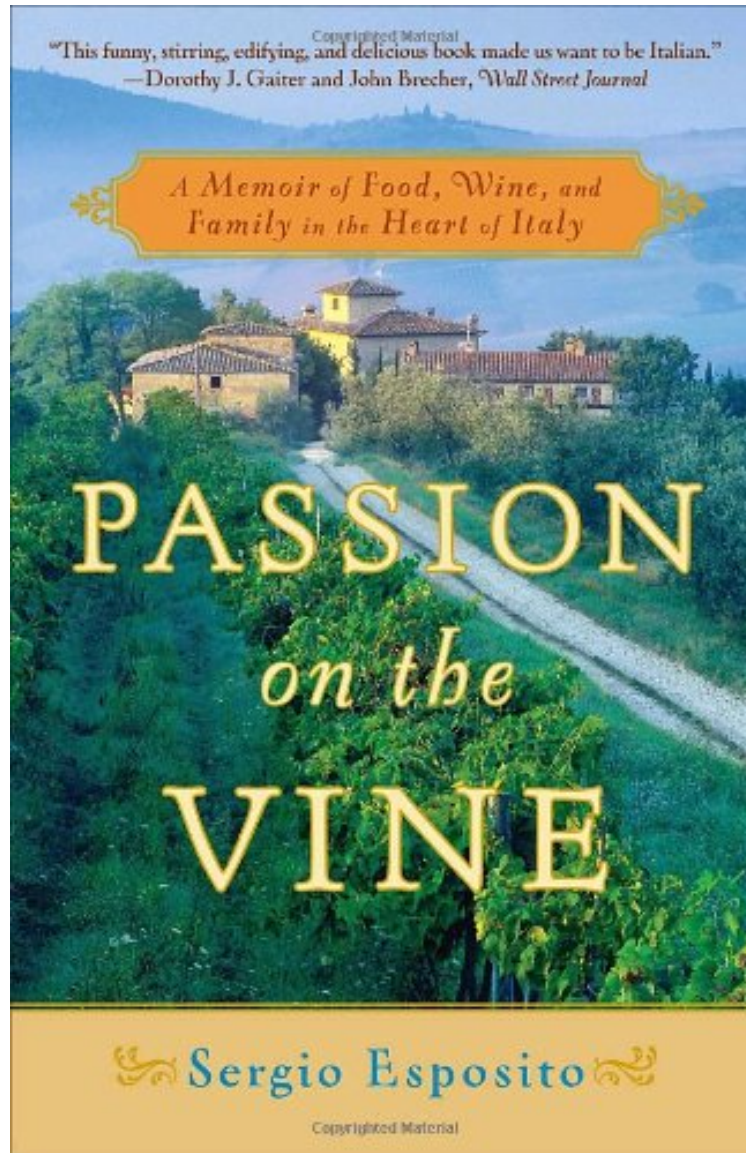


## Passion on the Vine: A Memoir of Food, Wine, and Family in the Heart of Italy

*Sergio Esposito*

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#1122235 in Books Broadway Books 2009-05-19 2009-05-19 Original language: English PDF # 1 8.00 x .66 x 5.211, .50 #File Name: 0767926080304 pages | File size: 55.Mb

**Sergio Esposito : Passion on the Vine: A Memoir of Food, Wine, and Family in the Heart of Italy** before purchasing it in order to gage whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised Passion on the Vine: A Memoir of Food, Wine, and Family in the Heart of Italy:

14 of 14 people found the following review helpful. Pop the cork and read this bookBy ForzaIf you have any interest

in wine, food, travel, culture, history, family, and people as I do, then I recommend you read this book - I enjoyed all of it. Basically, it's a memoir of the author's move from Italy to the U.S. as a boy, and how his interest and love of wine and food inspired him to learn more about wine, open an Italian wine store in New York, and through his travels, continue his wine education. He describes his travels throughout Italy in quest of the finest wines produced in that country (and the world) and understanding what motivates and inspires the people who make them. Along the way the reader gets taken for the ride through the beautiful wine making regions of Italy, and introduced to some of the iconic figures (some a bit eccentric) of Italian wine making. The author describes in detail his meetings, conversations, and tastings with these producers, and we get an inside perspective of how some of these icons have passionately and steadfastly respected history, terroir, and nature in crafting memorable wines they believe in. You'll visit their wineries, meet their families and partake in meals the author shared with the wine makers. Together they discuss the importance of food and wine pairing, and how, when done well, enhance each other and represent one of the essential aspects of an enjoyable and elevated quality of life. I imagined myself as a secret participant of the winery cantina visits and mealtime conversations he describes in the book. As a person who appreciates good wine and food, they were absolutely riveting for me as it enabled me to learn more by getting a peek inside the minds of these great wine makers. When you open this book and begin to read, it is much like a bottle of fine wine that develops and evolves over time. It has varying layers of characteristics that enhance your enjoyment, promote thinking, and will stay with you even past the last drop, or the last page.

1 of 1 people found the following review helpful. A view on authenticity. By Ken Pollard What a jerk. The author, Sergio Esposito, is one of those people who figured out very early what he liked to do, was extremely good at it, and has been doing it for years. He seems to be mostly happy at it. And he writes well. The book is about wine, Italian wine, small growers mostly, who have not always had it easy. It's about traditional vineyard techniques, old families, big houses, cramped cantinas, artists, overcrowded wine festivals, yuppie trend-followers -- a variety -- but the idea is deeper than the subject. This book is about a way to live, to be continually learning while at the same time respecting the old ways. It is about believing in something and following through with it. It is about finding the result, rather than forcing your prior conception upon it. I recommend this book.

17 of 18 people found the following review helpful. Don't stop him, he's rolling... By Bevetropo Although I don't have even a single corpuscle of Italian blood in me, my wife is 100%. Her grandparents on both sides were immigrants who came to Newark from the town of Avellino, which is about 45 minutes east of Naples, and if known at all in America, it's probably as the alleged hometown of Tony Soprano. Naples, of course, is far more famous for crime, but it's also the ancestral home of Sergio Esposito, author of *Passion on the Vine*, and it provides the springboard for his worldview and life's work. So I know a little about life in a Southern Italian family, at least through osmosis. It would also probably constitute full disclosure to add that I have an amateur's abiding interest in Italian wine, as evidenced by a number of reviews I've written on books that deal with this specific subject. Throw in the fact that I've been to Esposito's Italian Wine Merchant store in Manhattan a number of times, and you'll probably understand why I had certain preconceptions about this book before I ever opened it. In hindsight, I probably would have been better served if I had read it blind (pardon the atrocious mixed metaphor), and like a blind wine tasting, known nothing about it before I tried it. I was kind of hoping for a book that celebrated the true and the beautiful in Italian wine, but also the accessible, in the sense that you shouldn't need to take out a home equity loan before you buy, as would be the case if you were chasing '05 first growth Bordeaux. You certainly can find good, authentic QPR (quality/price ratio) wines in Esposito's store. Unfortunately, you won't find them in the book, but I'll return to this theme later. *Passion on the Vine* really isn't a traditional wine expert's memoir (here I lump together the works of intrepid importers like Kermit Lynch and writer/educators like Gerald Asher), because the story of Esposito's Neapolitan family is deeply woven into the narrative. It's a relatively engaging immigrants' tale, and the personalities of his parents, uncles and aunts especially come to life and remind me sharply of my wife's many relatives who still live in Avellino. But if your goal in reading this book is full immersion in the contemporary Italian wine scene, you may be disappointed by the family details that spill across the pages at the expense of more stories about wine. Or maybe you'll love them. You'll also probably find more details about the food he's eaten than the wines he's consumed, but that goes with the territorio. Accordingly, I'm not going to recount the "portrait of the wine merchant as a young man" story since that's not of real interest to me. For me, the first half of the book seemed to drag on and occasionally frustrated me. There are a few strange things I noted, like how his transplanted family appears to have suddenly gone from near abject poverty in Albany to relative affluence in Scottsdale without explanation, and occasional incomprehensible statements, like when he describes one of his early mentors as a true "scientist," since no one can reproduce his experiments. I also can't for the life of me figure out why he would effectively call the initial investors in *The Italian Wine Merchant* a bunch of clueless Wall Street boobs who couldn't understand how a store could only sell Italian wines, but then gave him the money anyway. At times the book reminded me of the scene in *Animal House* when Bluto says "...was it over when the Germans bombed Pearl Harbor?" Otter whispers to Boon, "Germans?" And Boon replies, "Don't stop him, he's rolling." Esposito seems to believe he alone invented the idea that a store dedicated to Italian wine could succeed in the US, although he didn't get around to opening the store until 1998. I recall shopping in a wonderful Italian food and wine store in Chicago in the early '80's called *Convito Italiano*, at a time when Esposito was still in knickers. The profiled producers

(see next paragraph) were mostly all well established when Victor Hazan wrote his wonderful guide simply called *Italian Wine*, published in 1982. When we finally get to Italy on business, the chapters are mostly arranged around visits to iconic, world-renowned properties (Bartolo Mascarello, Biondi Santi, Soldera, Josko Gravner), each singled out I presume for their respect for the land and what I might term modern traditionalism, where the best of the past is effectively preserved and enhanced by application of non-interventionist technical advances. Like I said before, these are fiendishly expensive wines that all sell for \$100 a bottle or more, so don't come looking for bargains here. But Esposito has a real gift for letting the winemakers tell their own stories. The chapter on biodynamics, for example, unfolds as a Socratic dialog between a Serbian winemaker and the author's wife. It is unquestionably the best and most entertaining introduction to the how's and why's of biodynamics I've encountered, and should be required reading for anyone who wants a primer on biodynamic theory and practice. The wines you read about here are mostly true *vini di meditazione*, so much so in fact that when visiting legendary Barolo producer Bartolo Mascarello, the winemaker sits mute for an hour smelling the wine and smiling to himself. Except for the fact that he's confined to a wheelchair, all that's missing is the lotus position. Esposito isn't afraid to reveal his personal foibles to the reader. He's impatient, petulant, self-absorbed, and even downright mean at times, particularly when he openly baits the effeminate son of one of his wine producers with a string of female names like Coco Chanel and Ursula Andress. Is he a homophobe? Well, that's passion of a different kind. I recognize this review is getting a little off topic, not unlike the way my initial expectations wandered from where they started. Read this book as a cultural history based on Italian family, food and wine in that order and you'll probably love it. Despite my grape gripes, I enjoyed a lot of it, and I don't think anyone could have summed it up better than Gianfranco Soldera, quoted after another prodigious Italian meal recounted by the author: "La storia, la famiglia, il cibo, il vino. Questa e la vita dell'uomo. History, family, food, wine. This is the life of man." A bottle of the wine they drank that afternoon, the '99 Casse Basse Soldera Brunello, isn't available at the Italian Wine Merchant, but you can get the '01 on pre-arrival for a little less than three hundred smackers a bottle if you inquire now.

As a young child in Naples, Italy, Sergio Esposito sat at his kitchen table observing the daily ritual of his large, loud family bonding over fresh local dishes and simple country wines. While devouring the rich *bufala mozzarella*, still sopping with milk and salt, and the platters of fresh *prosciutto*, sliced so thin he could see through it, he absorbed the profound relationship of food, wine, and family in Italian culture. Growing up in Albany, New York, after emigrating there with his family, he always sat next to his uncle Aldo and sipped from his wineglass during their customary hours-long extended family feasts. Thus, from a very early age, Esposito came to associate wine with the warmth of family, the tastes of his mother's cooking—and, above all, memories of his former life in Italy. When he was in his twenties, he headed for New York and undertook a career in wine, beginning a journey that would culminate in his founding of Italian Wine Merchants, now the leading Italian wine source in America. His career offered him the opportunity to make frequent trips back to Italy to find wine for his clients, to learn the traditions of Italian winemaking, and, in so doing, to rediscover the Italian way of life he'd left behind. *Passion on the Vine* is Esposito's intimate and evocative memoir of his colorful family life in Italy, his abrupt transition to life in America, and of his travels into the heart of Italy—its wine country—and the lives of those who inhabit it. The result is a remarkably engaging and entertaining wine/travel narrative replete with vivid portraits of seductive places—the world-famous cellars of Piedmont, the sweeping estates of Tuscany, the lush fields of Campania, the chilly hills of Friuli, the windy beaches of Le Marche; and of memorable people, diverse and vibrant wine artisans—from a disco-dancing vintner who bases his farming on the rhythm of the moon to an obsessive prince who destroys his vineyards before his death so that his grapes will never be used incorrectly. Esposito's luscious accounts of the wonderful food and wine that are so much a part of Italian life, and his poignant and often hilarious stories of his relationships with his family and Italian friends, make *Passion on the Vine* an utterly unique and enchanting work about Italy and its eternally seductive lifestyle.

From Publishers Weekly At a young age, Esposito and his family move from Naples, Italy, to Albany, N.Y., where he first falls in love with wine in the basement dining room of his uncle's house. Even as he reflects on the poor quality of those first sips, he understands he was consuming the sense of family and the spirit of his crazy yet adored uncle. After opening a store in Albany, he moves to Manhattan to work as a sommelier in the early 1990s. There he partakes of haute cuisine and affluent wine collections, while learning the hierarchy of international wines. While French wines are considered the pinnacle of the industry and Californian wines are gaining interest, there are very few Italian wines of note. With a fiery passion, he determines to bring appreciation of the wines of his homeland to America and opens Italian Merchant Wines, where he continues today to import highly selected Italian wines. His writing is exuberant, and his wine descriptions evocative. A bottle of Ribolla reminds him of staring at a cracked painting of a beautiful woman from long ago. For lovers of wine, this is a full-bodied read about one man's passion and the many delectable moments along his journeys. (Apr.) Copyright © Reed Business Information, a division of Reed Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved. From Booklist Esposito's earliest memories anchor firmly in the smells, tastes, and sounds of the suburban Neapolitan village of his birth. There he first encountered the raw materials from which sprang a gloriously

vibrant cuisine. In 1974 Esposito departed Naples for upstate New York. He became decidedly American, but he never abandoned his Italian roots. Esposito appreciates the uniqueness and the unpretentiousness of good Italian food: “simultaneously no big deal and the biggest deal possible.” Summers in Europe gave him an ever-greater appreciation for wine, and business partnership with Joe Bastianich and Mario Batali allowed him to turn his passion into a thriving import enterprise that gave him the opportunity to share with American consumers his appreciation for the full spectrum of Italian wines. In these pages, Esposito recounts adventures and discoveries across the Italian peninsula as he sought out the best vintages to offer in his Manhattan retail shop. --Mark Knoblauch “An unabashed love letter to Italian wine and food . . . a memoir of all the ways that food and wine bind us together, in lives full of emotion.”—Bloomberg.com “It is hard to read a page without developing pangs of hunger and thirst.”—Los Angeles Times