



Daniel Niepoort (c) Anna Stöcher



Fortified Wine conference

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Lech am Arlberg, Austria*

Port and Madeira wines share a rich history and have been economic mainstays of their respective regions. But while much has remained the same across the centuries, for example the same grape varieties in Madeira and the process of making Port, the categories have also evolved in exciting ways and are being discovered by a new generation of consumers.



Export sweetener

The development of the category was intertwined with English and American trade right from the start. Port was fortified from the 18th century to survive the shipping from Portugal to England, where the sweeter taste found favour with consumers. While the Madeira business was dominated by the English, as Ricardo Freitas from Barbeito noted, the product became known as the 'Wine of the Americans', with statistics from US historians suggesting that close to 75% of all wine drunk in the second half of the 18th century was Madeira.

Geography played an important role in the development of Madeira, which first produced wine in 1418, as it was the last point of call for all ships crossing the Atlantic and any empty spaces were filled with casks of wine. "This helped a lot to improve the business," Freitas said.



Ricardo Freitas (c) Anna Stöcher

Evolution of trade

However much has changed in both the Barbeito and Niepoort businesses over the last 30 to 40 years, in part reflecting the evolution of consumer preferences. Daniel Niepoort noted that the general trend for Port wine consumption is declining a bit, hence the company and Daniel's father, Dirk Niepoort, have focused on making

premium table wines. Unlike Madeira and Port wines which require a lot of time, the production and sale of table wines is quicker – thereby helping with cashflow and to finance future stock. Niepoort is also doing more in-house such as making Port wine rather than buying it in and being involved in ageing and blending as it did in the past.

"Port is a bit weird because it can be very extracted and heavy and a bit of a monster but at the same time light and elegant"

- Daniel Niepoort



Daniel Niepoort (c) Anna Stöcher

A new elegance

Sommelier Amanda Wassmer-Bulgin noted the significance of Barbeito's decisions, under Freitas' leadership, to stop producing bulk wine (a decade before other Madeira producers) and halt the addition of caramel. Freitas acknowledged that these big changes were sometimes done without his mother's knowledge...He spent more than five years trying to convince her to stop adding caramel and when it eventually occurred in 2001, she did not know it had happened.

"We can't be afraid to change things while respecting all the traditions"

- Ricardo Freitas

Freitas has also focused on building up inventories to face the future with confidence despite the protestations of his financial director. He has 1.2 million litres despite only selling 180,000 litres a year. He also moved into still wines in 2017 – not to cover lower fortified sales but to prove something to other Madeira producers. In any case, Freitas says in the last 15 years, he has been able to keep fortified sales stable and that annual sales fluctuations are "very small". And his focus on quality means that Madeira generally has enjoyed a moment of glory over the last five years. Developing a new lighter style of Madeira, which he describes as elegant and pure, has helped win younger fans. The average age of consumers is now around 40, at least 20 years younger than the average age previously.



Amanda Wassmer-Bulgin moderated the Conference (c) Anna Stöcher

Like Freitas, Niepoort is focusing on Port styles that start sweet and finish dry. And while vintage Port remains the 'King of Ports' for Daniel Niepoort, he names Colheita as worthy of the position of President! Niepoort is a great believer in this style, which

ages well in bottle, giving it an elegant, balanced character. Niepoort, a family business since 1842, has also reprised its Party Port at Daniel's urging, bottling 1,500 magnums and in the future he would also like to do a special Colheita with a late release.



Wassmer-Bulgin posed a question about how the next generation will be able to understand the foundations of Port wine if they can't afford to try those before the year 2000. However, Niepoort is optimistic about that, saying that people are drinking less than in the past, but "more wisely". He acknowledges however that it would maybe be good to have more stock because once it is sold, it is no longer available for blending. Freitas reiterated the importance of inventory control over short term sales, saying how important it is to look 20 years ahead in Madeira as it is possible to kill the future with short term thinking.

As to where premium Madeira is being sold now, Freitas singles out top restaurants and Michelin-starred establishments as underpinning his steady sales. Belgium is one of his best markets, he says, with open-minded sommeliers who aren't afraid to use the wines with food. Lech too has his wines available in one of its best restaurants.

"I said next year we have to sell 20% less than this year...sales results are important but inventory control is the most important."

- Ricardo Freitas



Madeira



Barbeito warehouse (c) Miguel Perestrel

Labour challenges

Ricardo says he tries not to stress about business too much now and to work for today while keeping an eye on the future. He cites his "revolutionary" ageing warehouse with colder temperatures than is traditional that caused him eight years of anxiety before he knew if it would work. Cooler temperatures suit his wines better, keeping a good balance between acidity and sugar.

Moving to the politics of the Madeira and Port wine sectors, the panel discussed the benefits and negatives of the beneficio system, which regulates the production of grapes for Port wine. Niepoort believes it is due for a bit of reform as the system was created a long time ago. He was ambivalent about the level of stock that Port shippers are required to hold in reserve, citing its unfairness and a barrier to entry on the one hand, but on the other, that it did encourage Port houses to age wine. Freitas said he completely agreed that Madeira producers should have stock of at least 75,000 litres and he opposed the reduction from 130,000.

When it comes to Madeira however, he believes the biggest challenges lie in the vineyards rather than in sales. There is a lack of people to work and the new generation of owners are not interested in doing that task themselves. Barbeito has even created its own small 'fireman' team of three to five people to help plug the labour shortage for its farmers. Urban construction is also posing a threat to vineyard land in some areas.



(c) Quinta do Crasto

Wassmer-Bulgin observed that the concept of sustainability often focuses on herbicides rather than people. Niepoort agreed that organic and sustainable was important but that the “treasure” in the Douro region was the old vineyards and older people because the younger people, he believes, have lost a little bit of the will to work. He would like to have a ‘fireman’ team like Freitas but says at present Niepoort does not even have enough people to work its own vineyards.

*“It’s heartbreaking when nobody wants to continue with a 120-year-old vineyard that’s been perfectly treated because the next generation says ‘F*ck that, I want to go and be an Instagrammer.’”*

- Daniel Niepoort



Daniel Niepoort, Amanda Wassmer-Bulgin and Ricardo Freitas (c) Anna Stöcher

The question of why terroir is not discussed as much as the name of the producer on the restaurant floor was another topic raised by Wassmer-Bulgin. Freitas believes it can, and should, be discussed and cited his recent release of two wines from the same grape variety from two different single vineyards as a motivator for having that very discussion. Niepoort believes it can be a complicated issue when it comes to Port wine because most of the time it comes not from a single terroir but is a blend from different areas.

The production of Port and other fortified wines continues to be driven by a focus on quality and tradition dating back hundreds of years. Yet at the same time, it is a category that has adapted to changing times and consumer tastes through innovation and living in the moment. In the words of Ricardo Freitas when he was asked whether acidity was the new luxury rather than sweetness when it comes to taste: “I think balance is the luxury”. He may well have been speaking for the entire industry – and its future.

LINKS TO MORE INFORMATION:

DANIEL NIEPOORT: NIEPOORT.PT

RICARDO FREITAS: VINHOSBARBEITO.COM

AMANDA WASSMER-BULGIN: AMANDABULGIN.COM

HOTEL KRONE VON LECH: KRONELECH.AT