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# From shed to winemaking powerhouse **Italian spirit fuels success**

THE now-booming Orange wine area's first vineyards were planted in the 1980s, but the distinction of producing the first wine in the area 71 years ago almost certainly belongs to Italian migrant grocer Carmelo D'Aquino.

The six barrels of wine Carmelo made in 1946 in an old tin shed came from grapes bought in from Molong and today that venture has grown into a remarkably diverse family-owned, Orange-based wine and spirits business.

The D'Aquino Group crushes 5000 tonnes of grapes a year, operates three bottling lines with a four-million-bottles output and is a major exporter with some of the biggest sales in the Russian market. It has its own 16-hectare vineyard, draws fruit from up to 20 wine areas, including Orange, the Hunter Valley, Hilltops and Mudgee, for its own brands and for contract winemaking for other vignerons.

The wines are made by veteran Hunter winemaker

John Hordern at the affiliated Hunter Wine Services winery in what was the Muswellbrook Oak dairy factory.

Now headed by managing director Rex D'Aquino, Carmelo's grandson and a Roseworthy College-graduate winemaker, the D'Aquino Group has a chain of liquor stores in Orange, Bathurst, Parkes and Wellington, a

wholesale wine and spirits division, an expansive cellar door, restaurant and 130-seat function centre and a helicopter charter service.

The group has recently released two special Highland Heritage reds, which are tagged Patrono to honour

Carmelo D'Aquino's inaugural vintage. The wines are available on [daquinogroup.com.au](http://daquinogroup.com.au), in bottle shops and at the Mitchell Highway cellar door.

Carmelo's family had vineyards and made wine in his native Italy but, when he came to Australia, he set himself up as a grocer in Sydney's Crows Nest. Noting that there were numerous Italian migrants running orchards in the NSW Central West, Carmelo and his wife Nina moved to Orange and set up a grocery and delicatessen. There was keen demand for their imported Italian, Dutch and German delicacies and this prompted Carmelo to try winemaking and producing liqueurs from local fruit.

Rex D'Aquino says his grandfather was "somewhat of a wine negotiant" sourcing grapes from NSW and SA for wine styles reminiscent of his homeland.

In the 1980s the group turned its grape sourcing closer to home, taking fruit from Cowra and then in 1985 planting its cool-climate Highland Heritage char-

donnay, sauvignon blanc, riesling, pinot noir, merlot and shiraz vineyard at an average elevation of 900 metres above sea level.



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**FINE HERITAGE:** D'Aquino Group managing director Rex D'Aquino samples a Highland Heritage 2015 Patrono red that celebrates 71 years of family winemaking at Orange.