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Book Review:

Passion on the Vine: A Memoir of Wine, Food, and Family by Sergio Esposito

By Lou Novacheck

If you're a wine lover, but have never tried good Italian wines, I promise you that by the time you've finished Sergio Esposito's *Passion on the Vine: A Memoir of Wine, Food, and Family*, if not before, you'll be champing at the bit to taste a good Italian wine.

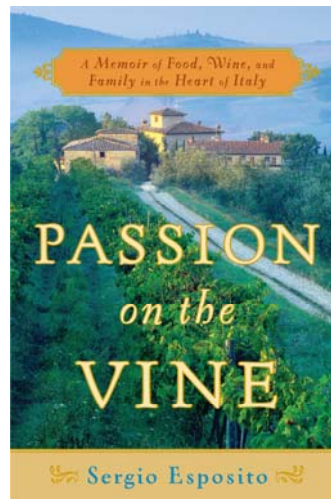
If you're not a wine lover, I'll make you the same promise.

"Whenever I drank it, I felt as if a pair of hands had reached out from the glass, grabbed my ears, and pulled me closer."

For me, a glass of wine will never again be the same. Ever. Now, when I take a sip of wine, I'll think about the truly unique quality of many Italian wines. In Italy, at least among the better grape growers, the grapes are a part of the family and are treated as such. I'll think about terroir. I'll think about Perché è così. I'll think about mushrooms picked under a full moon. I'll think about spaghetti alla chitarra. I'll think about the Barolo Boys and Luigi Veronelli. I'll think of wine as a spaceship. All these references are extremely well explained in the book, and I urge you to search out their meanings.

The author of *Passion on the Vine* missed his calling. He's a natural born writer. On page one I was back in Italy again, driving from Naples to Rome. By page two it was déjà vu, and I, too, recall people telling my how lucky I was to have to the job I had. Yes, I was lucky, but I also worked damned hard and damned long hours. And the harder I worked, the luckier I got. And by page three I was laughing in fond remembrance, although it wasn't always pleasant or cause for laughing when it had first happened.

Rather than relate my interpretations, allow me to paraphrase what the author says and you'll get a



more accurate rendering. Here are some sections in the book that made a particular impression on me.

One grower said young grapes are like a young woman. She has the body of a mature woman, but she's still a child. Treat her well when she's young, and she'll treat you well

when she's older. When she's young, her bounty of grapes is copious. But the grapes from young vines are sugar water. They're not grapes; they're sweets that look like grapes. Treat the plant well when she's young and she ages gracefully, and when she reaches maturity, that's when her absolute finest grapes are produced. And because you've treated her well when she was young, she's kinder to you in her maturity, and she gives you a bounty of true, delicious grapes. Grapes that have the flavor of the land, the people, and the nurturing she received from you when she was young. Vines that are planted today will supply the grapes that are harvested by the grower's children, just as the grapes that the grower reaps today were planted by his parents. It takes that long.

"You use your nose, your mouth, and your eyes, and you know if you like it or not."

The grapes are not doctored with foreign yeasts, chemicals, sugars, or other ingredients that don't begin and end with the grapes from a particular grower's land. Anything that is used is natural, not manmade. The must, the "starter" for wine, is from

the same vines that will produce what will become the wine a short time later. Nothing foreign, the grapes picked at the absolute exact time to reap the flavor when it's at its absolute best are added to grapes from the very same vines, but were picked a short time before.

There are no chemicals used in the growing cycle. Every day the grower examines his vines. A leaf that's a little brown, or that displays a sign of sickness is removed, by hand. Every day, he examines his vineyard and each individual plant, looking for harmful insects. Most of the time he doesn't have to worry about the insects because he's used the same processes that have been used since the time of the Romans to control the pests. And these processes are all natural.

"The ground has all the life you need to give birth to grapes ... A vine needs the earth to make a grape. Once you have that grape, you need the earth again to make wine."

Some growers don't use measurements, calibrations or scientific analysis of the wine to determine when it's ready for the next step in the process of maturing; he uses his own senses and the moon, keeping careful track of its progress across the sky.

Esposito relates his reaction on his first sip of an appassimento wine made by Giuseppe Quintarelli (appassimento is a relatively uncomplicated, but delicate, easily ruined process of using grapes that are essentially rotten to make wine). The purchase price of this book is worth that description alone. He adds that while the exact methodology is well known, why Quintarelli's wines are remarkable is not. Scientists have recreated the environment of his farm, reproduced his chemical conditions, materials, and climate. They've "... used the same grapes, grown in the same way. And they've never made anything close to a Quintarelli."

In another section, Esposito talks about terroir. Originally a French term, it's now commonly used to denote "a sense of place." More specifically, it means that grapes grown in a certain region absorb and transmogrify the qualities and nuances of the land into the taste of the grape, and subsequently into the wine. The Quintarelli description above is a casebook example.

"I make wines for me. I sell what's left over."

Esposito explains in a few short paragraphs the reason American wine buyers are generally not

fans of Italian wines (food). He tells us the single Italian wine that is a breakfast drink. He clearly explains why the "McInstant" mentality of average Americans leaves them unprepared for, and unable to cope with, or appreciate, some wines. He refers to "airport-novel language," and the ludicrousness of certain wine reviewers. He shows us the fallacy of how Italian wines are scored by the "Emperor of Wine." He tells us about the Friulian School of Gravner, how Gravner was leading the pack in new methodology when he suddenly scrapped it all and went back to using huge amphorae, large enough to hold a full-grown man and used five thousand years ago, thereby making enemies of former followers. He tells how this winemaker broke the mold on making Pinot Grigio, alienating some potential customers by his rosé-colored Pinot Grigio. We learn about zak-zak, the meaning of which you'll have to read the book to discover. We learn about "brown food." He tells us about the introverted prince and his cellars in Mount Vulture. We also learn which part of Italy will likely explode with wineries in the near future. We discover where the land of Enotria was and how we can find it today. And we learn of the favorite and most expensive wine of the ancient Romans, as well as about communist wine.

The above is a mere smattering of the wisdom and wonderful stories that Esposito imparts in this all too short book. I urge you to pick up a copy. It makes no difference if you adore wine or if you're a teetotaler. It's an absolutely spellbinding book. My only caution is to read *Passion on the Vine* on a full stomach. Otherwise your mouth will be watering every ten pages or so from the descriptions of the food and wine.

And if you should find you have an overwhelming urge to order some of the fine wines you've been reading about, check out Sergio's website (<http://www.italianwinemerchant.com/>).