serious Madeira lovers are taught to loathe and despise as it makes the vast majority of wines from the island; undated filth that is pumped out for scum who want a glass off Madeira at bedtime. Leandro showed us a Tinta Negra Mole base wine that was as pink as the Bastardo and also just as full of the fruity, acidic, lively characters. As a lover of Brachetto, if I ever retire to Madeira I will

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be growing these grapes and **not** be getting a seal of approval from the Madeira Wine Institute for my effervescent little charmers.

The process of making Madeira involves taking these fruity, charming fortified wines and putting them in places of varying degrees of warmth and letting them slowly concentrate in ancient wooden barrels that warp and twist due to the heat. This is a picture of the main **Barbeito** warehouse, they have 3, it has a zinc roof to trap extra warmth from the sun.



The conventional logic is that the stuff you are going to sell as young wine to people who do not care goes at the warm top of the warehouses and gets baked whilst the classy stuff lives at the cooler bottom of the warehouses and is matured more gracefully. At this point I did wonder if there really was method to the madness as **Barbeito**-grandson likes to experiment with putting barrels of

every quality at any height and so they get highly variable heat exposure. How this affects the character presumably only he and his second-in-command-winemaker know, as the blended Madeiras that **Barbeito** produce have some whacked-out constituents.

Some of these casks are blended into *average age* blends. Some are bottles as single cask *colheitas* and some will be left for many years to be blended into a single-varietal, single-vintage *frasqueiras*. All this may lead you to think that making Madeira is somewhat of an arcane art.

You would be right. I am frankly surprised that a recognisable house style emerges from all these various types of jiggery-pokery – but it does and that house style is one of the most compelling and delicious you will find from this island of twisted and crazy wines. The thing about Barbeito wines is that they are alive. You may try a 20 year old or a 200 year old wine from a more bland producer, but all that means is one has been dead longer than the other – the appreciation of Barbeito wines is the polar opposite of such necrophilia.



The wines with a given age are the ultimate expression of the blender's art. Like all **Barbeito** Madeiras they are made in very small batches so there is very little chance you will be able to try the exact same wines that we tried: the 40-year-old we tried, for example, had a small proportion of Mr Barbeito's 1880 wine from his private collection, that had been matured in demijohns, in it. There is no way I can tell you where to buy that wine! However, these wines show off the skill of the blender with ever more involute complexity and concentration the more your credit card smokes. Even at the *average* age of the 40-year-old blend they have that spritely, sweet, savoury, sour, sapid house style. 10-and 20-year-old bottles provide incredible bargains with increasing aged complexity overlaid by the personality of the producer.

I feel the real excitement is in the single-harvest *colheitas*. These are never amazingly old (we purchased a 2003), but they shine with the effulgent personality of a single plot of vines vinified and matured separately with the quality of the house style shining through. These wines are not expensive given the time and effort that goes into growing, making and maturing these wines. Moreover, they are the Madeiras which come closest, in this other-worldly style of wine, to a more conventional single-vintage, single-vineyard wine you would buy from anywhere other than this unique island.

Fraqueiras are incredibly rare and provide fascinating insights into how the particular grape varieties have aged since that vintage in the crazy Madeira maturation conditions. Delicious, wonderful, profound but, alas, rare and expensive. The few times I have seen them for sale I simply did not have enough money to buy the importer's minimum of six bottles; if I were not diabetic and so require food on a regular basis I would happily go without food for weeks if it meant I could be drinking these as I reduced.

Barbeito Madeiras are stunning examples of the island's wines, and qualify as **must**

buy items when you see them for sale. Readers in London should feel particularly lucky as the house Madeira of Fortnum and Mason is a **Barbeito** *colheita*. Visitors to Town are strongly advised to drop by to pick up a bottle or two!

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[1] Sergio, the **Barbeito**-favoured taxi driver, can be called on the number +351 919912420 ↩

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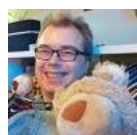
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Keith L. wrote:

Great read. I drink more Barbeito than any other Madeira mostly on account of the great blends they make for the Rare Wine Co label. Did you get a chance to try any of those or is it just a U.S. thing?

Mar 25, 2015 at 03:29



David Strange wrote:

Hi Keith,

We tried several blends: 10, 20 and 40 year olds, but what relation they have to the Rare Wine Company I cannot say. They were certainly fantastic, even the 10 year olds had amazing personality and class – we got one with our extremely limited funds!

Mar 25, 2015 at 05:22



Keith L. wrote:

Different line. I don't know if you can get any of these in the UK, but keep an eye out!

<http://www.rarewineco.com/rare-wine-co-historic-series-madeira/>

Mar 26, 2015 at 04:27

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