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BRAZIL AT A GLANCE

THE KEY VARIETIES

Cabernet Sauvignon, Merlot, Tannat, Pinot Noir, Chardonnay, Sauvignon Blanc.

THE COOL VARIETIES

Cabernet Franc, Touriga Nacional, Malbec, Moscato, Viognier.

THE BUZZ

For our money, the sparkling wines lead the charge, combining fruit intensity with fresh acidity and the extra party uplift that comes with a Brazilian vibe. The lower-alcohol Moscato-based wines can be very moreish, while the best of the Bordeaux varieties and blends, plus generous Chardonnays, hit the mark too.

DELIVERING MARGIN

Brazil's strongest USP lies in its clear point of difference and strong, positive image, meaning the still or sparkling can be a draw for more adventurous customers, either by the glass or as a seasonal special.

Brazil has come a long way since my first visit to the Vale dos Vinhedos wine heartlands in the southerly Serra Gaúcha region a decade or so ago, with both its sparkling and still wines gradually gaining tentative footholds in the UK. As figures from domestic wine board Ibravin show, exports to the UK have been fast growing, albeit from a tiny base, with the country accounting for around 12% of all wines shipped beyond Brazil's borders.

The main focus of Brazil's producers and export body appears to be increasing volumes and targeting the off-trade in general, with both the 2014 World Cup and 2016 Olympics helping to boost listings with major supermarkets. Virgin Wines has recently taken an interest, with a buyer visiting the country and Bibendum has for a while carried wines from the deep south, where Brazil borders Uruguay.

For an insight into the UK independent on- and off-trade channels, specialist importer Go Brazil is a useful barometer of how well the category is performing, not least as it represents several of Brazil's leading producers.

"In terms of price positioning in the UK, we have been mainly at around £9-£10 RRP in the off-trade, and £25-£50-plus selling prices in the on-trade," says Go Brazil's commercial director, Nicholas Corfe.

UK MARKET SHARE

While Brazil hardly figures, statistically speaking, in the league of producing countries represented in the UK, export volumes to the UK more than doubled in 2016, up 87% by value, totalling US\$760,000 (out of total global sales of US\$5.9m in 2016), accounting for some 12% of exports from this country.

(Ibravin export figures, 2016)

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GO BRAZIL

"Given sterling's devaluation, the fact that most Brazilian suppliers invoice in US dollars and their FOB prices are already high vis-à-vis Chile, Argentina and other countries, I see limited opportunities in the mainstream off-trade," he continues. "The on-trade, indies and – particularly for Go Brazil – private sales, tastings and events, is where we can still do business and in the short to medium term is where growth will come from."

Interestingly enough, while Wines of Brasil has been championing sparkling wines in the UK, delivering some high-end listings for the likes of leading producers Miolo and Geisse, Go Brazil has seen most uptake in still wines, possibly because of the extreme competition in the sparkling market.

"We have unearthed some stylish, complex, high quality reds, which round out our portfolio very nicely," adds Corfe. "Much of the white production – Chardonnay, Moscato and Italic Riesling – goes to make the sparkling, so there are currently rather limited options among still whites."

Nonetheless, Brazil is gaining a reputation for wines with naturally fresh acidity, coupled with long-lasting fruit and restrained alcohol. Moreover, as Corfe points out, the more switched-on Brazilian exporters are realising – in a country with no indigenous varieties – that they have to differentiate themselves and be more adventurous with grape varieties and blends.

Brazil may be a slow burner, but with quality from the larger companies like Miolo, Aurora and Salton looking good, and some real gems among smaller producers such as Pizzato, Lidio Carraro, Campos de Cima and Almaúnica, it is certainly one to watch as a source of characterful and interest-provoking wines.