

Toronto police put a cork in illegal winery

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Far from Niagara's vineyards, locked behind a steel door at the end of an anonymous alleyway in Little Portugal, a secret venture police have called an illicit winery lay hidden from officials and nosy neighbours.

The secrecy ended this week, as Toronto police seized 46,680 litres of wine - red and white - in vats, buckets and large plastic jugs, worth an estimated \$120,000.

Some nearby residents, in the area of Lansdowne Avenue south of Bloor Street West, appeared surprised to learn they lived near the west side's Napa Valley. But others expressed little shock to hear of the hulking \$13 jugs of wine that police say were tucked behind rows of Twinkies and spearmint gum in the back rooms of local convenience stores.

The wine was made and sold allegedly by Confira Imports and Distributing Limited, a business marked yesterday only by a sign on a locked steel door that read, "Beware of the Dog."

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Police officials said Confira's owners also import and distribute oil, frozen French fries and frozen quail. Officials have not released their names, but said neither owner was previously known to police.

According to records, Confira has been a registered business for nearly eight years.

The situation came to police attention when a neighbour complained about a local convenience store selling the bootlegged varietals. Five weeks of surveillance led to Confira's warehouse on Dublin Street, police said.

There, they said, they found the wine stewing in uncovered containers, two cats roaming the premises and a dead spider floating in one of the vats.

As of yesterday, police said there were no reported cases of people becoming ill after drinking the wine.

According to some in the community, mass-produced homemade wine is cheap, convenient and easy to find - for those who know where to look.

"There are lot of people that make it to sell, but it's done underground," said Manuel DaCosta, president of Camões House, a Portuguese community centre and retirement home. "It's a tradition. It's something that's been going on for many years. It continues, it's just people don't really talk about it."

Other community leaders said they were surprised, and believed the tradition had died out long ago.

"I don't know if you can go in and pick up your groceries, a loaf of bread and a jug of wine," said Jose Eustaquio, director of the Alliance of Portuguese Clubs and Associations of Ontario. "It's shocking that they would take the chance of putting it in retail stores."

For some drinkers, Mr. DaCosta said, the appeal of homemade wine lies in a high alcohol content. "You drink one glass and you'll be happy."

According to police, the alcohol content of the wine seized Monday was 13 per cent, which is modest.

"Police said Confira made its wine with California grape juice and described the equipment used to brew the wine as "unclean." The wine was sold to stores at \$10 for a four-litre jug. The stores then resold the jugs to customers for \$13 to \$14.

Police said the owners of the company and six store owners have been charged with unlawfully keeping, offering and selling liquor. The company could face fines of up to \$500,000, while each individual could face penalties of \$250,000.

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