



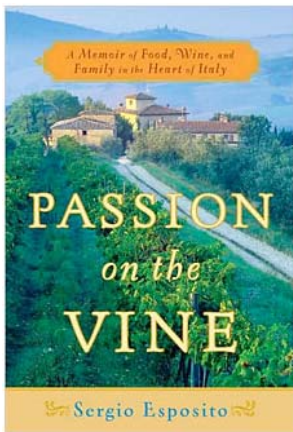
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Passion on the Vine—a review

By Ruarri Rogan

When one looks at a vineyard—you're not looking at it in the same way as you would look at an orange orchard. Instead one sees a multitude of experiences past and of moments yet to come—moments of intimacy, memorable occasions, conversations and treasured friendships. Since time immemorial, vineyards have not only been the touchstone of certain regions, but have often been the lifeblood of local communities and the cornerstone of entire generations of families. Every vineyard contains a family, a history, a culture and a purpose. This was at least, the sentiment I had before embarking on a mission to New York City, where I would promote and sell wine's connected to my family in some ways, and more importantly—wine from my country.

During that time—having spent much time in preparation for the mission, I left with those stories and sentiments of culture and family fresh in my blood. But with every sales-call and wine event I began to feel further and further from the vineyard. Soon it was about laid in cost, case-discounts and what kind of Point of Sale material was on offer. I travelled the country in a rental car with a case of wine, a corkscrew and a power-point presentation along the way having people from Westchester Wine Warehouse cruelly spit wine on my shoe after having left me waiting for an hour, sitting in cold-rooms of cellars in Maryland, helping do stock-takes in Ohio, presenting to Wholefoods buyers in North Carolina and pushing on-premise retail in Atlanta: and with every step I became a bit more confused and lost the focus of what I was doing. Having believed that wine was so important to my country and stepping into the States to tell the story of South African wine, it was very dispiriting to suddenly be faced with the fact that no one really cared so long as they could make a profit.



Step in Sergio Esposito's *Passion on the Vine: A Memoir of Food, Wine and Family in the Heart of Italy*—which from the first page pulls one directly into the rental car of he and his brother Sal at the end of an epic 60 winery tour of Italy. Sergio, an Italian born New York wine retailer has embarked on a wine-buying tour of Italy with his brother who got him into the business in the first place—and within the first pages of reading you are situated within a remarkable life, which I was utterly compelled by because

suddenly the retailer I had been up against was given a face. I completely sympathise with the opening sentiments of having a job that on the surface sounds glamorous but in reality can be very gritty—however one quickly learns that Esposito has been doing this for 3 months every year for nearly 2 decades.

From my part I was around the East Coast, Mid West and West Coast pushing wine to restaurants retailers and country-clubs tasting wine from 8:30 in the morning to 1am sometimes 6 days a week—and within two years I have more stories than I care to remember. For Sergio and his brother they're diligently working through 10 wineries a day tasting through varietals and enduring long-drives in hot weather—often what sounds glamorous, and would seem like the setting for a series of *Sideways* style misadventures through a foreign country ends up being a lot more like work than anyone else could ever imagine. One has to take their hat off to such dedication even though amidst the work it is interspersed with tales of seductive winemakers daughters, raucous Italian weddings and personalities you're unlikely to forget.

Passion on the Vine is an insight into a life less ordinary from one of the world's leading wine consultants who can be found on the pages of the *Wall Street Journal* to the *Times* to the *Wine Spectator* itself. Esposito brings the innate raconteur nature of Italian New Yorkers, combined with a mellifluous writing style into a memoir that goes to the heart of what it means to be an epicurean. He illustrates so perfectly how passion, love and romance can go a long way to carrying someone throughout life. Ultimately this is a romance between one man and an entire region which will make you fall in love with Italy; and paints the picture of a dying breed—wine-men who actually love wine, men who excel in their jobs for more than money and people who add value not only to their families but pay their dues to those who have helped them over the years. Esposito's is a poignant picture of optimism and love in a marketplace that is primarily having the life squeezed out of it by soulless critters.

Esposito re-introduced me to a feeling I nearly lost, and in his words I remembered a part of myself. When one is up against Little Penguin—it's difficult to find the actual stories and vines and passion in a fuzzy cartoon character. There is no doubt that much of Western Philosophy was built on the back of wine-fuelled sentiments; and from the foundation of Western culture there is no doubt that Italians built New York and have made the culture (together with the Irish) what it is today. Esposito, in a tale filled with adventure, comedy and energy has staked his claim to not only being a philosopher, a wine lover and a great New Yorker—but being an advocate and an inspiration to future wine millenials, showing that there's no real substitute for loving what you do.

Cheerz.

Special thanks to Dianna Tingg from Italian Wine Merchants who has reached out to so many of us on the wine blogosphere, and has shared this wonderful book with us. It is a privilege to have been given the opportunity to review such a great book.