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The Pour By Eric Asimov



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Mysteries With a Menu

A few months back Charles and Michele Scicolone did the good deed of turning me onto Andrea Camilleri's series of Inspector Montalbano mysteries. I was at a small dinner party at their apartment, which is always a treat since Michele, a cookbook author, is naturally an accomplished cook, and Charles is the longtime wine director at I Trulli and the wine rabbi at Vino, an all-Italian wine shop on East 27th Street.

We started talking about books, and I mentioned how much I loved the wonderfully atmospheric novels of Alan Furst, which all take place in the haunted years leading up to World War II.

More than plot, more than character, I respond to atmosphere in fiction, particularly in detective fiction. For me, the best parts of the Sherlock Holmes stories were the lead-ins—Holmes's periodic bouts with the dumps, his jousting with Watson, the interior descriptions of 221B Baker Street. Once the game was afoot and the carriage clattered off to Charing Cross I was pretty much done with the story.

The masters are unsurpassed for atmosphere—Hammett defined San Francisco of the 1920's and Chandler Los Angeles of the 40's. James Ellroy took Los Angeles into a gloriously nightmarish realm, until he got literary.

But these have nothing to do with the Inspector Montalbano books, which take place in Sicily, a million miles away from America. No American crime novel could possibly unfold as slowly and as timelessly as these do. They have a respect for history, culture and tradition that is thoroughly and completely Italian, and if you have ever traveled in Italy and spent time with Italians you will feel that you are there on every page. I suspect that it's even more true for Sicily, though I've never been there so I can't say for sure.

Food is central to this culture in a way that would be impossible in an American novel. Spenser, Robert B. Parker's intrepid detective, certainly loves his food and his beer, wine and whiskey, but one always gets the feeling that his eating and drinking are meant to set him apart from his culture rather than convey membership. Here is a passage from "The Terra-Cotta Dog," a 1996 Montalbano mystery, that I can't imagine occurring in any other culture. The inspector is standing outside a trattoria, when he has a brainstorm, and can't decide whether to follow his idea or fill his stomach. Then follows a brief exchange with the proprietor.

The scent of fried mullet coming from the restaurant won the duel. He ate a special appetizer of shellfish, then had them bring him two sea perches so fresh they seemed to be still swimming in the sea.

"You're eating without conviction, Inspector."

"It's true. The fact is, I've got something on my mind."

"The mind should be forgotten when the Lord in His grace puts such perches in front of you," Calogero said solemnly, walking away.

Later on, in the same story, Montalbano stays for an impromptu dinner at an elderly couple's house.

The soft vegetables, which consisted of the leaves and flowers of Sicilian zucchini—the long, smooth kind, which are white, lightly speckled with green—had come out so tender, so delicate, that Montalbano actually felt deeply moved.

"You're eating without conviction." Where in America would anybody ever make that observation? Perhaps without gusto, or without appetite. But conviction? Only in Italy, at least in my experience, is the consumption of food and wine held in such reverence. Montalbano doesn't even like to talk when he eats.

Of course, the modern globalized world has made far more of an impression on the rest of Italy than on Vigàta, Montalbano's fictional Sicilian town. But in "Passion on the Vine: A Memoir of Food, Wine and Family in the Heart of Italy," by Sergio Esposito, owner of Italian Wine Merchants, a shop on East 16th Street that in fact is a rival to Vino, you get a sense of the tenacious hold that food and wine has on the Italian soul. Sergio's memoir is one of the truest expressions of Italian food and wine culture that I know, full of numerous characters who would be perfectly at home observing, "You're eating without conviction."

I can tell you that we ate and drank with conviction at Casa Scicolone. I won't take you through the food, which Jeremy Parzen captured with excellent photographs. But the wines were superb. Since I wrote an account a few years back of tasting the extraordinary white Fiorano wines of Alberico Boncompagni Ludovisi, prince of Venosa, Charles had been telling me that I had to taste the prince's reds, which he felt were even more compelling. It just so happened that he had a few bottles himself, from 1991, 1989 and 1986, and on this occasion he was going to open them.

I will say that these red wines were great, though not so singular as the whites. They were made in the Bordeaux style, a blend of cabernet sauvignon and merlot, and they were great Bordeaux-style wines, on a par with Sassicaia, the renowned super-Tuscan. Each was balanced and lovely, with aromas of leather and flowers and that pencil-lead, cigar-box quality that you find in aged Pauillacs. The '91 was especially graceful, while the '89 was more concentrated. But the '86 was the one that moved me, as Montalbano might have said. It was the most herbal of the three, with aromas more licorice than leather, and flavors that persisted long in the mouth.

Each was so different, yet each was clearly of the same place.

Wine may be a transient pleasure, but it gets into the memory and the unconscious. I think I'm a better person for having tasted those wines. I know I'm a happier person for having discovered Montalbano.