

Romeo Bragato:

The Viticulturalist who put Te Kauwhata on the Map.



Romeo Bragato was born in 1858 on an Adriatic Island then known as Lussin Piccolo. It was part of Austria–Hungary or the Austro-Hungarian Empire at that time, having been Venetian in earlier times. The island is now part of Croatia and known as Mali Losinj. As his name implies Romeo Bragato's parentage was Italian and for four years he studied at the Royal School of Oenology in Conegliano in the Treviso Province of Italy.

With impressive credentials he was employed as Resident Viticulturalist by the Victoria State Government in Australia. In 1895 the New Zealand Government, led by Richard John Seddon, invited him to New Zealand. Despite limited time and merely passing through the Waikato, between Auckland and Hamilton, he was convinced it would be suited to growing vines and fruit. His report also noted the potential for fruit and wine in Central Otago and Hawkes Bay. Most importantly he identified Phylloxera aphids as a threat. Consequently his knowledge and expertise led to ensuring that New Zealand's infant wine industry survived.

The first vines planted at the Department of Agriculture's "Wairangi Experimental Farm" in Te Kauwhata in 1896 were not resistant grafted American vines. Romeo Bragato had recommended the Department of Agriculture import these from Europe. However the New Zealand Government invited him back in 1901 and in 1902 offered

him the newly created post of Viticulturalist and Head of the Viticultural Division of the Department of Agriculture. He returned and took up the post, based at Te Kauwhata until going to Canada in 1908. The original wine cellar and laboratory designed, by architect T H White, date from 1903 and still stand with surrounding additions. The first experimental wines were made from Albany Surprise grapes. By 1905 Romeo Bragato took control of the wine making. Tom Rodda, then Head Ploughman was to become the Experimental Farm's Manager 1924-1933. Rodda Road is named for his family who farmed next to the Expressway at the Hall Road end 1884 -1950s. Noting some potential in 1905 Senor Bragato delegated Tom to supervise the picking of grapes by four specially hired Maori women. At 5pm Tom and James Andrews, Cellar man and Vineyard Overseer, would go to the cellar to crush the grapes. James rubbed them off the stalks with the aid of a wooden grating over the hopper of a hand machine. They worked as late as 11.30pm, three or four nights a week. Senor Bragato would come in with a late supper of dry water crackers, sardines, pickled olives and claret.

At the New Zealand, International Exhibition in Christchurch, lasting from November 1906 to April 1907, the "splendid eating grapes" from Te Kauwhata, in the "Waikato Court" were sold as soon as the cases were opened. Then vintner acclaim came in 1908 when Bragato's wine, said to be; "approaching the Bordeaux clarets in lightness and delicacy," was awarded a gold medal at the Franco-British Exhibition in London. Romeo Bragato and Te Kauwhata Experimental Station were truly on the viticultural map. Invivo, with winemaker Rob Cameron, are the current occupants of the now heritage winery. Already with some success, they aim to continue producing award-winning wines.

Romeo Bragato married an Auckland woman, Laura Condon, in 1907 and they had a daughter Miriam. With her only daughter, the late Jan Colville, Miriam Colville-Scrimgeour visited Te Kauwhata and the winery in the 1990s. Sadly there are no further descendants but the Bragato name is now on a new local map. Bragato Way leads from Travers Road into the current Waikare Estate development. Fittingly it is where some of Te Kauwhata's vineyards once stood.

#### References:

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*Vintage Memories of Te Kauwhata compiled by the Te Kauwhata & District Historical Society Inc. to the year 2000*. Te Kauwhata, 2003.