

## From slash and burn to winemaking: the historical trajectory of Italian *colonos* in the uplands of Rio Grande do Sul, Brazil

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This contribution discusses the early years of Italian immigration in the uplands of southern Brazil, known as the Serra Gaucha (1875–1915). Tracing back early agrarian practices and deforestation techniques of the early settlement years, we investigate the consolidation of this human group in the southernmost Brazilian state of Rio Grande do Sul. In addition, analysing the development of both wood logging and winemaking industries in the region, the essay frames the identitarian construction of this social group, looking at the intersection between cultural traditions from the homeland, socio-economic drives and local environmental factors. This analysis builds upon primary sources from both Brazilian and Italian institutions, local newspapers, and scholarly publications on environmental history, as well as Brazilian and Italian migration history.

**Keywords:** Italian *gringos*; colonisation; *Serra Gaucha*; logging; winemaking.

### Introduction

Between 1875 and 1914, about 100,000 Italian immigrants reached the southern state of Rio Grande do Sul. They came mainly from the northern regions of Veneto, Lombardia, Trentino and Friuli.<sup>1</sup> The immigration of thousands of Italians to Brazil was part of a wider large-scale migratory exodus, which began in the second half of the 1870s and involved almost one-and-a-half million people (Sanfilippo 2009, 83). This was the result of the combination of several political and economic factors. First, the agrarian crisis (1873–9) investing Europe as American grains began to invade the market. This led to a steep fall in the price of Italian grains – by 28 per cent until 1888 – jeopardising the livelihoods of several rural communities. Moreover the opening up of both external and internal customs barriers affected other key productive sectors such as rice and cotton (Ciocca and Toniolo 1999). This added to a national demographic increase caused by improved sanitary conditions, creating a landless workforce that the country's fragmented national industrialisation policies were incapable of assimilating (Golini and Amato 2009, 48–51; De Clementi 2009, 191–4). These national issues, united to liberal migratory policies, fuelled the beginning of this massive Italian diaspora.<sup>2</sup> They were also complemented, in the regions where interest in immigration to Brazil was at its strongest, by a steady demographic growth that exacerbated issues of land occupation, generating a large number of healthy and unemployed individuals. While seasonal migrations to the Austro-Hungarian empire were not abolished in post-unitary Italy, permanent immigration to Brazil also became a viable option for a large number of farmers looking for a

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better future. This also allowed these agrarian communities to maintain the traditional status of farming autonomy that the emergence of rural capitalism had progressively corroded.<sup>3</sup>

Several Italian immigrants who took this leap into the faraway lands of Brazil were forced to toil in the coffee plantations of São Paulo and Minas Gerais, a practice that became regarded as ‘camouflaged slavery’ (Lazzari 1980, 15; Trento 2009, 7–11). However, those who were destined for the state of Rio Grande do Sul ended up playing a central role in what is commonly regarded as the ‘colonisation’ of the region (*colonização*). This process was functional to the expansion of the country’s socio-ecological frontier, imposing new regimes of territoriality to ‘empty’ regions mainly inhabited by indigenous people. In addition, drawing on the eugenic theories of the time, Brazilian elites aimed at modifying the ethnic profile of the local population, thus whitening the Brazilian race (Iotti 2010, 156–86; Iotti 2017).<sup>4</sup> This political agenda found confirmation after the creation of the Brazilian Republic (1899), with the formulation of the decree n° 528, published on 28 June 1890. This law essentially granted free legal entry and legal protection to all individuals willingly to develop ‘agrarian properties’, except indigenous people and immigrants from Asia and Africa (Republica dos Estados Unidos do Brasil, Decreto n° 528, Junho 28, 1890). In the context of Italian immigration to Rio Grande do Sul, the national government legalised *de facto* the occupation of indigenous lands, pushing them to further penetrate *Alto Uruguai* and *Alto Jacuí*, an upland area between the rivers Uruguay and Jacuí, encompassing the states of Rio Grande do Sul and Santa Catarina. Italian immigrants marched for several days along train trails and narrow mountain paths in order to find suitable lands for cultivation (Bernardes 1997, 77).

This article reconstructs the early years of this immigration experience in the uplands of Rio Grande do Sul, looking at the complex cultural and socio-ecological dynamics that led to the successful settlement of this distinctive group that still inhabits the region today. Northern Italian *colonos*, today full-fledged Brazilians, still present a marked regional identity, stemming from the cultural epitome of nineteenth-century Italianness and of the multicultural patchwork of modern Brazil (Giron 1992, 66; Franzina 2008, 278–9). Reinterpreting a rather famous episode of the Italian diaspora that has been widely described by both Italian and Brazilian researchers, this study strikes a balance between national academic studies and primary sources from both Italy and Brazil.<sup>5</sup> Moreover, drawing on the critical tools of environmental history, it looks at the consolidation of this human group in relation to the environmental characteristics of southern Brazil, exploring the challenges that Italian immigrants confronted during the early settlement years.<sup>6</sup> Such an approach allows us to move beyond the rather clichéd image of Italian *colonos* as skilled pioneers able to construct their identity by reproducing their traditions in a foreign environment.<sup>7</sup> As this article demonstrates, the construction of the Italian colonial zone was the result of a complex identitarian journey, where the will to preserve and reproduce traditions from the homeland crucially intermingled with other factors that historical reconstructions have often overlooked. These included harsh climatic and ecological challenges, conflicting relations with local indigenous people, as well as the biological characteristics of a foreign grape species able to adapt to the local ecosystem.

### **On the Serra Gaucha**

Rio Grande do Sul began receiving immigrants after the completion of the first two major waves of German colonisation, initiated with the foundation of the colony of São Leopoldo in 1824, which by the early 1870s had reached about 25,000 people. As the Prussian empire began to restrict immigration to Brazil, Italians became a feasible alternative from the mid-1870s. The first two Italian colonies, *Conde d’Eu* and *Dona Isabel*, today respectively known as Garibaldi and Bento Gonçalves, were established in 1876.

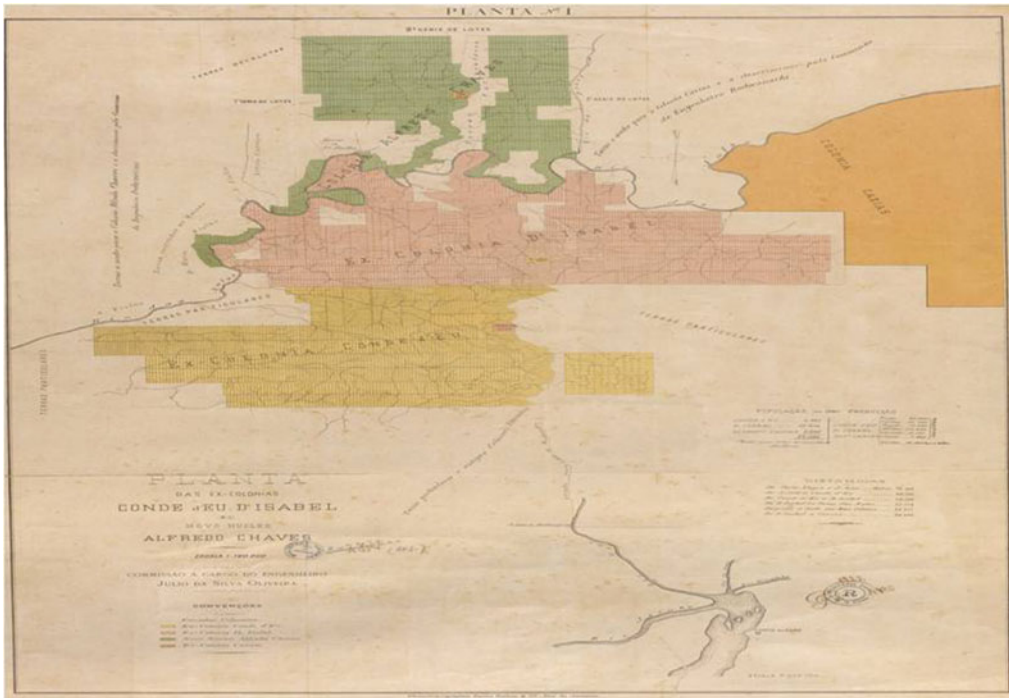


Figure 1. Historical document displaying the first Italian colonies: Conde d'Eu (1870), Dona Isabel (1870), Caxias do Sul do Sul (1875) and Alfredo Chaves (1884). Source: Arquivo Histórico Municipal João Spadari Adami, Caxias do Sul do Sul (BR RS APMCS PM-04-03-11 00-01-P 06c).

However, while the German occupation had been facilitated by the formulation of the so-called *Lei de Terras* (1850) entitling immigrants to lots ranging between 70 to 100 hectares as well as supplies of food, seeds and agricultural tools, for Italians the situation was very different. They were assigned smaller plots measuring between 30 and 60 hectares, which they had to ransom within five years using the revenues of their agricultural yields. This was a rather unrealistic challenge, considering the ecological characteristics of the region: the so-called *Serra Gaucha* was a rugged territory almost entirely covered with forests. While today this region hosts 55 municipalities, early Italian *colonos* had to confront multiple environmental challenges. Nestled between the river *Das Antas* to the north and the German settlements situated at the deltas of the rivers *Taquari* and *Cai*, the Italian colonial zone possessed peculiar environmental and climatic characteristics in the tropical and subtropical environment of Brazil. Although it was situated only about 100 kilometres from the coastal capital city of Porto Alegre, it sat on the high Paraná plateau, a large sedimentary tableland formed of solidified sheets of lava rock (diabase), whose peaks reached a height of 1,200 metres, and stretched for 5,000 sq km along the north-eastern part of Rio Grande do Sul (Falcão Vieira and Salum Rangel 1984, 22). This caused uncommon climatic imbalances, such as harsh snowy winters, heavy rainfalls, hot and dry seasons, as well as dramatic overnight temperature variations (Falcão Vieira 2012, 70–1). Clergyman Don Domenico Munari described climatic imbalances in the region as a daily toil for Italian *colonos*:

Last year, a six-month drought deprived the *colonos* of the awaited harvest, while now, as I write, frosts have appeared for a couple of days in a row, damaging all the harvested beans (note that here it is now

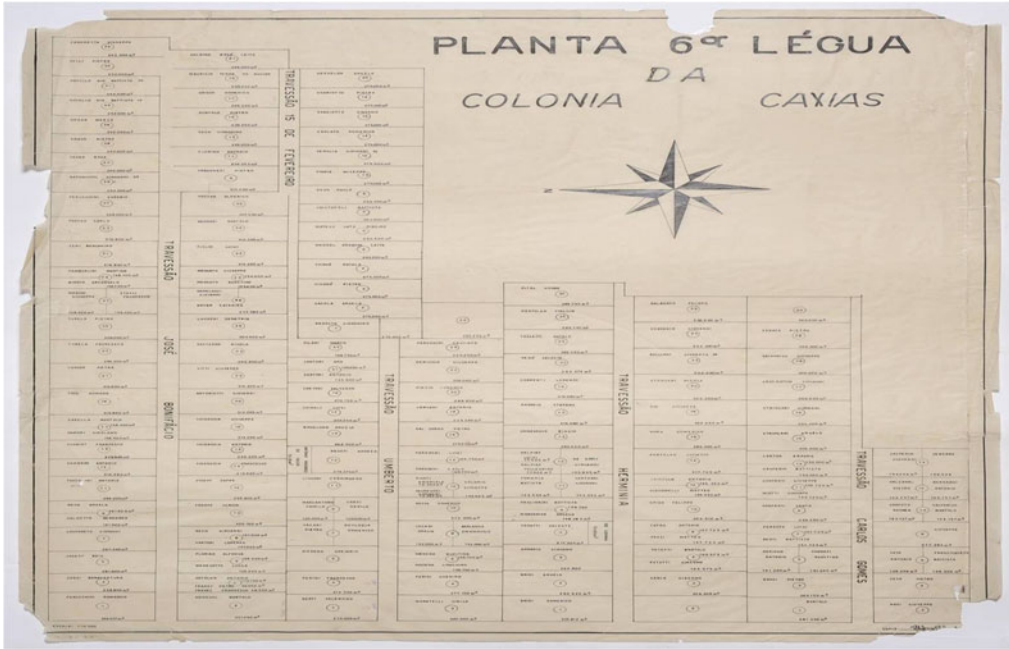


Figure 2. Historical document displaying the patterns of land division in one of the Italian colonies, Caxias do Sul do Sul. Source: Arquivo Histórico Municipal João Spadari Adami, Caxias do Sul do Sul (BR RS APMCS PM-04-03-11 00-01-P 06c).

springtime); the other day, a heavy hailstorm, lasting almost 15 minutes, kept the poor *colonos* in suspense over the future of the sprouting wheat.<sup>8</sup>

These factors, combined with the poor drainage of local basaltic grounds, increased soil acidity and the risk of erosion, all serious hindrances for agricultural production (Rothwell 1959, 29–33). Additionally, the whole Italian colonial zone was poorly connected by a rudimentary road network that impaired communication with the rest of the state. In a 1883 visit, Italian consul Enrico Perrod described the local road system as ‘horrendous, so bad that in Italy only goats would use it’ (1883, 297). Facing hardship and deprivation, Italian *colonos* looked more like guinea pigs in the Brazilian government’s plan to bring ‘civilisation’ to the region, than a lucky group of individuals reaching the promised land.

Perhaps their main challenge lay in fruitfully interacting with local forests, at the time a real riddle of inter-tropical diversity typical of the Atlantic rainforest biome. Almost every land assigned to Italian *colonos* bordered a forest area, or presented scattered thickets in the middle. These were mainly mixed ombrophilous forests covered with araucaria pine trees (*araucaria angustifolia*), a pioneer species able to grow in the acidic local soils. Pine trees formed a typically mountainous vegetation, intersecting both with other arboreal species characteristic of peaky mountain edges, as well as with shrubs and field species, such as lower *myrtaceae* specimens, Spanish mosses (*tillandsia usneoides*) and beard grasses (*andropogon lateralis*) (Boldrini 2009, 42; Rambo 1994, 313). This geographically fragmented bioregion was at the core of the local ecosystem, where fractured plains intermingled with smooth wavy peaks gently crossed by river flows, a combination observable up to the plateau’s highest peaks, which reached 1,200 metres above sea level. While German immigrants regarded this dense woodland area as an obstacle to agricultural

development, Italians had no choice but to progressively occupy the densest forest areas and to devise ways to make a living by exploiting the local natural resources (Bublitz and Correa 2006, 2).

Before Italians occupied the region, local *Kaingang* and *Xokleng* indigenous communities had inhabited the territory for millennia, developing a lifestyle that relied on hunter-gathering and slash and burn agriculture (Zarth 2012, 57). While this system had contained the impact of human activities, the peopling plan launched by the national government completely neglected the presence of local indigenous groups, regarding them as a hindrance to progress (Dornelles 2009, 2). Although Italian *colonos* harshly confronted and persecuted local indigenous tribes, during the first settling period they also relied on slash and burn agricultural techniques, clearing and fertilising the forest with fire and rotating crops.<sup>9</sup> This resulted in a diversified regime of familiar agriculture, alternating typical Brazilian and Italian crops: these included wheat, rice, corn, tobacco, potatoes, oranges, sugar cane, manioc roots and beans (ANRJ, *Ministerio da Agricultura, Comércio e Obras Públicas* 1877, 445). Different crops were also associated with animal species, creating a fragmented policulture: forage was normally synonymous with cows and the production of milk and dairy products; similarly, corn production was linked to chickens and pigs, guaranteeing supply of eggs, pork, ham and lard (Bunse 1978, 24). In an 1884 letter to his father, Italian immigrant Paulo Rossatto meticulously described these agricultural techniques:

Cutting the wood, or the forest if you prefer, is done in the following way: first, you need a long sickle in order to cut reeds and small shrubs ... Then, we cut all the biggest trees. After the cut, we leave them there for about one month, after which we burn them. We first incinerate the reeds and the thinnest branches. Smaller trunks and twigs are piled up and burned ... After that, we sow wheat plants between the trunks, covering it with a hoe, and it grows without needing further work.<sup>10</sup>

However, while indigenous communities witnessed the simultaneous appropriation of their traditional knowledge and the progressive dissolution of their lifestyle, Italians struggled to push their yields beyond subsistence levels (Zarth 2012, 58). Although their difficulties were certainly also caused by the environmental characteristics of the territory, local institutions and the press also blamed the lack of preparation of Italian farmers.<sup>11</sup> According to the local newspaper *O Caxiense*, the reason for these problems had to be attributed to the lack of experience of Italian *colonos*, former pieceworkers who did not possess sufficient skills to improve agricultural revenues (AHMJSA, y. 1 n. 2, 1897). The alleged lack of agricultural skill among Italian immigrants was also confirmed by the specialised columns run by another local newspaper, *La Libertà*, between 1909 and 1910. These were entitled 'Notions of Modern Agriculture' and 'The Colonos' Section', and contained basic rules of agricultural production for local inhabitants (AHMJSA, y. 1 n. 1–5). If piecework farmers encountered problems in profiting from local farming activities, subsistence agriculture was also the choice in the areas inhabited by Italian manufacturers attempting to reproduce their practices in the new colonies. While in the long run this fostered the industrial development of the Italian colonial zone, it did not favour agricultural development during the early settlement years.<sup>12</sup>

### Forest clearing and environmental hazards

Agricultural issues and the need to increase economic revenues led Italian *colonos* to regard local forests not only as a complement to farming, but as a potential source of income. Native araucaria pine trees constituted a perfect resource for the establishment of a thriving logging business. Adult local species measured an average of about 80 centimetres in diameter and could reach 30 metres in



Figure 3. The colony of Caxias do Sul at the beginning of the Italian colonisation, entirely composed of wooden houses, with araucaria pine trees in the background showing evident signs of logging activities. Source: AHMJS, Coleção Família Darsie.

height, although figures could be even higher for specimens reaching their full potential. As one of the most ancient species characterising the Brazilian flora, it had survived through different geological epochs, enduring drastic climate variations, marine incursions and retractions, as well as massive extinctions (Koch and Correa 2002, 10). Given these sturdy characteristics, local trees could be considered as high quality timber and were utilisable for a large variety of products such as ships, house rafters and furniture (Leão 2000, 173). Soon local forests became the core of a thriving lumber industry. Logging constituted a rather stable source of income, also guaranteeing enough raw material for the construction of houses and for fuel supply. While the most valuable trees were sold as building material, less valuable specimens were adopted to fertilise local fields. A census from the 1920s reported the presence of 1,207 sawmills in Brazil, 365 of which were in the state of Rio Grande do Sul. Naturally, a large part of these were located in the Italian colonial zone, where forest logging constituted a thriving business (Carvalho 2006, 118).

The industrial potential of local timber and the establishment of sawmill businesses constituted a further incentive to the colonisation of the region. The monthly newspaper *Il Colono Italiano* often advertised land plots with pine trees. In some cases, these were even sold to Italian colonisers together with small sawmills and watermills.

*Il Colono Italiano* also frequently published advertisements for manufactured goods made with local timber. As an example, in 1914, it advertised a local sawmill, offering the purchase of treated timber for construction (in Portuguese *madeiras de lei*) together with a small LANZ locomotive, that was described as ideal for the transportation of woods and tools (MUSCAP, *Il colono italiano*

**MOLINO, SEGHERIA**  
 e DUE COLONIE  
**IN VENDITA**

Giuseppe Antoniuti vende una  
**SEGHERIA** nuova mossa a  
 acqua, ed un eccelente **MOLI-**  
**NO** pure a acqua, con due colo-  
 nie situate in *S. MARCOS DE*  
*CIMA DA SERRA*, a due chilo-  
 metri di distanza dal paese.

Nelle colonie v'è casa di abi-  
 tazione con tutte le comodità,  
**POTREIRO** buonissimo, vigna-  
 to e molto **PINHAL**.

Per trattare rivolgersi al proprietario  
**IN S. MARCOS**

Figure 4. Advertisement for a land plot with a sawmill and a watermill Source: MUSCAP, *Il Colono Italiano*, 1912, y. 4, n. 13, p. 3.

y. 6 n. 38, 1914). The great market value of local timbers increased deforestation in the Italian colonial zone, jeopardising several native species that complemented local phyto-physiognomies. This determined a drastic reduction of araucaria forests. In 1850, before the Italian colonisation, the forest area covering in Rio Grande do Sul amounted to 36 per cent of the state's total surface, and deforestation processes had only encroached on 5 per cent of the territory. About 30 years later, cleared lands amounted to 5.8 per cent of the overall territorial surface, while local forests had diminished to 30.7 per cent. By 1914, the first figure had doubled to 11.5 per cent, while only 25 per cent of forest areas remained in the whole state of Rio Grande do Sul (Roche 1969, 53). Today, in the old Italian colonial zone the native araucaria forest has been dramatically reduced, covering only 2–4 per cent, of the total territory, while pristine wildlife areas have almost completely disappeared (Simões and Lino 2002, 85–102). Whilst forest areas progressively disappeared, sawmills generated profits for the local economy, becoming a distinctive familiar activity in the region. By 1882 there were already nine in the sole colony of Caxias do Sul, and by 1909 they had skyrocketed to 50. Revenues from logging activities constituted one of the major profits for the Italian colonial zone, together with mills and stills (Stormowski 2005, 58–64). Sawmills also supplied raw material for other key productive sectors such as milling and the rising viticulture. Economic and demographic growth went hand in hand. After the Italian immigration, the population of Rio Grande do Sul had increased from 446,962 in 1872 to 1,149,070 in 1900. In this context, the Italian colonial zone registered one of the highest increase rates in the colony, with the emancipation of several municipalities between 1890 and 1900.

Towards the beginning of the twentieth century, the clearing of local forests for polyculture and wood extraction, combined with enhanced demographic pressures, began to put a strain on the hydrogeological balance of the territory (La Salvia and Handschunch 1974, 8). Slash and burn

**Table 1.** Population rate in the main municipalities of the Italian colonial zone between 1890 and 1990. The few municipalities reported in 1890 experienced a demographic decrease, as several colonies were emancipated by 1900. Source: IBGE 1890 and 1900.

Municipality	Population in 1890	Population in 1900
Alfredo Chaves (Veranópolis)	N/A	19,952
Antonio Prado	N/A	8,331
Bento Gonçalves	27,276	17,920
Caxias do Sul do Sul	18,506	24,997
Garibaldi	N/A	12,178
Lagoa Vermelha	17,641	12,511
Vacaria	N/A	17,208
Total	63,423	113.097

agriculture could not accommodate the needs of an ambitious growing community, and accelerated soil nutrient depletion and erosion risks. In 1905, Italian consul Umberto Ancarani documented these challenges, questioning the future resilience of the colonial zone and predicting a major socio-environmental crisis:

Deforested territories are exploited for about five years with only two cereal varieties and then they are completely abandoned for some time. After five or six years at rest, the small *capoeira* shrubs start sprouting and Italian *colonos* burn all the weeds again. However, in this way the land is deprived of its most fertile products, especially in upland territories, as rains carry away a lot of earth and underground rocks begin to surface.

The fertilisation of these lands is not practised, as peasants only cut, burn and sow among the ashes. Everybody cuts but nobody cares about reforestation. Three-fifths of the forest has been cleared already.

What is the next generation of colonisers going to do when the local woods are completely cleared? Once the lands are completely sterile? Many people will be forced to migrate somewhere else, in new colonies and developing centres, such as Guaporé, Nova Virginia, Passo Fundo, etc. And they will need to buy new land plots and to rebuild their houses (Ancarani 1905, 12–13).<sup>13</sup>

These were legitimate concerns: as the native forest progressively shrank and demographic pressure increased in the region, Italian *colonos* were confronted with the challenge to devise alternative productive activities that would ensure subsistence while addressing surging environmental pressures (Pébayle 1973, 52). In this context, an essential step was the expansion of the local wine industry, allowing the Italian colonial zone to reinvent itself as a national hub for wine production. While this process contributed to the deforestation of the region, it also allowed territorial transformations that would turn Italian *colônias* into a prototypical Mediterranean landscape. Perhaps more importantly, it elevated Italian-Brazilian *gringos* as a symbol of the emerging national narrative of progress and order.

### The making of *Mediterranean Brazil*

The increase in wine production in the Italian colonial zone would pave the way for a massive environmental transformation, lessening the ecological consequences of deforestation and propelling the industrial development of the region. Whilst the success of wine production among Italian immigrants lay partially in their will to implement traditional viticulture activities from their



homeland, other exogenous factors would play a pivotal role. More specifically, Italians found a great ally in an American grape species whose biological characteristics suited the harsh local environment.

Although at first Italians imported several grapes from their homeland, these did not produce satisfactory results (Cinquantenario 2000, 201).<sup>14</sup> Traditional Mediterranean grapes had a hard time adapting to the rather unbalanced climatic patterns of the region and to the poor drainage of local soils. However, as early as the 1880s, the Italian colonial zone slowly began to practise domestic wine production, thanks to a Northern American grape cultivar known as Isabella. Commonly known as ‘fox grape’, the Isabella is considered as a hybrid variety between *vitis vinifera* and *vitis labrusca*. Allegedly originating in Spain, it became well known for the first time in the mid-1810s through Colonel George Gibbs, who grew it in his Brooklyn garden and renamed it after his wife (Pinney 2007, 190–92). Early botanic studies of the plant already praised its adaptive qualities and its capacity to grow in ‘any roof or space which may be desired’ (Spooner 1846, 16). As it gained the respect of North American botanists, it was brought to southern Brazil by Thomas Maister, who first introduced it in 1839 and 1840 among the German immigrants who inhabited the colonial zones of *Rio dos Sinos* and *Caí*, bordering the *Serra Gaucha*. German *colonos* had engaged in small-scale wine production since the mid-1820s, growing grapes in the backyards of their homes as a complement to major crops such as potatoes and tobacco (Falcade 2011, 63). Although the introduction of the Isabella grape among German *colonos* fostered domestic production, the commercialisation of wine only happened when there were surpluses (Witt 2008, 223–4). Italians first entered into contact with this product during the early immigration years, when they usually travelled to the adjoining German colonies in order to exchange goods and products. Within a few years after the creation of the Italian colonial zone, the cultivation of this grape had already become a distinguishing commercial enterprise, paving the way for the first experience of industrial wine production in Brazil (Manfio 2019, 434). The Isabella grape’s biological qualities suited the harsh upland environment of the Italian colonial zone: thanks to its spatial adaptability, the grape thrived in these rugged territories. Moreover, as a deciduous species, it could endure cold winters and climatic imbalances. Just as importantly, it was sturdier than the average grape and could resist fungal plagues such as oidium and phylloxera (Rizzon, Miele and Meneguzzo 2000, 115).

Shortly after its introduction to the Italian colonial zone, the Isabella grape became the most profitable local cultivation and its adaptability to local ecological challenges allowed Italian immigrants to reclaim a traditional homeland activity in an environment not particularly suitable for viticulture. Perhaps more importantly, the capillary development of the local wine industry allowed a smoother environmental transition in the region, mitigating the effects of deforestation. As the local rainforest disappeared, it gave way to the so-called ‘sacred Mediterranean pair’ - wheat fields alternating with vines (Rambo 1950, 144).<sup>15</sup> Isabella grapes were also compatible with local undergrowth vegetation, especially the so-called *capoeira* shrubs, which grew naturally after forest clearing and were used in fallow periods, complementing crop rotation (Rothwell 1959, 31). Just as important as this, in spite of its sour taste, the Isabella progressively filled an important gap in the Brazilian food-chain, becoming a valuable market commodity and turning the Italian colonial zone into the first national territory to produce enough wine barrels for exportation.<sup>16</sup>

As Italian *colonos* began to embrace wine production, institutional actors favoured the development of the local wine industry through policies that stimulated productive efforts. Already in 1896, the government of Rio Grande do Sul created the *Estação Experimental de Agronomia* in order to disseminate technical knowledge and improve vine cultivation by selecting new varieties. The body’s first initiatives included the free distribution of crops imported by the

government to the Italian colonies as well as the organisation of workshops with viticulturists from São Leopoldo and farm owners in Porto Alegre. By 1898, the government of Rio Grande do Sul was sending 25,000 seedlings to distribute among Italian immigrants all over the colonial zone, as well as to Germans in São Leopoldo. This was complemented by investments in packaging and carriage. Moreover, by 1901, the Commercial Association of Caxias do Sul began to organise the main local businesses for the commercialisation of locally produced wine, once again with the support of agronomic governmental organisations. These measures were complemented by the reduction of tariffs and charges in 1904, benefiting the exportation of wines and liquors, as well as wooden artefacts and clothes (Reichel 1978, 30). As private and public initiatives meaningfully interplayed, the *Estação Experimental de Agronomia* continued to send seedlings until 1910, when this task shifted to the School of Engineering at the Federal University of Rio Grande do Sul (Farias 2009, 82).

This process was facilitated by the improvement of the local transport network, culminating in the inauguration of a railway line connecting Caxias do Sul with the German colony of Montenegro in 1910. This was especially important for the local wine industry, improving the transportation of stored barrels and officially turning the Italian colonial zone into the country's major wine producer (Giron and Herédia 2007, 22). Already in 1905, the same Ancarani documented the presence of 318 shops in the colonial area of Caxias do Sul, about a hundred of them directly associated to the wine industry (1905, 6).

By 1914, wine production was further incentivised by favourable fiscal policies regimes, helping this industry to become the main productive sector in the city of Caxias do Sul (Pesciolini Venerosi 1914, 44). Local newspapers published this information on a regular basis, in order to further stimulate wine production among local *colonos*. As an example, a 1914 article from *Il Colono Italiano* announced that wine-related products would be included among the items with lowest taxation – only 2 per cent (AHMJSA, year 5, n. 52, 1914). Perhaps the main evidence of the success of local wine industry during the early twentieth century lay in the rate of its exports, already taking place beyond the state of Rio Grande do Sul.

Thus, although local wine production had to compete with imported varieties, the Isabella grape managed to successfully carve out its own market niche in the national economy. While Italian *colonos* never gave up on the attempt to improve its quality, developing hybrids with other European varieties, by 1914 the Isabella was by far the most successful grape in the region, while other species produced poor yields (Pesciolini Venerosi 1914, 62). Although attempts to improve the quality of the Isabella started in the late 1890s, in general terms local colonists continued to prefer the Isabella grape over other varieties, due to its resistance to pests and diseases and its abundant yields (Monteiro 2016, 125).

As the Isabella became the dominant grape, wine production began to stretch beyond the *Serra Gaucha*, reaching neighbouring coastal regions. Italian *colonos* were incentivised to acquire coastal lands and to convert them to grape production, whose harvests would later be sent to the colonies to be processed into wine. Winemaking in the Italian colonies of Rio Grande do Sul was becoming a full-fledged regional-national industry, culturally grounded in the uplands of Rio Grande do Sul, while increasingly decentralised in its production chain and commercially directed towards national and international markets (Dos Santos 1992, 143). This distinctive productive structure was also fostered, from the early 1910s, by the creation of cooperative organisations, to preserve the interests of local small producers against both domestic and external competition. By the interwar period there were about 25 cooperatives in the region, gathered in a national labour union of wine producers – known as *Sindicato Vinícola do Rio Grande do Sul* – created in 1927 to preserve the quality of local wines and to promote their commercialisation

## Wine Exportation from Rio Grande do Sul (1898-1914)

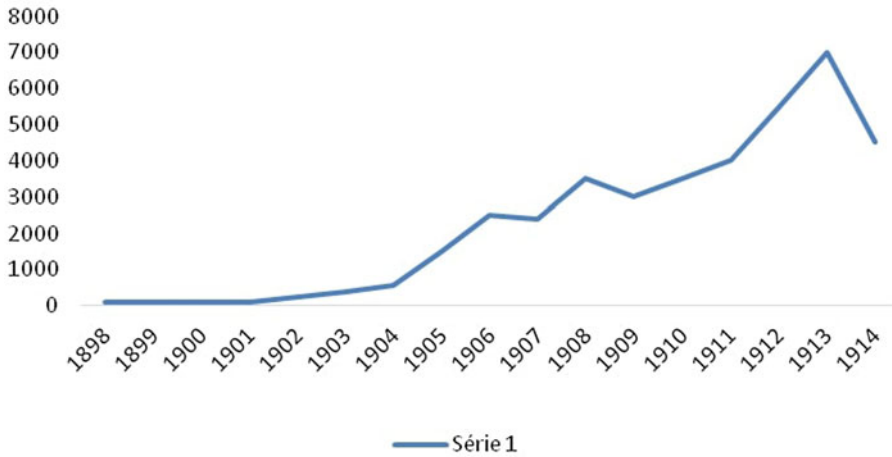


Figure 5. Litres of wine exported from Rio Grande do Sul (mainly from the Italian colonial zone). Source: *Relatórios apresentados ao Governo do Estado do RS pela Secretaria dos Negócios da Fazenda. Porto Alegre 1908–1914* (see Cavagnoli 1989, 66).

(Rodrigues 2007, 106–12). The development of the local wine industry was also incentivised by technological innovations such as small windmills and vapour machines. Concurrently, the first large-scale producers began to emerge in the region, profiting from the import substitution policy launched by the Brazilian government (Rothwell 1959, 70–73).

While the development of a thriving winemaking industry helped Italians redesigning the colonial landscape to avoid major ecological setbacks, it also propelled the emergence of a cultural *koiné* where Brazilian and Italian factors intermingled. As Italian *colonos* from different provinces of northern Italy began to linguistically amalgamate in a unified dialectical entity (known as *talian*), several words related to winemaking emerged. These included expressions such as ‘*vendema*’ (vintage), ‘*mosto*’ (grape juice) ‘*tinhas*’ (wine press) ‘*bote*’ (barrel) ‘*mastel*’ (tub bath).<sup>17</sup> By the 1950s, vine production, together with maize, was undoubtedly the main local culture as well as the ‘fundamental feature’ of the region. Although grapes were rarely commercialised, wine was already extensively exported to other parts of the country, amounting to one third of the region’s total production (Valverde 1955, 38–40). The expansion of the wine industry during this time went hand in hand with the improvement of local forestry activities. The lower southern part of the Italian colonial zone was designated for the planting of eucalyptus, whose solid timber would improve the local railway line, thus favouring the commerce of wine and other essential products such as maize, wheat and rice (Valverde 1955, 41). Although by the 1960s, wine-making was already one of the most productive sectors of the Italian colonial zone, modern bio-technologies would further foster the development of the local industry. Towards the 1970s, multinationals from Europe and North America such as Chandon, Maison Forestier, Martini, National Distillers, Château Lacave, and Welch Foods (Suvalan) began to invest in local firms, fostering the development of breeding bio-technologies aimed at diversifying local production (Cavalcante 2016, 7). While this posed new issues of environmental sustainability given the increased utilisation of pesticides and agro-toxics, it also reinforced the image of Italian *colonos* as successful ecological pioneers, in concurrence with the centenary of Italian immigration.<sup>18</sup>

As recently reported by the Brazilian Institute of Wine, between 2006 and 2019, wine industries in Rio Grande do Sul (mostly based in former Italian colonies) processed an average of 596 million kg of grapes, producing 381 million litres of wine and derivatives per year (IBRAVIN 2019).

The encounter with an American grape whose biological characteristics suited the local environment helped Italian immigrants find economic stability and social integration, creating a prosperous wine industry. This in turn stimulated the creation of ritualistic feasts revolving around grapes and other by-products such as wine and champagne.<sup>19</sup> These regional traditions, still recurring every year today, demonstrate the importance of the Isabella grape in the identitarian construction of Italian communities. Although the first settlement years were characterised by a controversial adaptation process, their successful winemaking experience legitimised a quasi-epic migratory narrative. This in turn elevated the image of Italian *colonos* from a group of immigrants struggling to create stable livelihoods, to skilled ecological pioneers capable of transplanting their biological and cultural roots in a foreign environment.

### The hybrid *gringo* identity

Towards the late nineteenth century, a large number of Italian *colonos* abandoned their homeland to pursue the dream of small landownership. Both the emergence of rural capitalism and their will to preserve a traditional lifestyle of agrarian autonomy were the main political and cultural drives at the core of this radical life choice (Biondi 2019, 125–6). Although this propelled a massive migratory process, Italian communities also strived to preserve their culture, their religion and their linguistic identity, with satisfactory results (Giron and Herédia 2007, 118–21). Unlike their peers who were forced to toil in coffee plantations or to make ends meet in urban centres, they could re-establish a rather traditional society on the uplands of southern Brazil, sustained by small tenure agriculture and religious organisations (Franzina 2005, 123–4). On the other hand, substantial geographical isolation forced them to radically adapt agricultural activities to local environmental circumstances. As a consequence, they had to abandon the traditional ‘stable economy’ relying on fragmented patterns of mountaintop farming, for a ‘natural economy’ practised on larger spaces, allowing a hybrid policulture regime where European and American crops intermingled (Zannini 2019, 70). In this context, their most difficult challenge was to carry out the agricultural conversion of the region, adapting their productive activities to the local ecosystem. While deforestation and wood logging initially allowed Italians to develop their colonies, they also led to environmental issues that jeopardised the ecological balance of the region. In this sense, the development of the local wine industry was certainly a defining historical juncture, as it allowed the reshaping of the local landscape while at the same time providing a long-term source of economic revenue. The emergence of this quasi-Mediterranean landscape in the midst of the Atlantic rainforest reinforced the cultural identity of Italian communities, who could embrace a traditional activity from their homeland, preserving the rather conservative agrarian lifestyle that was progressively unravelling in their homeland (Bertagna 2009, 585–7).

The making of ‘Mediterranean Brazil’ was therefore a complex historical process, in which cultural traditions from the homeland interacted with the complex local ecology of the *Serra Gaucha*. Although the development of a thriving winemaking industry allowed Italian *gringos* to become one of the main symbols of the national motto ‘order and progress’ (*ordem e progresso*), this process was not simply the result of the agrarian skills of this immigrant community. Rather, it was the result of the encounter with a foreign grape species such as the Isabella, whose biological characteristics adapted to the harsh environmental circumstances of the Italian colonial zone. As a result, within a few decades, a rather displaced group of European immigrants became one of the most

iconic figures of rural Brazil. Although the 1884 political emancipation of the Italian colonial zone was experienced with mixed feelings by an immigrant community who still did not consider itself as fully integrated in the national social texture, by the early twentieth century the so-called *colonos* already embodied the image of both self-sufficient farmer and skilled entrepreneur, able to trade their products on both national and international markets.<sup>20</sup> This is particularly witnessed by the prestige that locally produced ‘colonial’ products still enjoy all over the country to this day.

Although as pointed out by several historians, by the early twentieth century the sense of ‘Italianness’ had lost its realistic connotation, a new syncretic agricultural experience developed among Italian *colonos*.<sup>21</sup> This brought together renovated Italian agricultural features, Brazilian environmental characteristics and national agrarian incentives, as well as a grape species from a different continent. The result was a hybrid eco-cultural identity, deeply enrooted in the local ecology of the *Serra Gaucha*, not simply informed by cultural reminiscences from the homeland, but also by the biological qualities of a foreign grape species, indigenous agricultural techniques and institutional plans.

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### Notes

1. According to recent estimates by Frosi and Mioranza, 54% of total immigrants were from Veneto, 33% from Lombardia, 7% from Trentino, 4.5% from Friuli and the remaining 1.5% from the rest of the peninsula (2009, 47).
2. The rather liberal migratory policy promoted by the Italian state was later formalised by the law n.5866 (30 December 1888), proclaiming complete migratory freedom. See Ostuni 2009, 310–11.

3. Several classic studies agree on this point. See for example Franzina 1976, Brunello 1981 and Hall and Martinez Alier 1979. For a more recent perspective on the same topic see Zannini 2019 and Biondi 2019.
4. Brazilian institutions commonly defined this region as *sertão* (desert), in spite of the indigenous groups who had inhabited it for millennia (Manfroi 2001, 53).
5. On the Italian diaspora see the classic work by Donna R. Garbaccia (2000) and the more recent theoretical perspectives on Italian mobility proposed by Ben-Ghiat and Hom (2016) and by Burns and Keen (2020). For Italian studies on this historical episode see for example Franzina 1976 and 2005, Brunello 1994, Zannini and Gazzi 2003. For Brazilian studies see Azevedo 1975, De Boni and Costa 1984, Manfroi 2001, Frosi and Mioranza 2009, Manfio and Pierozan 2019.
6. In particular, this study draws from the emerging subfield known as environmental history of migrations (EHM). For further information see Armiero and Tucker 2017. For an environmental history of migrations in southern Brazil see Nodari and Mundstock Xavier 2017, De Majo and Relly 2020.
7. On the cliché of skilled pioneers see Franzina 2019.
8. Translated into English by the authors. Correspondence available in Franzina 1994, 75–83.
9. On the controversial relationship between Italian *colonos* and local indigenous people see Brunello 1994 and 2020. Italian *colonos* also had a difficult relationship with local colonial agents and with the local independents militias known as *maragatos* (Franzina 2008, 162–3). On the adoption of indigenous practices by Italian communities see Manfroi 2001, 71–2.
10. Translated by the authors. Correspondence available in De Boni 1977, 35.
11. According to Rambo, farming and fertility issues in the region directly related to the presence of dense woodland areas, as the trees' deep roots could hinder agricultural practices (1994, 201–26).
12. On the composition of Italian immigrants see De Boni and Costa 1984, 81. For a well-documented case of a manufacturing industry transferred from northern Italy to the north-eastern uplands of Rio Grande do Sul see Herédia 2019.
13. Translated by the authors.
14. The initial Italian winemaking failure was not the first one in Brazil, as previous attempts to practise viticulture had also produced negligible results. Historical records report at least two failed attempts in the state of Rio Grande do Sul, respectively by Jesuit missionary Roque González de Santa Cruz in 1626 and in 1752 by the Azorean mariners who contributed to the foundation of the capital city of Porto Alegre (Rodrigues 2007, 101–02).
15. Only about one per cent of the native rainforest survived this transition. For further information see Moreno 1972, 50.
16. Ancarani described the taste of this wine variety as 'weak, sour and strawberry-flavoured' (1905, 18).
17. On the emergence of a dialectical *koiné* see Frosi and Mioranza 2009, 75–89. On the vocabulary specifically related to winemaking see Bunse 1978, 69–82. This process was also facilitated by a rather fragmentary local school system, mostly relying on private initiative and weakly supported by the Italian consulate (see Barausse 2019).
18. On the use of agro-toxic substances in wine production see Pires Viera da Rocha and Nodari 2020. On the cultural consolidation of Italian-Brazilian *colonos* through wine production see Blume and Specht 2008.
19. On festivals in the Italian colonial zone see Manfio (2017). On the role of feasts in the identitarian construction of different Brazilian communities see Da Matta (1986) and Albuquerque (2011).
20. This event was thoroughly documented by Italian consul Antonio Greppi in a visit to the colony (1884, 596–7).
21. See among others Manfroi 2001, 15–16 and Franzina 2008, 278–80.

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### *Archival Abbreviations*

Municipal Historical Archive João Spadari Adami - Caxias do Sul (AHMJA)

National Archive of Rio de Janeiro (ANRJ)

Capucine Museum of Caxias do Sul (MUSCAP)

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### Italian summary

Questa ricerca analizza i primi trent'anni di immigrazione italiana nell'altopiano del Brasile meridionale, conosciuto come *Serra Gaúcha* (1875–1915). Ricostruendo le prime pratiche agricole e le tecniche di deforestazione utilizzate in questo periodo, si è tentato di comprendere i processi di consolidamento di questa società migrante nello stato più a sud del Brasile, il Rio Grande do Sul. Analizzando lo sviluppo dell'industria del legno e di quella vinicola, si discutono inoltre le modalità di costruzione identitaria di questo gruppo sociale, spiegandolo come il risultato dell'intersezione di tradizioni culturali della madrepatria, di impulsi esterni di carattere sociale ed economico, nonché di fattori ambientali specifici al territorio. La presente analisi si basa sull'interpretazione di fonti documentarie prodotte da istituzioni brasiliane ed italiane, sulla consultazione di periodici locali, nonché sullo studio della letteratura critica, sia italiana che brasiliana, prodotta sulle tematiche della storia ambientale e della storia delle migrazioni.