



## Madeira: Bringing it all back home with Archie McDiarmid

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Published: 20 August, 2018

Barbeito Madeira run the hugely successful #MadeiraDay competition in December each year, bringing together independent retailers from all over the UK in celebration of this outstanding fortified wine. Luvians won the 2017 edition and after being presented with our certificate at the Big Fortified Tasting earlier this year, I got the chance to fly out to the island (this Portuguese colony lies some 280 miles off the coast of Africa) to get a personal perspective on how this bewitching wine is made.

Like most of the wineries on the island these days, Barbeito is situated just outside the main city of Funchal, up in the hills that define Madeira (the tallest peak, Pico Ruivo, is also Portugal's tallest mountain). Barbeito enjoys a spectacular view of the Atlantic as it looks down up on the Cape Girão cliffs.

Founded in 1946 by Mario Barbeito and now run by his grandson Ricardo Diogo Vasconcelos de Freitas, Barbeito is a fantastic mix of tradition and modernity, with old wooden barrels laid out in the traditional canteiro system, many sealed with ribbon and wax by the Madeira Wine Institute, sitting alongside custom built stainless steel, steam jacketed estufas (essentially giant kettles).

Both canteiros and estufas do the same job, heating the wine to caramelise its sugars, creating the unique roasted, nutty, almost marmalade flavours that were so beloved of early explorers, the fathers of the US revolution and 20th century icons like Ernest Hemmingway and Winston Churchill.

The only difference is that what takes the wooden barrels and hot humid warehouses of the canteiro system many years, takes the estufas take just three months. As a result most young (three and five year old) Madeiras will start their lives in estufas, while older wines (10 and 20 year old and vintages) will spend their whole lives in the canteiro.

Easy access to the winery is hugely important during harvest as Barbeito, like most producers on the island, owns only a small percentage of the vines they need, relying instead on a network of small growers, the largest bringing in grapes by the truck, the smallest just a few baskets at a time.

These growers are often operating from tiny plots, perched on terraces that are stunning from a distance, but utterly terrifying up close. More than once I walked to the end of a row to be greeted by a sheer drop of hundreds of feet just a few paces further on. I don't know if pickers on the island get danger money, but they certainly deserve it.

It is all pickers incidentally, the terrain making mechanisation impossible, so every grape on the island picked by hand. All this manual labour, the long maturation and complex process of making and blending the wine explains why entry-level Madeira can be relatively expensive when compared to other fortified wines like port or sherry. But I'd argue that Madeira is a significantly more

nuanced and drinkable wine when young and as it ages the price is falls into line very quickly with its contemporaries, delivering huge length and depth of flavour.

Trying a multitude of styles from almost bone-dry vintage Sercial to deeply sweet and sticky young 'Island Rich' Madeira also proved it could be a wine for all occasions. A bottle of the Island Dry evaporated over the course of an evening, the perfect partner to jamon and smoked almonds, while a 1981 Vintage Verdehlo lingered so long at the back of my tongue I couldn't help but buy a bottle to bring home.

## Keywords:

- wine
- Fortified
- Independent
- merchants
- Madeira
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- Lucians
- Barbeito
- MadeiraDay
- canteiros
- estufas

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