

TASTING CORNER



The Next South American Entry: *Wines from Brazil*

By Ed McCarthy

If you know your ABCs of South American wine, you definitely know the A and C, but what about the B? We have plenty of wine from Argentina and Chile in the U.S., but wines from Brazil have been difficult to find in most of our local markets, except South Florida—always a great market for South American wines. I'm sure that many readers don't even know that wine is made in Brazil. But that is about to change, as Brazilian wine producers have decided to concentrate on the huge markets of the U.S. and Canada.

I recently traveled to Brazil's main wine region (Rio Grande do Sul), with an obligatory stop in Rio de Janeiro, and learned some interesting information about this huge country. Brazil is actually the fifth-largest producer of wine in the Southern Hemisphere, after Argentina, Australia, South Africa and Chile; it's even larger than New Zealand, whose wines are now so popular in the U.S.

When it comes to wine production, Brazil has been seriously under-performing—perhaps because only small parts of the country, mainly in the south, have suitable climate for growing wine grapes. Brazil has the fifth-largest population in the world, with nearly 200 million people, and is the world's fifth-largest country in area—almost the size of the U.S. Brazil now has a thriving middle class, and interest in wine has been developing there within the last two decades.

Brazil Finds Its Niche in the Wine Market

Rio Grande do Sul has a temperate climate, with four distinct seasons. Rain and even snowfall in winter; in summer, the temperature is mainly in the 80s (F°), ideal for grape growing. But there was no market for wine in Brazil in the last century, traditionally not a big wine-drinking country. And the Brazilian government has not helped, still taxing Brazilian wine sales today in its own country as high as 50%. Fortunately, the taxation does not apply to exports, and so we can find Brazilian wines at reasonable prices in the U.S.

Most of the wineries in Rio Grande do Sul began in the late 1980s and early 1990s; they were founded by third- and fourth-generation members of the original Italian immigrant families. One huge Cooperative, **Cooperativa Vinicola Aurora** (simply known as Aurora), and two large wineries, **Salton** and **Miolo**, dominate the domestic and export market, although at least 18 wineries are now exporting their wines around the world. The largest import markets for Brazilian wines are

the United States, Germany, Switzerland, the Czech Republic and Holland, with Canada and Singapore rapidly growing.

The Brazilian wine region in Rio Grande do Sul centers around the thriving town of Bento Gonçalves—really a city of 100,000 people, with its inhabitants enjoying the second-highest per capita income rate in all of Brazil. During my visit, I visited eight wineries and tasted wines from another eight. Many of the wineries and vineyards are located in the appropriately named Vale dos Vinhedos, making it easy for a visitor to travel from one winery to the other.

My first surprise during the visit was that just about every winery makes sparkling wines as well as still wines, and that these wines generally are of very good quality. Three types of sparkling wines exist in Brazil: wines made by Methode Champenoise, (aka Traditional Method); Charmat (bulk method sparkling wine); and Asti-style Moscato, made with the Muscat variety—and generally quite exceptional, by the way. I discovered that Brazilians drink lots of sparkling wine, especially the less-expensive Charmat

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■ MIOLO FAMILY VINEYARDS, VALE DOS VINHEDOS (BRAZIL)

CUVÉE GIUSEPPE, 2004 (\$12): Miolo's wines are among the best being produced in Brazil today. Its 2004 Cuvée Giuseppe, a blend of 60% Cabernet Sauvignon and 40% Merlot, is an amazingly high-quality wine for this price. The Merlot in the blend softens the wine enough to make it drinkable now.

■ MIOLO FAMILY VINEYARDS, VALE DOS VINHEDOS (BRAZIL)

LOT 43, 2005 (\$31): Miolo's finest red wine, Lot 43, is a blend of its choicest Cabernet Sauvignon and Merlot grapes from its Lot 43 vineyard. This is definitely one of the finest red wines I've tasted from South America during the past year, with intense varietal character and concentration, and a long finish. Compared to Chile's premium wines in the \$60 to \$80 range, Miolo's Lot 43 is an excellent value.

■ SALTON FAMILY RESERVE, BENTO GONÇALVES (BRAZIL)

VOLPI TALENTO 2005 (\$13): Salton's Volpi Talento, a blend of 60% Cabernet Sauvignon, 30% Merlot and 10% Tannat, is a fine blended wine, with a great balance of acidity, tannin, and fruit. Aged in French oak, it is still quite young, and should age nicely for several years; terrific value.

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sparklers and Moscatos. The market in the U.S. for Brazilian sparkling wines is certainly limited right now, although these wines have had some success in the Miami area. Miolo brings in at least one sparkling brut into the U.S., made from Chardonnay and Pinot Noir.

Familiar with European Varietals a Marketing Boon

Brazil's fine table wines are primarily made from the same European varieties that we are familiar with: Cabernet Sauvignon and Merlot are the big players among the red wines, Chardonnay the main white variety. What I particularly liked, however, was the huge range of varieties that are being utilized in Brazilian wines. For example, Tannat, a fairly obscure red variety from southwest France, is thriving in Brazil and neighboring Uruguay. In France, Tannat lives up to its name; it is a very dark-colored, very tannic, astringent variety that is used mainly as part of a blended wine. Brazilian *terroir*, however, has tamed the harsh Tannat quite a bit; it tastes fruitier, and is fine as a straight Brazilian varietal wine—although it is usually blended in with Cabernet Sauvignon and Merlot.

In addition to Tannat, probably the two red Brazilian varietal wines that I enjoyed the most were Cabernet Franc and Teroldego. Generally, I found that those wineries which produced Cabernet Franc wines, such as Casa Valduga, often did better with this variety than any other. Casa Valduga's Cabernet Franc, for example, was intensely flavored, with great structure. Probably because Cabernet Franc needs less time to ripen than other varieties (such as Cabernet Sauvignon) the mountainous Brazilian wine region is a plus.

Teroldego is the principal red variety in the Trento region of Italy's Trentino-Alto Adige region, and a few Brazilian wineries produce it as a varietal wine. I loved every Brazilian Teroldego that I tasted; just like Tannat, Brazil's version of Teroldego is less tannic with more appealing fruit than the more austere Italian Teroldego wines.



TWO INTERESTING FACTS ABOUT

brazilian wines

1

90% of its wines are produced in Rio Grande do Sul, the southernmost state, bordering Uruguay (which also produces wine).

2

Just about every winery, at least in Rio Grande do Sul, was founded by Italian immigrants,

almost all of whom arrived in Brazil between 1875 and 1900.

And, in fact, just about all of these families came from only two regions in Northern Italy, the Veneto and Trentino. The immigrants, chiefly poor farmers, lured by the prospect of buying their own land at low prices, settled in the mountains around the town of Bento Gonçalves, and planted grapes as well as grains, exactly what they had been doing in Italy.

Other red Brazilian varietal wines that I tasted included Tempranillo (good), Pinot Noir (just okay), Syrah/Shiraz, Barbera, Gamay, Malbec, Ancellota (an obscure Italian variety from Emilia-Romagna and Switzerland), Marselan (a new Mediterranean French variety made from crossing Cabernet Sauvignon with Grenache), and Nebbiolo (just one, from Lidio Carraro Winery, and quite good, with true Nebbiolo character).

Most Brazilian wineries make far more red wines than white (with just a little rosé), but some of the white wines I tasted were very good. In general, its Chardonnays are competent, but not spectacular. I preferred its Sauvignon Blancs (I don't think that Brazil's climate is cool enough for outstanding Chardonnays or Pinot Noirs). I did enjoy Miolo's Pinot Grigio and Viognier, and Casa Valduga's Gewürztraminer was particularly fine.

Most of the wineries whose wines I tasted do export their wines into the U.S., but often in limited markets. For example, one small winery told me its wines are only in Colorado. The two Brazilian wineries which have the broadest distribution in the U.S. are two of the largest and the best: Salton and Miolo. Salton, which produces 20 million bottles a year, is Brazil's largest privately owned winery. Look for Salton's Family Reserve wines, especially its "Volpi" line. Miolo, which has a magnificent new winery, produces seven million bottles a year. I found all of Miolo's wines first-rate.

Three other wineries that impressed me: Casa Valduga (run by the three Valduga brothers, who rate an "A" for their warm Italian-style hospitality); Lidio Carraro, a rather amazing, smaller winery which ages all of its wines in stainless steel tanks—not an oak barrel in sight—and whose wines are of a very high caliber; and Aurora, whose Aurora brand wines all indeed impressive. Other Brazilian wineries to look for include Pizzato, Panceri, Luiz Argenta, Perini, Courmayeur and Don Laurindo.

Brazilian wine exports have increased 127% since last year, admittedly from a miniscule base. I visited Brazil with limited expectations; I returned impressed. I found the wines to be generally well-made, interesting and well-priced. ■