

The Italian Wine Connection

Francine Segan (February 03, 2016)

Acclaimed New York Times wine critic Eric Asimov writes three columns—The Pour, Wines of the Times and Wine School—in which he explores a specific type of wine each month. Part memoir and part manifesto, his latest book *How to Love Wine* tells the story of how he went from writing beer reviews for his high school newspaper to becoming America's most trusted wine critic.

What are your general impressions of Italian wine?

The great thing for me is the variety of it. You have to go back hundreds of years, when every region had its own wine. You made one vine in one valley, over the hill, and in the next valley, they made a completely different kind of wine. Twenty-five years ago, Americans were familiar with a handful of these wines, but there are dozens, if not hundreds, and now we are discovering them and experiencing how wonderful they are. They are showing up everywhere; they're great.

I'm an avid reader of your Wine School...

This is a school in fundamentals. In some ways, a number of Italian wines are advanced courses, so we are moving on. We will be doing Nebbiolo wines from Barolo, Barbaresco and Piemonte. We will be doing wines from Mount Etna. We will be looking at some Italian whites. We'll have an outdated view of Italian whites but they can be so wonderful. We might even do something like Lambrusco, which is just a joy.

How does the column work?

The column appears once a month. I pick a particular wine and suggest a few bottles readers can look for. Over the course of the month, we drink these wines, virtually together. Readers can comment on them; we can have a conversation through comments on the Times website. The idea here isn't just to taste wines, such as a laboratory experiment, but to actually drink them in a natural setting: drink them with food, with friends or family, and pay attention to the wine. It's not about reading books or memorizing anything - it's about paying attention to your own experience and taking your own experience seriously, rather than feeling like you don't know enough to enjoy wine.

Do you remember any particularly great pairings of Italian wine and food?

There are many classic combinations, but I personally think the notion of wine pairing is a little overrated. We tend to make it too complicated - balancing nuances here, hints of flavor there. Maybe that is for sommeliers and chefs to do, so they can offer you a very specific experience. I think at home there are a dozen different wines you could drink with carbonara, for example. Who is to say whether a white wine or a red wine is better?

What about with a good pizza?

In Italy, people tend to drink beer with pizza. I believe in the bubble theory: I love Lambrusco.

In *How to Love Wine*, there is a description of a friend of yours, Jim, and his dad enjoying wine. Can you describe that story?

Jim's father was an immigrant from Sicily. He was not a connoisseur of wine but he always had a gallon jug of red in his refrigerator. When he came home from work every day, he would pour himself a glass or two with dinner. To me, that is the most basic and wonderful way to enjoy wine: as a drink



with your family over a meal. You don't really care where it came from or what kind of wine it is. In a lot of ways, we are beyond that now. We can't help but be conscious of these things, especially when we live in a place like New York with so many varieties of wine to choose from. For centuries, though, we drank what was available locally - we didn't have a lot of choice. That was fine. That was the wine that people drank.

I love how you talk about the Italian way of celebrating sparkling wine.

I have been to a lot of dinners in Italy. Maybe they are a little ceremonial because they are with winemakers, people in the business, but I have never seen a meal start off without Spumante of some sort, whether it's Prosecco or Franciacorta or sparkling wine from Mount Etna. It always begins the meal. It's not that everybody drinks a bottle of it; they touch it to their lips before moving on to (in their minds) the more important wines being served.

Well, thank you and cin cin! Here's to Italian wine!

My pleasure.

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