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Wine in Words

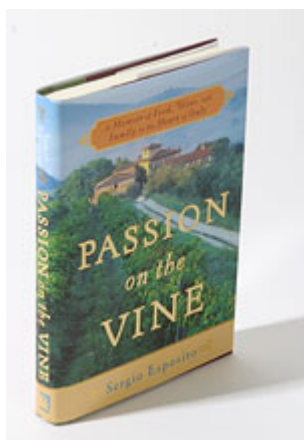
For Father's Day, Give a Wine-Loving Dad One of These Great Narratives

By Dorothy Gaiter and John Brecher

Just in time for Father's Day, there is good news to share about wine books.

When we were growing up in wine in the 1970s, there were some concise and often witty wine guides and a whole lot of books that discussed wine in a compelling, narrative way. We probably learned as much about American history from Leon Adams's "The Wines of America" as from any textbook. Over the past decade or so, however, the world of wine books was overwhelmed by guides, dictionaries, introductory courses and ratings books in which wit was too often replaced with a kind of solemn accounting. There is certainly a place for those, but they take wine out of its context: real life.

If Dad is interested in wine, our guess is that he already has plenty of reference books. Instead, give him a book this year that he can enjoy reading from cover to cover. We are happy to report that the concept of narrative writing about wine has returned. Here are three books that are good examples of what we mean. One is an autobiographical journey told through wine; one is a historical, biographical story told through wine, and one is a nonfiction narrative of important financial, historical and geographical forces told through wine. There are other good narratives on the shelves, but these will give you some idea of what's out there.



Passion on the Vine

By *Sergio Esposito*
(Broadway Books, \$24.95)

This funny, stirring, edifying and delicious book made us want to be Italian. Mr. Esposito takes us on a tasty, sometimes hilarious, always wondrous tour of Italy, past and present, where we meet its passionate winemakers amid a gallery of other memorable

characters and almost taste every drop of wine and every morsel of food that he describes throughout. The book contains a delightful smattering of Italian idiomatic expressions such as *scarpetta*. "Scarpetta," Mr. Esposito writes, "is a single word that means 'that dish I just ate was so tasty that I must wipe the plate clean with my bread in order to consume every bit of juice.' It is the ultimate compliment to an Italian cook."

There's history here, a lot of it, including Mr. Esposito's personal story, which began in Naples, Italy, then found him in Albany, N.Y., and finally in New York City, where he started the well-regarded store Italian Wine Merchants. And there's the history of Italy's wines, including what the ancient Romans drank, how Italy's wines sprang to the world's attention, the triumphs they've experienced and the challenges that face them. Along the way, we meet a womanizing winemaker whose explanation of biodynamic winemaking is so simply rapturous that Mr. Esposito's wife, Stephany, follows him through mud in her new Prada boots without complaint. Another, "widely regarded as the best producer of Brunello di Montalcino," tells Mr. Esposito, "Not everyone can taste beauty." Among his parting words: "If you don't miss a wine after you've drunk it, don't ever drink it again."

Of course, there's the mad prince, a genius who destroyed his exceptional vines because he didn't want anyone to mistreat them after his death. The prince, near death, allowed Luigi Veronelli, "the forefather of the Italian quality-wine movement," to take his remaining wine and make it available only to those who would understand it. Mr. Veronelli, who died two months after meeting Mr. Esposito at a once-in-a-lifetime tasting of several vintages of the prince's wines, sold the lion's share to Mr. Esposito after seeing how Mr. Esposito ate and what kind of face he had.

It's a shame that this book can't be disguised as a necktie, because if Mom gets her hands on it first, Dad will just have to wait.