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## Dinner with Sergio

By Lauren

A wine tasting is all very well. A wine pairing with dinner is even better. But Sergio Esposito's stories about Italian wine, its *territorio*, and the people whose lives revolve around it, are best of all. And he opens our First Person Festival with wine, dinner, *and* stories.

Esposito is a partner in Italian Wine Merchants, and has just published *Passion on the Vine: A Memoir of Food, Wine, and Family in the Heart of Italy*. This book is no foodie fantasy, although it does have more than its share of mouthwatering descriptions. Rather, it's a full and rich account of a life in which wine and food are metaphors for the human connection. Like the best Barolo wine, the book is complex and full of surprises.

We learn that Little Sergio killed his first chicken at age four and fell in love with wine at age seven. For his first seven years his family lived in Barra, on the outskirts of Naples. "In Barra, you were never alone, even when you slept. And nothing you owned was simply yours. Were you missing your lipstick? Check next door. Where was the sugar? Probably down the street. What about your favorite blue sweater? Cousin Margherita was wearing that at the movies yesterday." Sundays in Barra were as full as the households, dedicated to two things, church and supper.



When his family moved to Albany, New York to join other relatives, it was a shock for everyone. They moved to an all-black neighborhood where "We stood out terribly with our brown leather shoes and our pale faces, and, none of us having learned English in school, we couldn't communicate at all." The new foods were just as incomprehensible: cottage cheese, barbecue sauce, marshmallows, dry cereal, peanut butter, and ketchup. "We especially didn't understand marshmallows. A white spongy hunk of gelatin that is hard to digest, and, on Easter is dyed bright yellow and shaped like a chick? But *why?*"

As a young teen, Esposito saw the movie *A Cuckoo's Nest*, in which he finds parallels between the lobotomized Jack Nicholson character and the people around him in Albany, seeking routine and monochrome sameness, and eating, he imagined, Hamburger Helper. With that wake-up call, he vowed to lead a life full of variety, flavor, and warmth, from that day forward.

Esposito grew up into someone who can write about wine this way: "It wasn't a catchy pop song or a girl in a makeup commercial. You couldn't pin it down by saying it smelled like rose petals. That was as reductive and senseless as looking at *The Birth of Venus* and saying, "It's a painting of a girl in a shell."

You can buy tickets to the First Taste Preview Dinner at [Brown Paper Tickets](#).

Of course, if it's you're looking for, check out the [Complaint Choir!](#)