
A Brazilian Success Story: from Grape Farmers to Fine Wine Producers

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The municipality of Monte Belo do Sul, 121 kilometers away from the capital Porto Alegre, in the state of Rio Grande do Sul, is located in southern Brazil in a region favorable to production of noble varieties of grapes such as riesling, chardonnay and pinot noir.

It offers quality land and favorable weather for planting grapes. Despite this potential, the work of farmers, up until 2002, was limited to planting and selling grapes.

"We were unable to do anything else, because we did not have the technology and no one knew how to manage another type of business," says farmer Antoninho Calza.

Knowing that they could expand their business, Calza and 12 other wine producers sought assistance from organizations in order to add value to the activity. The Brazilian Micro and Small Business Support Service (Sebrae) and the Brazilian Agricultural Research Corporation (Embrapa) were the first choices.

In the national context, the farmers received support from the Sebrae Technological Consultancy Program (Sebraetec), which grants micro and small companies access to knowledge produced by science-, technology- and innovation-oriented institutions, by means of subsidies to the costs of the consultancy services.

In the regional context, they participated in 'Juntos para Competir' (Together to Compete), a program promoted by the Sebrae, the Federation of Agriculture of the State of Rio Grande do Sul (Farsul) and the National Service of Rural Education in the State of Rio Grande do Sul (Senar-RS), which articulates the production chains.

"Embrapa was the technological link in this process. Through all of these initiatives, we have established even closer ties with these wineries. I would say that it was a very successful wedding, because the know how of the two organizations was maximized in order to meet the demands of the farmers," says the supervisor for communication and business at Embrapa in the municipality of Bento Gonçalves, Alexandre Hoffmann.

From then on, the producers took a quality leap and now count on support from other organizations. Grapes are no longer only a raw material for third parties, and now they manufacture wine and sparkling wine. An even bolder step in this partnership started out two years ago, with integrated, no residue production in order to increase the appeal to consumers. By means of training in good agricultural and managerial practices, they want to expand their market even further.

"As other organizations have joined this project, the result of work by the managing board is yielding increasingly good results. Sebrae operates in different fields, and the partnership with Embrapa stands out for the structure for research," claims the manager of the Sebrae vitiviniculture project in Caxias do Sul, Janine Lisboa.

The wineries in the project have a combined area of 2,500 hectares of grapevines, 35% of which are of noble varieties. The farmers pride themselves in being the leading per capita producers in Latin America, with approximately 16,800 kilograms per inhabitant, an output that should grow even more with the implementation of a production unit with capacity for 600,000 bottles. Part of the funding for the work was provided by the Studies and Projects Funding Body (Finep).

"In 2005, we were producing 5,800 liters of sparkling wine, and now we are making 80,000 liters for the domestic market. Our initial wine output was 15,000 bottles, and now it is 120,000. With technical support from Embrapa and the Sebrae courses on how to manage a business, as well as business roundtables, we have made a big leap. We have gone from grape farmers to businessmen," says Antoninho Calza.

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