



Wine honcho gives Italian varieties push

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From a poor childhood in Naples, to washing pots in a Manhattan restaurant, to the center of the Italian wine scene, Sergio Esposito has had a great rise.

And the wine importer is only in his 30s.

The owner of Italian Wine Merchants and partner of Italian cultural ambassadors Mario Batali and Joe Bastianich published a book last year, "Passion on the Vine: A Memoir of Food, Wine, and Family, in the Heart of Italy." (Broadway).

In what is becoming an increasingly common genre — the wine memoir — Mr. Esposito's book begins with his early life in the housing projects of Naples. His family, marked for an ancestor's support of Mussolini, was shut out of opportunity. The family didn't have much money, but never wanted for food. Mr. Esposito, with help from a sharp ghost writer, writes so evocatively about Italian food — whether his mother's peasant cuisine or the work of a four-star chef — that the words make you hungrier than cookbook glossies.

His family emigrated to the United States when he was young to bland and chilly Upstate New York. A return visit to Italy as a teen ignited newfound respect for his Italian heritage and the nation's food and wine.

The first half of his book pokes fun unflinchingly at his idiosyncratic family in passages that will resonate with anyone with an off-beat uncle, bickering parents, or loud family gatherings. Later, he brings to life peculiar Italians in the wine industry: A guy making wine in clay amphorae. A womanizing Slovenian who grows vines under the New Age yet age-old organic philosophy of biodynamics and makes a convincing case for it. Through it all, Mr. Esposito weaves detail about grape growing and winemaking that will enrich casual to experienced wine drinkers.

By the last third of the book, however, the reader begins to realize that Mr. Esposito's colorful vignettes are profiles of wine producers he represents. The well-written book then comes off as an advertising piece of sorts and boils to blistering diatribe against competing views of winemaking and wine drinking.

Nevertheless, fans of Italy, Italian food and Italian wine will find the majority of Mr. Esposito's memoir fun and engaging.

Mr. Esposito's passion is well placed. While our wine philosophies may differ slightly, we agree that Italy has an outstanding, diverse wine industry worth exploring. I recently tried some Italian wines, none of which, to my knowledge, have any connection with Mr. Esposito. They remind me why I return to the Italy section for affordable, unique wines.

Tormarsecia 2006 Neprica, Puglia, doesn't stand out on the shelf, but don't pass it by. An interesting marketing attempt and very good value: Neprica is a contraction of the names of the three grapes used to make the wine: negroamoro, primitivo, and cabernet sauvignon. This wine, from the prominent Antinori family, is a reminder that Italy grows hundreds of different wine grapes and many are worth trying. As its name suggests, negroamoro is a dark berry. Primitivo is the Italian name for zinfandel, and everyone knows cabernet. The trio has great results with a wine rich in dark fruit character and slightly minty overtones. A real bargain. \$9.HHHH

I can drink the tasty, food-friendly Chiantis just about every day. Placido Chianti Classico 2004 Riserva is a great example. Considerable cherry, blackberry, and vanilla aroma for a wine comprised most of the sometimes anemic sangiovese grape. Flavors of cherry and a slight toffee aftertaste follow through with a pleasant finish. \$15. HHHH 1/2

The plush, easy-drinking dolcetto is one of the Italy's distinctive grapes. Vigne Regali L'Ardi 2006 Dolcetto d' Acqui is deep velvet colored with smells of dark cherry and pomegranate and bright plum and almond flavors. For all its vibrancy, it finishes tart and bit flat, a problem with dolcetto, which is notoriously low in acids. But dolcettos are worth checking out. \$9.