

LITTLE ITALY

Growers in Brazil's leading fine wine region, Vale dos Vinhedos, are doing their immigrant forefathers proud, finds **ANTHONY ROSE**

MEET THE CARRAROS, the Pizzatos, the Valdugas and the Miolos. You've washed down your pasta and polenta with a glass of vino at the Ristorante del Filippi; you've done your shopping at the Centro Comercial Benvenuto. So, are we in Veneto? Trentino? Umbria? Er, no, actually we're in Brazil's southernmost province of Rio Grande do Sul, and within it, the Serra Gaúcha region's Vale dos Vinhedos. In this lush wine valley, located at 29° latitude, echoes of an ancestral Italian past link seamlessly with a modern landscape of bustling country towns, winding roads and wooded hills.

The story begins with several boatloads of Italian immigrants trading the poverty of Trentino and Veneto to take up the Brazilian government's offer of land grants in the 1870s. Bringing their own vines with them, they planted in the lush, verdant hills of a region that wasn't suited to wine production. The resulting wines were largely for their own use and it took another 50 years before the formation of a number of cooperatives at a time of severe economic crisis laid the foundations of a modern wine industry – of sorts.

Among them were the Garibaldi and Aurora co-ops, both established in 1931.

One of the biggest producers of wine in Brazil today, Aurora's 16 families pooled their resources to set up the cooperative in the town of Bento Gonçalves, whose high buildings and church spires overlook the Vale dos Vinhedos from afar.

Aurora today is an association of 1,100 growers and their families, producing some 50 million kilogrammes of grapes from 3,300ha (hectares) and exporting their wines to eight countries. More than two-thirds of Aurora's production is still from *Vitis labrusca* varieties (good for juice and table grapes), but it is starting to produce a raft of creditable *Vitis vinifera* reds and whites and a light, medium-sweet Moscato d'Asti lookalike from Moscato Bianco and Giallo.

LIMITED YIELDS

In the early days of Brazil's young wine industry, few families focused on growing wine grapes. Instead, they favoured hybrid table grapes. These proved better adapted to a sub-tropical climate with rainfall of 1,800mm a year – hence the need for frequent spraying against mildew and rot. This legacy is so endemic, that even today, Brazil's 10,000ha of *Vitis vinifera* grapes make up just 11% of the country's 88,000ha of vineyards.

Following the arrival in the 1970s of multinationals such as Martini & Rossi, Moët, Seagram and National Distillers, small grape growers started to invest in making and marketing their own wines. By the mid-1990s, a group of growers got together in Vale dos Vinhedos with the aim of making wines from Merlot, the grape found to be best suited to the valley's climate, along with Cabernet Sauvignon, Cabernet Franc, Chardonnay, Tannat and Pinot Noir. The result is a yield-limiting indication of origin system called IPVV, with some 350ha of premium varieties produced in the valley.



ABOVE: Miolo, Brazil's third-largest wine producer, has come a long way since Giuseppe Miolo bought the Lote 43 vineyard 112 years ago

Giuseppe Miolo, arriving as an immigrant in 1897, went to Bento Gonçalves and exchanged his savings for a piece of land, Lote 43, in Vale dos Vinhedos, where he started to plant grapes. By the 1970s, his grandsons, Darcy, Antonio and Paulo, were planting premium varieties, and in 1989 they started to make and bottle their own wine at their Tuscan-inspired winery. Some \$40 million was invested in new vines planted using vertical wire trellising instead of the traditional horizontal pergola system. Yields were reduced, the cellar modernised and consultant Michel Rolland brought on board. At Estância Fortaleza do Seival near the border with Uruguay, Miolo has successfully planted Touriga Nacional,

Alfrocheiro and Tinta Roriz for its succulent Quinta do Seival Castas Portuguesas.

WORKS IN PROGRESS

'Ten years ago, viticulture was asleep,' says Patricia Carraro. 'The mentality was based purely on quantity'. From five generations of working the vineyards and making wine, the Lidio Carraro family is typical of the way a new generation has adapted to quality. Until 1998, they sold grapes, making wine only for themselves. They then planted a mix of Bordeaux varieties with Tannat, Tempranillo, Nebbiolo, Teroldego, Pinot Noir and Chardonnay over 37ha, using a higher density of 4,500 vines per hectare for their flagship range. The vineyards are sub-divided into plots, the grapes vinified separately by winemaker Monica Rosseti, who eschews oak.

Beyond the Vale dos Vinhedos, regions such as Pinto Bandejas and Encruzilhada do Sul are emerging. Many of the wines

JOIN THE PARTY: By Dirceu Vianna Jr MW

Brazil often brings to mind samba, beautiful beaches, carnaval, Pelé and caipirinhas. You could be forgiven for failing to mention the words 'Brazil' and 'wine' in the same sentence, but Brazil is one of the top 20 largest wine-producing countries in the world and is the third most important wine producer in South America.

Although overall wine quality varies, a small group of quality-conscious producers are making wines worthy of international recognition.

For that small band of consumers looking for something interesting and new, Brazilian wines can offer the novelty factor, accompanied by an image of a fun, happy culture.

Moreover, the wines tend to be restrained, elegant and leaning

towards a European style of wine, with moderate alcohol levels.

The industry is still in its infancy, but Brazilian sparkling wines have already earned a reputation overseas for quality. Knowledgeable consumers looking for good-quality sparkling wines as a less-expensive alternative to Champagne may be pleasantly surprised. Additionally, many producers in Vale dos Vinhedos are banking on Merlot as their flagship grape, with encouraging results.

Brazilian wines offer good value and the finer examples would sit well in any Michelin-starred restaurant. The party has just begun.

Brazil's first Master of Wine, Dirceu Vianna Jr is a buyer for Coe Vintners

remain a work in progress, but in place of the alcohol and oak power of so many South American counterparts, the reds, based on Bordeaux and southwest French varieties, are more moderate, less oak-dominated and fresher. Whites are more hit and miss, with the odd excellent Chardonnay, but sparkling wines made either *à la* Moscato d'Asti, or more complex,

lees-aged Champagne-method types have a good future. But as serious production is less than a decade old, it will take a while before quality Brazilian wine competes for our attention with the usual suspects of football, carnival and beaches. **D**

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