



## Sarah Ahmed THE WINE DETECTIVE

The inside track on Portuguese and Australian wine

### Barbeito Madeira – innovative Bastardo, Ribeiro Real Tinta Negra & skin contact Sercial

**Sarah Ahmed** (<http://thewinedetective.co.uk/blog/barbeito-madeira-innovative-bastardo-ribeiro-real-tinta-negra-skin-contact-sercial>)

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*In full flow – Ricardo Diogo V Freitas of Barbeito*

What is Madeira before it becomes ready to be bottled? Alchemist Ricardo Diogo V Freitas of **Barbeito** determined to show us what lies behind the gold at this fascinating masterclass at the **Big Fortified Tasting**.

A theme which allowed him to share with us his plans for the future, which incorporate reviving Madeira made from the (red) Bastardo grape and continuing to elevate another red grape – Tinta Negra – the island's most planted variety.

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## Tinta Negra



*Rarely tasted cask samples*

Tinta Negra is the island's most populous noble grape, representing around 80% of plantings. Unlike the best-known Madeira grapes – Sercial, Verdelho, Boal and Malvasia – it is not only red, but has been made in every style of sweetness.

Until 2015, Madeira's regulations did not allow this stalwart of 3, 5 & 10 year old Madeiras to appear on front labels. Even when producers – Ricardo Diogo being the first – started making canteiro (cask-aged) premium colheita or single harvest Madeiras from Tinta Negra. (Barbeito 1995 Single Harvest was the first Tinta Negra to be aged in canteiro for decades).

Since 2015, when the grape that dare not speak its name has appeared on labels, it has seen something of a reversal of fortune. Barbeito was also first to put Tinta Negra on a label. [Barbeito Ribeiro Real Tinta Negra 1996 Colheita Medium Sweet](#), a two barrel blend, was sourced from the Favila Vieira family's Ribeiro Real vineyards in Estreito de Câmara de Lobos. The same source that has contributed an aged (15%) Tinta Negra component to Ricardo Diogo's stunning [Ribeiro Real Boal](#), [Verdelho](#) and Malvasia. As you can see from my tasting notes below, this master blender has now gone the whole hog, producing a Ribeiro Real Tinta Negra.

Since Barbeito's seminal 1995 Tinta Negra, others have under-scored the quality potential of this variety, notably [Henriques & Henriques, with a terrific 50 Year Old Tinta Negra](#), while Madeira Wine Company have released Leacock's Colheita Tinta Negra 2001 and a rather good vintage Madeira – Leacock's Frasqueira Tinta Negra 1995.

Returning to Ricardo Diogo's theme, what is Tinta Negra Madeira before it becomes ready to be bottled? As you can see, the deep red 2017 looks rather different from the tawny-coloured 20 Year Old Ribeiro Real. According to Ricardo Diogo, Tinta Negra typically loses its colour fast. However, going forward, his aim is to produce more

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structured wines, like the examples made 150 years ago and the wines he recalls his grandfather served to guests, *“so they must have been good.”* To that end, he has turned to old fashioned methods – foot treading the wines in lagares (originally – since 2007 – mechanically, recently, by human foot) then basket pressing the pomace to extract more colour, flavour and tannin.

### Barbeito Tinta Negra cask sample 2017



*Cask sample left, 20 Years Old wine right*

This single vineyard cask sample comes from an early-picked 2,500kg batch of Tinta Negra from the north west coast – São Vicente, which means that the grapes have the high acidity – a signature note of Barbeito Madeiras. The grapes were foot trodden in stainless steel temperature controlled lagares for 1.5 hours, then fermented for four days on skins and stems prior to the addition of spirit. The free run was decanted and the solids/pomace pressed in a basket press to recreate the old method, when the pomace would have been encircled by a rope and squeezed to extract more flavoursome, structured ‘press wine.’ Deep red, this fortified cask sample has a sweetness and raw blackberry and apple sappiness to the nose and palate. It is fresh and there is some tannin but, aside from the colour, it’s difficult at this stage to imagine its likely ageing potential. The wine will go into cask in the near future and its transformation into Madeira as we know it will accelerate as it evaporates and concentrates over time (plus Ricardo Diogo has already blended some with 2007 and 2009 mechanically trodden Tinta Negra). Of course, Ricardo Diogo can compare it with previous wines and told us foot treading makes *“much more powerful and structured wines.”* Elaborating, he told us that when you press direct (pneumatic bag press) without stems and without foot treading, the wine is much paler and the oxidation process starts much earlier – *“you can feel the oxidation on the palate after the third year and see the loss of colour.”* On the other hand, earlier examples trodden mechanically in lagares *“take at least 5 years to show oxidation of flavour and several years to show a marked loss of colour.”*



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### Barbeito Ribeiro Real Medium Sweet Tinta Negra 20 Years Old Madeira



*Barbeito Ribeiro Real Tinta Negra 20 Year Old Madeira, Barbeito Avo Maria Bastardo 50 Years Old Madeira*

Barbeito's Ribeiro Real range are probably my favourite Madeiras from his range. Which is interesting, because this is the range in which he started to showcase a (15%) splash of top notch Tinta Negra, blending it into Barbeito Ribeiro Real 20 Year Old Boal, Barbeito Ribeiro Real 20 Year Old Verdelho and Barbeito Ribeiro Real 20 Year Old Malvasia, the latter of which was in scintillating form when I showed it at a masterclass for Dutch importer Horizon Wine last month. Barbeito Ribeiro Real Tinta Negra is the only 20 Year Old example on the market. Explaining that such wines are classified by character and quality alone (and not by the average age of the blending components), there is no minimum age for blending material. This wine includes around 20% Tinta Negra from 2007 "for tannin and structure [high acidity]," which was trodden in mechanical lagares. It is the youngest component, whereas the oldest is from Ribeiro Real's highly concentrated (some +300g/l residual sugar) Tinta Negra from the 1950s. Ribeiro Real 20 Year Old Tinta Negra has very good acidity and tannin, with some pink grapefruit peel on the attack, a hint of green walnut, lip-smacking, spicy, chutney fruit and the rounder, barley sugar and malty characters so typical of this grape on the back palate. Thanks to the younger wine, it has a brightness and spark. Ricardo Diogo's masterful blend absolutely achieves his aim of combining the higher acidity of a young wine fermented for longer on stems and skins with "the real character of Tinta Negra." For him, making more structured young wines will enhance the reputation of Tinta Negra going forward and improve its longevity. Given the variety's preponderance, it is a worthy goal for the island now he is "absolutely sure it is now

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*possible to have good Tinta Negra – I can sell everything.”* Residual sugar 81.5 g/l,  
Total acidity: 8.88

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### Sercial

Madeira's high acidity is its calling card. Trump card for Sercial so, I must confess, I felt a little chary about tasting a 2017 cask sample!

#### Barbeito Sercial cask sample Madeira 2017



*Cask sample left, 1988 Sercial right*

Like the young Tinta Negra, this cask sample signposts a future direction for Madeira. It hails from a seven year old organic vineyard and, I must say, it has lovely purity and intensity to its applely fruit. This, its bone dryness and smoky, flinty note typifies the grape. Whilst much top Sercial comes from higher vineyards in the island's cooler, wetter north, this comes from a coastal vineyard in Câmara de Lobos in the south-east of the island. It's a slightly deeper colour than you might expect which, Ricardo Diogo points out, is down to skin contact. He ferments on skins for higher acidity and structure and, it follows, more resistance to oxidation to slow down the ageing process which, Ricardo Diogo adds, can sometimes be too fast – *“it's important to slow it down and allow the wine to integrate in cask.”* This batch comprised just 800kg of fruit which was foot trodden in a (de-capitated) 1000l plastic drum for 30 minutes. The solid parts were basket pressed and the press juice blended with the free run.



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### Barbeito Frasqueira Sercial 1988 Eugénio Fernandes Madeira



*Barbeito Frasqueira Sercial 1988 Eugénio Fernandes Madeira*

This is the first wine from a project started last year which pays tribute to the late Manuel Eugénio Fernandes. A leading grape grower and winemaker- the north coast's biggest for Sercial and Verdelho – he was a long-term supplier to Barbeito (also Blandys and Henriques & Henriques). Eugénio Fernandes visited Ricardo Diogo's grandfather, then mother, every Wednesday for lunch, providing young Ricardo Diogo with an invaluable insight into Madeira wine. When his mother died, Ricardo Diogo continued the tradition, meeting weekly with his mentor. Sercial from vineyards close to the sea (at 150-200m, as opposed to the more typical, higher sites) sets apart Eugénio Fernandes' strikingly salty, super dry style. In fact, so dry – even for Ricardo Diogo – that this 650 bottle edition is a blend of a Eugénio Fernandes' wine and a Barbeito wine. It is an almost nose-bleedingly intense wine, with brisk, bracing acidity (TA of 11.28, residual sugar, 38g/l), sea salt piquancy, smoked almonds, bitter lemon and iodine; a lick of nutty caramel keeps the acid the right side of searing! But it leaves an indelible mark. Super dry, super long.

### Bastardo

In recent years, Tinta Negra has had a makeover and Terrantez, a rare white grape, has seen a revival of interest with fresh plantings and thrilling releases. "Everyone is

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*planting Terrantez” said Ricardo Diogo, “so I planted Bastardo, which has almost exited the island.” Blandy’s have no more of the 1969, he pointed out, which was the youngest-known example – no-one, he said, has been making wine from it since, “though there were reasonable quantities in the 19<sup>th</sup> & 20<sup>th</sup> centuries.”*

In 2004, Ricardo Diogo planted his first vineyard of the variety, which yielded less than 400kg in 2007 – its first crop. He may well have had an insight into its swift exit in 2008, when he harvested zero Bastardo. However, since 2009 he has produced wines every year.

Given its demise, there was a dearth of information about how to grow the grape or make wine from Bastardo, although like fellow red grape Tinta Negra, it can be made in any style (vis a vis sweetness). When he realised that the very thin skinned, high acid grape was starting to rot when he picked it at the ‘regular’ time, resulting in volatile acidity in the wines, he started picking Bastardo earlier (at around 9 baume). Initially, he pressed the grapes directly in a pneumatic press (i.e. with no foot treading), but has now gone down the same route as the Tinta Negra to prevent the wines developing far too quickly (after one year looking like a three year old wine).

Barbeito Bastardo Madeira cask sample 2016



*Cask sample left, 50 Years Old right*

Fermented in decapitated (open) plastic drums on stems in 500kg batches. The grapes were foot-trodden for 20-30 minutes over three days, then fortified. It is a very pale, light ruby hue with a garnet rim and a gris note. The nose is grapey, with some spirit. Beneath, you find some spicy, peppery tannin and soft strawberry and sweet plum fruit. In three years, said Ricardo Diogo, the colour will be completely gone.

**Barbeito Avo Maria Bastardo 50 Years Old Madeira**

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Given Bastardo's near exit from Madeira, well might you wonder how Ricardo Diogo came up with a 50 Years Old example. The answer lies in the latitude which this age indication category gives to the blender. As I have learned from playing around with Tawny Ports on the blending bench, a soupcon of really old wine can make a huge difference to the complexity of a blend and one's perception of its age. In this case, the winemaker's relationship with the Ribeiro Real family has paid dividends again. The oldest component of this blend is a demi-john of Ribeiro Real 1870 Bastardo which, admits Ricardo Diogo, "*was nothing special*" so, I guess, why not elevate it through blending? Then a 2.2% component of trusty old 1950s Ribeiro Real Tinta Negra has evidently worked its magic since, said Ricardo Diogo, the main basis of this Madeira is very substantially younger material – "*the 2007 and 2009 Bastardos...for a kick of acidity.*" The component parts were blended two to three years ago and just one lot – 550 bottles – was bottled for this medium sweet wine. For Ricardo Diogo, medium dry and medium sweet styles enhance the variety's acidity. Where, he says "*Bastardo is very delicate and soft,*" he is convinced in future it will be very interesting and has in mind to make a younger wine with the 2009 and 2007 as its basis. I missed some of the energy and verve which I enjoy about Barbeito's wines in this 50 Year Old Bastardo and, a mite dusty, I missed some of the clarity too. What I do like about it is a spiciness which, being edgier, struck me as varietal and not just wood-derived. But my interpretation perhaps reflects my lack of experience of the grape as a fortified wine. If I think about Conceito Bastardo – the Douro (unfortified) wine, it is pale and delicate, quite soft, albeit picked early for freshness. It's not a powerhouse. I suspect I'll prefer a younger example, but let me hold my judgment pending more experience! One to review, but hats off to Ricardo Diogo who, relishing a challenge, told us he loves it when winemakers and people you work with question what you do. (Total Acidity: 8.74, residual sugar: 87 g/l)