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## Wine Memoirs Celebrate Exuberant Italy, Lament Vanishing France

By Elin McCoy

Wine books used to be histories, travel guides or compilations of expert ratings. Now the most rapidly growing subcategory is the wine memoir, invariably billed as a tantalizing look behind the scenes and a chance to experience the author's on-the-spot sample-and-spit encounters.

Two recent examples of the genre offer very different views of what it's like to spend a life discovering and peddling wine.

Sergio Esposito's unabashed love letter to Italian wine and food, "Passion on the Vine," and Neal I. Rosenthal's often querulous "Reflections of a Wine Merchant" go well beyond vintages and varietals to explore wine's cultural context.



Sergio Esposito, author of "Passion on the Vine: A Memoir of Food, Wine, and Family in the Heart of Italy."

Esposito is the owner of the well-known New York City shop Italian Wine Merchants; Rosenthal abandoned life as a tax lawyer to become (with his wife) first an eponymous retailer on the city's Upper East Side, then an importer of wines from small producers in France and northern Italy.

Both books extol traditionally made wines created at small family-run estates by dedicated vintners—as opposed to mass-market crowd pleasers with no character or soul. Both see powerful wine critics and modern trends

threatening the human approach to winemaking. And central to both is the importance of terroir, "the combination of soil, climate, grape type, and, perhaps, human history," as Rosenthal puts it, that "are responsible for producing very special characteristics that are unique to a quite specific spot."

In flavor, though, the books couldn't be more different.

### Family Affair

"Passion on the Vine" begins as an Italian family tale in Barra, the suburb of Naples where Esposito was born, and Albany, New York, to which his parents immigrated when he was 6. His memories are meals of "linguini with little clams, still in the shell, and sweet baby tomatoes, drenched in garlic and olive oil" and life-altering sips of wine from his uncle Aldo's glass.

The main story line is an exuberant family trip to Italy that includes visits to his favorite iconoclastic producers in different regions. In Friuli, Josko Gravner ages his wines in clay amphora buried in his ramshackle cellar. Baby-faced Maurizio Anselma theorizes about great Barolo while he and Esposito cook rabbit. Then there's the mad prince who destroys his vines so no one can mistreat them after his death. Esposito paints their portraits with humor and a sharp eye.

Appealing dogs, a wild wedding and delicious asides make their way into the book—including how Nutella, the addictive chocolate and hazelnut spread made in Piemonte, saved Barolo.

Who wouldn't want to embrace Esposito's very Italian view of wine: "We needed it as we needed one another, it made every taste, every moment complete." In the end, his book is really a memoir of all the ways that food and wine bind us together, in lives full of emotion.

### Half-Empty View

If Esposito sees the world as a full glass, Rosenthal's is half-empty and, sadly, being drained every day.

His opening line ("I admit to a firmly held prejudice") sets the tone. Reading some parts of the book is like being stuck on a plane with a constant kvetcher.

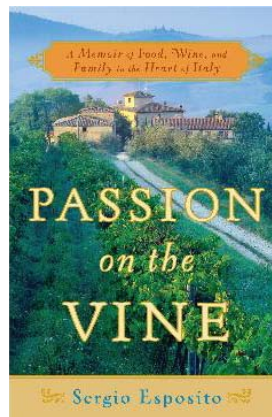
In structure, "Reflections" takes the form of a quest as Rosenthal dashes through charming villages to search out little-known wines for his portfolio, overcoming tribulations as he holds fast to his ideals. (In form, though not in tone, this resembles one of my all-time favorite wine books, "Adventures in the Wine Trade," by importer Kermit Lynch.)

### Reality Check

While Rosenthal's book doesn't have the genial humanity of "Passions on the Vine," it may provide a reality check for those with wine-importing dreams. Rosenthal takes plenty of swipes at those who disappoint him. There's a money launderer, mistrustful Burgundians who want to make sure he will pay, a snooty aristo, intractable problems of succession in small family estates, even misguided customers.

"We learned and we suffered," he says.

All the wrongs make his description of the delicate dance required to pry out great Burgundy and his riff on the sensual pleasures of spitting wine stand out even more.



"Passion on the Vine: A Memoir of Food, Wine, and Family in the Heart of Italy" by Sergio Esposito.

Rosenthal, too, is trying to make a larger point about the connection between wine and living a life with meaning and tradition, with authentic roots as deep as the vines.

If Esposito's book is a celebration, at times Rosenthal's book seems like a lament for a world that he sees as disappearing. It's not, though—even if it is under attack.

"Passion on the Vine: A Memoir of Food, Wine, and Family in the Heart of Italy" is published by Broadway Books (304 pages, \$24.95). "Reflections of a Wine Merchant: On a Lifetime in the Vineyards and Cellars of France and Italy" is published by Farrar, Straus & Giroux (272 pages, \$24).