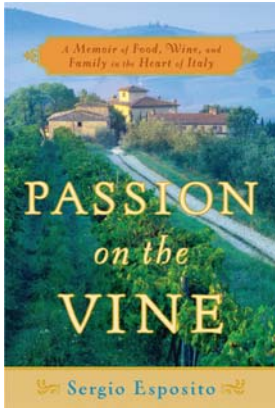


The Gazette

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Passion on the Vine: A Memoir of Food, Wine, and Family in the Heart of Italy By Sergio Esposito (Broadway Books, 2008, \$27.95)

By Bill Zacharkiw



Esposito is an Italian immigrant to the United States and an Italian wine importer in New York City. This is first and foremost his memoirs—an entertaining look at how he grew up in the poorest part of Naples and immigrated with his family to Albany, N.Y., his love of Italian cuisine, the importance of family. But it is also a manifesto about the world of modern winemaking.

As we travel with him through Italy, tasting the wines and meeting some of the country's most important and influential winemakers, we get a deeper understanding of what these wines are all about—how the greatest ones are those that are incontestably tied to a respect for tradition.

One of my favourite moments in the book occurs when, as a self-described “whiz kid,” Esposito goes to sample wines at the Barolo winery of Bartolo Mascarello. Mascarello, an older man in a wheelchair, pours young Sergio and himself a glass of Barolo, and for hours sits in silence in front of Esposito, swirling the wine in his glass, smelling it, putting it down—ignoring the young man.

Frustrated and angry, Esposito at first plays along defiantly. But as he loses track of time, he writes, “the wine was no longer what I’d first perceived. I wasn’t in a world of recognizable perfumes and sensations. I was in a complex labyrinth in which nothing made sense.” He then writes about beauty, humility and respect, and their importance in both making wine and appreciating it. They finished the bottle in silence, Esposito thanked Mascarello and left, and, as he writes, “the whiz kid did not come with me.”

If you want to understand what I mean about authenticity and learn a whole lot about Italian wine at the same time, this is a great place to start.