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A Paean to His Passion

By Karen Page and Andrew Dornenburg

We've never met Alma Tschantret, but in honor of Mother's Day, we salute her. She's the mother of Italian wine merchant Sergio Esposito, author of the hilarious, insightful and moving memoir "Passion on the Vine: A Memoir of Food, Wine, and Family in the Heart of Italy" (Broadway, 2008).

After all, if it weren't for Alma, there would be no Sergio, and thus no page-turner to delight our senses and reignite our own passions, as this one did. As Gianfranco Soldera, Italy's most distinguished producer of Brunello di Montalcino, observes in the book, "You know what they say: If they come out right, it's because of the mother."

Following life-altering sips of wine at age 7, Esposito eats and drinks his way through his childhood in Naples, his formative years in Albany, N.Y., and his adulthood in New York City and Italy. He introduces us to renowned and often eccentric characters who populate the Italian-wine world, including Brunello producer Bartolo Mascarello and the late Luigi Veronelli, a philosopher who became the world's foremost expert on Italian wine. Veronelli entrusts to the author a vintage Malvasia literally fit for a prince.

But rarefied wines are the exception in Italy, where, Esposito writes, "Wine is like bread and salt: Without it, dinner is incomplete. . . . If you didn't have wine, you didn't have a meal." He also points out: "Wine didn't get us drunk. It brought out the flavors in our food. It cut the spice, cooled down the heat, heightened the sensations. We needed it as we needed one another."

We agree with Esposito that any afternoon or evening meal—if not life itself—is incomplete without wine, so this week we share the best of our recent tasting of Italian wines under \$15.

Prosecco, Esposito writes, is "certainly good at stimulating the palate." So is the new rosy-hued N.V. Anime Pink sparkling dry rosé wine (\$15), which contains a small percentage of prosecco



By Julia Ewan-The Washington Post

grapes. Made via the same Charmat method used to make prosecco, this charming bubbly is comprised of 40 percent pinot nero (pinot noir), 40 percent Raboso (a red wine grape native to northeastern Italy) and 20 percent blended chardonnay and prosecco, according to

Peter Matt, a partner in importer Monarchia Matt International. An elegant sparkling wine with bright pear, peach and raspberry fruitiness and a creamy finish, it pairs beautifully with shellfish and even meat dishes.

Zola in Penn Quarter is one of the first restaurants in the mid-Atlantic to serve Anime Pink. Director of operations Ralph Rosenberg pours it with tuna tartare and grilled shrimp. At a Mother's Day brunch, it could pair with all but the sweetest dishes.

A former restaurant professional himself, Esposito writes of his revelation that wine and food "could work as a team, how they could be synchronized, how I could help create an astounding experience for a diner through the correct combination of flavors." All of this week's recommendations can allow you to do the same.

A perfect partner with anything you'd couple with sauvignon blanc—including vinaigrette-dressed salads and seafood—Karen's pick is the crisp and

dry 2006 Villa Antinori Toscana Bianco (\$12). This light-bodied, refreshing white made from a blend of four grapes offers an impressive value from a well-known Tuscan producer.

Our other choices will bring out the best of any tomato-sauced pastas or pizza, or heartier dishes featuring mushrooms or meat, including veal Parmesan or those with beef, lamb or sausage.

We both loved the full-bodied, sangiovese-based 2004 Monte Antico Toscana Red Wine (\$13), a collaboration between Italian wine importer Neil Empson and Italian winemaker Franco Bernabei. Though the 2006 Bolla Valpolicella (\$9) didn't impress us nearly as much on its own, with food this 125-year-old winery's light-bodied, cherry-noted Valpolicella sprang to life.

Esposito quotes winemaker Ales Kristancic as saying that "the key to biodynamic winemaking is to know that in the world there are some forces we can't touch, some great cosmic mysteries. We can't explain them exactly, but we can see their effects. And because of this, we must have faith in their value." With one powerful whiff and then taste of the 2005 Conserva Aglianico (\$15), which is certified organic (but not biodynamic), you, too, will believe in the value of sustainable winemaking practices. This wine, which is aged in new oak barrels for 12 months, is as heavy in weight as it is loud and complex in flavor, and it requires an equally robust dish to bring out its best.

Andrew's pick, the 2005 Michele Chiarlo Barbera d'Asti Superiore "Le Orme" (\$13), disproves the notion that quantity and quality can't go hand in hand. Some 42,000 cases of this wine were made in southern Piedmont in the DOC region of Asti. The area generally is believed to produce the best barbera, elegant and complex because of its limestone and clay earth. This well-balanced, velvety-textured red is a pleasure even without food, but why deny yourself the pleasure of both?

Together, food and wine are transformative. The combination of the two "altered my thought process, and if I was feeling a little down, a good meal could pick me up," Esposito writes. "Wine and food—the scents, the ingredients, my mother's mastery—pulled me in." Armchair travelers, be advised: "Passion on the Vine" does the same.

Tips: Wine Wisdom

From the pages of "Passion on the Vine," by Sergio Esposito:

- "The first known quality winemakers were priests and alchemists, men who believed that nature was central to all understanding. . . . Wine is alive, full of yeasts and ever changing, evolving like a plant or a person, a divine creation."
- "I considered the nature of a great wine. Its value lies in the fact that you can never understand or master it. To begin to see even a small portion of what it is, you must smother your ego, stop trying to win at some mad game, and let yourself become completely engulfed by something bigger than you."
- "Get to know the winemaker. . . . Is he steadfast, true to his principles, devoted first to wine and next to profit? This was how I found the great wines that you could depend on year in and year out -- by finding the great producers."
- "If you don't miss a wine after you've drunk it, don't ever drink it again."