

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.

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 market for Madeira.

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."



Barrels of Madeira at Barbeito in the 1950s.