Brazilian blueberry (Vaccinium spp.) production has made remarkable progress in developing quality and quantity. The price of the fruit for fresh and processing purposes is linked to its quality and origin. An effective method for authenticity control and traceability is the stable isotopes method. Carbon ($^{13}$C) and oxygen ($^{18}$O) of Brazilian blueberries have never been extensively explored. In this work, the results of $^{13}$C and $^{18}$O (performed by IRMS) of thirty blueberry samples were presented and discussed, being eleven different cultivars produced in the Southern Brazilian region from mountain and high-altitude. The blueberry showed the typical range of carbon isotopes for C$_3$ plants, with significant differences between Rabbiteye and Southern Highbush. The $\delta^{13}$C and $\delta^{18}$O values showed a significant difference between a mountain and a high-altitude region. This study represents the first isotopic database for Brazilian blueberries, and it can be incorporated into a traceability system. In addition, these results can be used to verify the authenticity of the fruit composition declared on the label and as an effective tool for identifying the geographical origin.

**Keywords:** isotopic composition, quality control, mass spectrometry, food and beverage analysis, geographical discrimination


INTRODUCTION

Blueberry (Vaccinium spp.) production and consumption have increased in the last decade and become more popular because this fruit shows excellent sensory properties. Also, it has aroused particular interest of people due to its beneficial properties for human health. Blueberries can be consumed naturally or in products, like juice. However, the benefits will only be achieved if the products from blueberry are genuine, without adulteration with cheaper raw, like sugar cane or apple juice. Three blueberry cultivars are responsible for the worldwide production: Highbush (Vaccinium corymbosum L.), Lowbush (V. angustifolium Ait.) and Rabbiteye (Vaccinium virgatum Ait.).

The gastronomic versatility and the growing demand for blueberry stimulated a significant increase in global production, which more than doubled between 2010 and 2019, rising from 439,000 metric tons to nearly 1.0 million metric tons. The most significant production is in the United States, followed by Canada, Chile, and Peru. In Brazil, the production is still relatively low. It was introduced in the 80’s in the South region, motivated by the growing world demand and the attractive fresh fruit prices on the European market. Furthermore, Brazil has some advantages such as the possibility of early production in the Northern Hemisphere off-season and the availability of water and land suitable for cultivation. The main cultivars produced are Rabbiteye (Aliceblue, Bluebelle, Bluegem, Briteblue, Climax, Delite, Powderblue and Woodard) and Southern highbush (Misty, O’Neal and Georgiagem). New varieties of Southern highbush cultivars have been introduced, such as Star, Jewel, Emerald, Millenial, Primadonna and Snowchaser.

Several studies have shown the benefits of blueberry, such as effects on cardiovascular disease, type 2 diabetes mellitus, neurological decline, ophthalmologic disorders, bone protection, decrease blood pressure and cholesterol, anti-diabetic properties, cytotoxic activity, for example. In addition, anti-inflammatory action associated with blueberry intake is supported by clinical, animal and in vitro studies. The bioactivity of blueberry extract is mainly due to phenolics compounds, such as anthocyanins, phenolic acids and proanthocyanidins, making it one of the most desirable and nutritious fruits.

Accordingly, the isotope ratio $^{13}$C/$^{12}$C expressed in $\delta^{13}$C, C$_3$ plants such as blueberry, grape and orange, show $\delta^{13}$C values ranging from -33 to -22‰, and C$_4$ plants such as corn, sugar cane and sorghum range from -16 to -10‰. Therefore, knowing the isotopic profile is an important way to control adulteration, and preserve the authenticity and the benefits of products from blueberry fruits.

Natural variation in carbon isotope ratio ($^{13}$C/$^{12}$C) has been immensely investigated. Isotopic composition such as $^{13}$C/$^{12}$C is used to reduce the database’s variability and to detect relatively small amounts of sugar added to fruit products, even when the isotopic values of investigated samples are close to the natural variation range of the fruit. Plants have lower levels of $^{13}$C to $^{12}$C, these two carbon isotopes occur naturally in nature, due to the fractionations during the photosynthetic cycle. The photosynthetic cycle is responsible for the most significant difference between the values of $^{13}$C in C$_3$ (Calvin cycle) and C$_4$ (Hatch-Slack cycle) plants. The CO$_2$ fixed in the photosynthesis will reflect the botanical origin of carbon in plants, as the metabolic pathway discriminates differently against the heavier isotope $^{13}$C present in atmospheric CO$_2$, for plants C$_3$ and C$_4$. Recent research confirmed a variation in chemical composition in small fruits due to the influence of cultivar, genetic background, climate, growing conditions, maturity and post-harvest handling techniques. So, the factors cited, plant type and agriculture practices reflect the isotopic composition of $^{13}$C/$^{12}$C and $^{18}$O/$^{16}$O. For example, the mild water stress increase berry sugar, early or late. In the same way water stress affects stable isotopes, because changes the gradient between atmospheric CO$_2$ and intercellular CO$_2$ concentration during the photosynthesis process in the plant.

In the literature, there are several references for isotopic characterization from different fruits, but few studies about different blueberry cultivars. Furthermore, there are no studies for stable isotopes in Brazilian blueberries. Therefore, the study aimed to build the first database for stable isotopes of blueberries, including eleven cultivars: Northern Highbush (Bluecrop, Elliot and Duke), Southern Highbush (Misty and O’Neal) and Rabbiteye (Bluegen, Briteblue, Climax, Delite, Florida, and Power blue), characterizing the range of carbon ($^{13}$C/$^{12}$C) and oxygen ($^{18}$O/$^{16}$O) values in different blueberry cultivars. In addition, to assess...
the effectiveness of the stable isotopes of carbon and oxygen to determine the geographical origin of blueberries.

**MATERIALS AND METHODS**

**Samples**

The blueberries were collected during the 2017 and 2018 vegetation seasons from 30 sampling sites in the Southern Brazilian region of Rio Grande do Sul. Samples of different cultivars belonged to three varieties: Northern Highbush (Bluecrop, Elliot and Duke), Southern Highbush (Misty and O’Neal), and Rabbiteye (Bluegen, Briteblue, Climax, Delite, Florida, and Power blue).

**Sampling site description**

Samples were collected in different private fields located in 7 cities of Rio Grande do Sul. Five from the mountain region: Bento Gonçalves (1 sample Rabbiteye: Bluegen), Caxias do Sul (11 samples: being 10 Rabbiteye: Florida: 3, Briteblue:1, Climax: 3, Bluegen: 2 and Powder Blue:1 and 1 Southern Highbush: O’Neal: 1), Flores da Cunha (3 samples: being Powder Blue:1, Bluegen: 1 and Climax: 1), Nova Petrópolis (1 sample Florida) and São Marcos (5 samples: Delite: 1, Bluegen: 1, Bluecrop: 1, Climax: 1 and Florida: 1) and two from high-altitude region: Vacaria (8 samples: O’Neal: 2, Climax: 1, Bluecrop: 1, Elliot: 1, Duke: 1, Misty: 1 and Bluegen: 1) and Campestre da Serra (1 sample Florida).

The two regions are about 110 km apart, and the mountain region has an altitude of 750 meters, whereas the high-altitude region has 971 meters. The climatic and environmental data variables, such as the precipitation, the mean annual temperature and the mean annual chill hours, were obtained from National Institute of Meteorology (INMET). Furthermore, information about soil was obtained from the Soil Museum of Rio Grande do Sul (MSRS). The mountain region is marked by a soil well-drained, shallow, developed from volcanic rocks, rocky and sloping. In contrast, the high-altitude region presents the soil poorly drained, deep, developed from basalt, hydromorphic and rocky. Based on the published literature, these variables were the most likely to have significant effects on carbon and oxygen isotope ratio, and the data are relatively accurate for each location. All the samples were collected from irrigated field.

**Sample preparation**

The juice was extracted from the fruit using a juice maker (Skimsen, Brusque, Brazil), and the samples were manually crushed and after centrifuged at 1750 rpm to separate and remove the seeds and peels from the fruit. The juice was filtered by a membrane with a pore size of 0.8 µm (Millipore Merck, Germany). All samples were subjected to the analyses of $^{13}$C/$^{12}$C and $^{18}$O/$^{16}$O in triplicate.

**Stable isotope ratio ($^{13}$C/$^{12}$C) analysis**

The carbon isotopic ratio ($^{13}$C/$^{12}$C) of each sample was determined in triplicate using an isotope ratio mass spectrometer (Delta Plus XP, Thermo Fisher Scientific, Bremen, Germany) following total combustion in an elemental analyzer (Flash EA 1112, Thermo Fisher Scientific). Juice from blueberry (1 μL) was injected directly into the reactor; the sample was converted into CO$_2$ gas by combustion in a quartz reactor with copper oxide, and silvered cobaltous-cobaltic oxide. Under a continuous flow of ultra-pure helium (flow rate at 100 mL min$^{-1}$) to form CO$_2$ and H$_2$O. The gases passed through a reduction column at 680 ºC containing reduced copper whilst water was trapped with magnesium perchlorate for the gases to be separated on a Porapak Q chromatographic column at 45 ºC. The resulting gas (CO$_2$) was then transferred to the isotope ratio mass spectrometer via a universal continuous flow interface (Conflo III, Thermo Fisher Scientific) to determine the $^{13}$C/$^{12}$C.

The values of $^{13}$C/$^{12}$C are denoted in delta related to the intentional V-PDB (Vienna-Pee Dee Belemnite) and the δ$^{13}$C values were calculated against the international reference material Sucrose IAEA-CH-6. (RM 8542, from International Atomic Energy Agency, Viena, Austria). A reference gas CO$_2$ 4.8 (Air Liquide, Paris, France) was used to calibrate against the reference material to ensure the results trueness. The analytical instrumental error was lower than ± 0.20‰.
Determination of $\delta^{18}$O of water by equilibration (GasBench-IRMS)

Sample preparation was based on the $\text{CO}_2$ equilibrium obtained through the isotopic exchange reaction between $\text{CO}_2$ (g) and water in the sample (L). Samples (500 µL) were transferred into the vial using a pipette, and then the vial was flushed with a mixture of 0.3% $\text{CO}_2$ in helium at a flow rate of 100 mL min$^{-1}$ for 5 min. The complete exchange between the $\text{CO}_2$ from the sample and the helium-$\text{CO}_2$ gas was reached after 24 h of equilibration at 25 ºC. The headspace formed was injected into the peripheral device (Gasbench II, Thermo Fisher Scientific). The helium flow gently moves the headspace of the vial into the fused silica capillary through the diffusion traps (Nafion®) to remove the water and then to a Valco® loop for injection into the gas chromatograph.

The loop injection set up 100 µL aliquots of the sample gas into the gas chromatography column at 70 ºC, with a helium flow of 20 mL min$^{-1}$ at 10-12 psi. The spectrometer then measured the isotope species with mass 44, 45 and 46. The analytical error was lower than 0.20‰, and the samples were analyzed in triplicate.

Method validation

The method was validated, and the following parameters were evaluated: selectivity, linearity, working range, detection limit, quantification limit, accuracy, recovery and calculation of measurement uncertainty. For selectivity and accuracy, tests were carried out by adding cane sugar to blueberry juice. A solution (100% C$_4$) with cane sugar in ultra-pure water (80 g L$^{-1}$) was added to blueberry juice at the following concentrations: 1, 2, 5, 10, 20, 30, 50 and 80%. The accuracy values were evaluated by the AOAC Association of Official Agricultural Chemists criteria. A curve reading seven concentrations in seven replicates was prepared for linearity and working range. The detection and quantification limits were calculated by testing a sample containing the matrix. Finally, the calculation of measurement uncertainty of the methods was performed using GUM Workbench 2.4 software.

Statistical analysis

All statistical analyses were performed by SPSS software, version 22.0 (IBM Corporation, New York, USA) at 5% significance level. The normal distribution of the residuals was evaluated through the Kolmogorov Smirnov. Data were analyzed by ANOVA, and if a statistically significant effect was verified, multiple pairwise comparisons were performed using Tukey’s test.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Carbon isotopic composition ($^{13}$C/$^{12}$C)

The $\delta^{13}$C values for blueberries cultivars are summarized in Table I.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Cultivar</th>
<th>n</th>
<th>Variety</th>
<th>$\delta^{12}$C Mean ± SD* (%)</th>
<th>$\delta^{13}$C Minimum (%)</th>
<th>$\delta^{13}$C Maximum (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Bluecrop</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Northern highbush</td>
<td>-24.69 ± 0.47</td>
<td>-25.26</td>
<td>-24.18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bluegen</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>Rabbiteye</td>
<td>-25.86 ± 0.93</td>
<td>-27.38</td>
<td>-24.93</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Briteblue</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Rabbiteye</td>
<td>-25.80 ± 0.07</td>
<td>-25.86</td>
<td>-25.73</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Climax</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>Rabbiteye</td>
<td>-26.06 ± 1.12</td>
<td>-27.41</td>
<td>-24.02</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Delite</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Rabbiteye</td>
<td>-24.97 ± 0.08</td>
<td>-25.06</td>
<td>-24.92</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Duke</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Northern highbush</td>
<td>-24.53 ± 0.05</td>
<td>-24.61</td>
<td>-24.44</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

continues on the next page
Blueberries' δ¹³C values ranged from -27.37 to -23.21‰, nearly identical to those found by other authors in C₃ plants, as expected for plants with the same metabolic pathway. The δ¹³C values for the Northern Highbush variety in this study were similar to the results found in blueberry produced in the Northern Italian region (-24.20 ± 1.30‰) and the Rabbiteye close to found in the Eastern European (-26.20 ± 1.40‰). However, the isotopic ranges of sugar from blueberry pulp classified by varieties showed a significant difference between the varieties Rabbiteye and Southern Highbush, with lower δ¹³C values for Rabbiteye. Previous studies have also indicated that genetic diversity can influence the δ¹³C values of plant biomass. The difference is not statistically significant because blueberry cultivars present a natural variation and δ¹³C values specific for each cultivar. Furthermore, other influences in δ¹³C values are important, such as plant physiology, plant resistance to climatic factors and cultivation practices adopted. Southern Highbush blueberries are hybrids from *Vaccinium corymbosum* (Highbush, tetraploid). This variety shows characteristics like the need for upland soils, short fruit development periods without organic amendment and plants that do not tolerate winter temperatures below freezing.

The lowest δ¹³C values were found for Bluegen cultivar and the highest for Misty. In a study developed with samples from Italy, Poland and Romanian, the values of δ¹³C for pulp ranged between -28.60 to -22.10‰ comparing different cultivars; the Brigitta Blue showed the highest δ¹³C values and Bluecrop showed the lowest δ¹³C value. In our study, the cultivar Climax showed the lowest value. Previous studies with apples showed δ¹³C and δ¹⁵N values were statistically influenced by the cultivar and geographical origin, and their interactions. Furthermore, they confirmed the existence of a great effect of the geographical origin and a limited influence due to the variety.

The lower standard deviation found for Briteblue, Delite, Duke, Elliot and Misty happened because there is just one producer for those cultivars in the South.

**Oxygen isotopic composition (δ¹⁸O/¹⁶O)**

The δ¹⁸O values for blueberries cultivars are summarized in Table II.
Blueberries $\delta^{18}$O values ranged from -3.12 to +2.62‰. These results were very similar to those found by Camin et al.\textsuperscript{20} in highbush blueberry collected in Italy, Poland and Romania, where the researcher found values ranged from -2.2 to +4.3‰. A variation of $\delta^{18}$O values also was observed by Klavins et al.,\textsuperscript{21} working with blueberries from different countries. They observed a pattern based on the $^{18}$O water cycle. Due to the natural water cycle and precipitations, the heavy oxygen isotope ($^{18}$O) tends to concentrate more in regions close to the ocean, and lower $\delta^{18}$O values indicate a greater distance from the ocean. Considering these factors $\delta^{18}$O values are more characteristic to the geographical location.

**Geographical origin**

The samples were separated from two regions: mountain and high altitude. The difference between the regions was highly significant at the 95% confidence level for the $\delta^{13}$C and $\delta^{18}$O values. The results can be seen graphically in Figure 1, where the $\delta^{13}$C are plotted concerning the $\delta^{18}$O, differentiating them by region.

![Figure 1. $\delta^{13}$C versus $\delta^{18}$O values of all blueberry samples by region.](image)

\begin{table}
\centering
\caption{Isotope composition $\delta^{18}$O (‰) of pulp from eleven different blueberry cultivars, expressed by maximum, minimum, mean and standard deviation (SD) (continuation)}
\label{table:isotope_composition}
\begin{tabular}{lccccc}
\hline
Cultivar & n & Variety & $\delta^{18}$O Mean ± SD* (‰) & $\delta^{18}$O Minimum (‰) & $\delta^{18}$O Maximum (‰) \\
\hline
Climax & 6 & Rabbiteye & -0.83 ± 1.99 & -3.01 & 2.62 \\
Delite & 1 & Rabbiteye & -0.53 ± 0.09 & -0.69 & -0.45 \\
Duke & 1 & Northern highbush & -0.10 ± 0.06 & -0.17 & -0.01 \\
Elliot & 1 & Northern highbush & +0.14 ± 0.09 & -0.07 & +0.23 \\
Florida & 6 & Rabbiteye & -1.65 ± 1.04 & -3.04 & +0.09 \\
Misty & 1 & Southern highbush & +0.86 ± 0.08 & +0.73 & +1.00 \\
O’Neal & 3 & Southern highbush & -1.05 ± 1.61 & -3.12 & +1.01 \\
Powder Blue & 2 & Rabbiteye & -2.00 ± 0.67 & -2.79 & -1.20 \\
\hline
\end{tabular}
\footnote{SD = Standard Deviation, significance level of 5%}.
\end{table}
Variation in the δ¹³C values is usually connected to the cultivar, due to the influence of CO₂ fixation during photosynthesis. However, differences in geographical origin considering δ¹³C were also found in products, such as olive oil. For example, the δ¹³C allowed to differentiate olive oil from Sicily to other regions of Italy. The influence was assigned to the geographical position, considering the latitude of the olive grove.²² Significant differences related to δ¹³C were also found in mangoes cultivated in Mexico from those cultivated in the Ivory Coast, Senegal, and Spain. Meanwhile, δ¹⁸O values in the same study allowed to differentiate mangoes produced in Brazil, Equatorial Guinea, Ivory Coast and Spain from those produced in Mexico, Peru, and Senegal.²³

In this study, the δ¹⁸O for samples from high-altitude region (0.42 ± 1.18‰) were significantly higher than the values found for samples from mountain (-1.37 ± 1.21‰). Considering that the mountain region has an altitude of 750 meters whereas the high-altitude region has 971 meters. The results showed an increase in the values with increasing altitudes. Taous et al.²⁴ also found an influence of geographical position in Argan oil in δ¹³C and δ¹⁸O, with an increased value with increasing altitudes and a negative tendency with latitude, suggesting a continental effect on the coastal oils showing more enriched isotopic values.

Geographical influence, such as latitude, altitude, elevation, and in addition climatic factors like precipitation, hydric stress and light exposure, affect the efficiency of CO₂ fixation. The reason is that δ¹³C and δ¹⁸O of plants are influenced by the availability of water, relative humidity, and environmental temperature.²⁵ These factors influence the plant’s stomata, in which regulate leaf diffusive conductance and influence water loss and carbon gain.²⁶

The two regions considered in this study showed different precipitation volumes in 2017, in which the mountain region showed 1864 mm during this year, whereas in the high-altitude region, the precipitation volume was 1715 mm in the same year.²⁷ The difference is reflected in the δ¹⁸O values; lower values was found for the mountain region, where the precipitation volume was higher than in the high-altitude region. The volume of precipitation directly influences the oxygen because the heavy oxygen isotope tends to concentrate more in the oceans due to the influence of the natural water cycle and precipitation. As a result, the lower δ¹⁸O values are characteristic of regions distant from the ocean.²¹ On the other hand, the temperature for the mountain region was higher, showing an annual mean of 18.30 ºC, while in the high-altitude region 16.10 ºC.²⁷

Concerning the geographical position, differences in soil type between the mountain and the high-altitude region can also influence the δ¹³C and δ¹⁸O values due to water availability. The soil in the mountain is well-drained, while it is poorly drained in the high-altitude region.²⁸

The blueberries can provide excellent nutrients and nutraceutical benefits to human health. However, the region’s characteristic and environmental influences are important reasons for the differences found in the δ¹³C and δ¹⁸O values in this study. Furthermore, global warming and associated precipitation change impact many agricultural ecosystems.

Results of validation method

The analytical procedure has been adapted to the case of blueberry juice from a method proposed for other fruit juice. All parameters analyzed for the method validating were considered satisfactory (Table III).

Table III. Results of validation parameters of the method

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Parameter</th>
<th>Results</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Linear range (%)</td>
<td>0 – 100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>R²</td>
<td>0.99</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LOD (%)</td>
<td>0.27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LOQ (%)</td>
<td>0.87</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

continues on the next page
The standard deviation used to calculate the repeatability was 0.09‰. It was very similar to the standard deviation that Jamin et al. found and according to the repeatability recommended by European Committee for Standardization (CEN) for orange and pineapple juice, beet and cane sugar (CEN - ENV12140) particularly on the question whether the ENV can be converted into an European Standard (EN).

The isotopic recovery has been determined using low, medium and high concentrations of a test mixture of sucrose solution in a blueberry juice with known isotopic content. The recovery reached was between 97-103% according to the recommendation by Codex Alimentarius Commission. It shows that the method employed effectively applies to blueberry juice and is free of isotopic effects.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, this study represents the first isotope database for Brazilian blueberries that covers eleven cultivars from three different varieties. The range of δ¹³C and δ¹⁸O were characterized and the database could be incorporate into a traceability system, helping future studies about the food industry and authenticity products. In addition, the results showed satisfactory classification performances to discriminate blueberries of the mountain from those of the high-altitude region. The results are rather explorative, and they can be excellent support for the existence of a potential indication of geographical origin for Brazilian blueberries.

Conflicts of interest

The authors declare that there are no conflicts of interest.

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