

Wine Makes Good Blood

Wine Culture Among Toronto Italians

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Article abstract

While the author's past research on Toronto Italians has explored foods place in the domestic and mythic landscapes of immigrants (from the kitchen, garden, and winecellar of home, to the mythic Land of Cockaigne (Paese di Cuccagn), "a gastronomic utopia," still embedded in immigrant consciousness, this paper elaborates the wine nexus and explores the meanings of wine—material and symbolic, historic and contemporary—in the culture of predominately first-generation Toronto Italians. It delineates how wine figures in several primary binary oppositions in Italian folk culture, which oppose 1) wine to water; 2) wine to bread; 3) blood to body; and 4) the semantics of red vis à vis white. Further, it focusses on how Italian historic and symbolic contexts intersect with this culture through family history, through personal experience and anecdote, and to a lesser extent through direct historic sources. It provides snapshots of how cultural history and personal experience constantly intertwine within the praxis of folk culture.

HORS THÈME / OPEN TOPIC

WINE MAKES GOOD BLOOD Wine Culture Among Toronto Italians*

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for my father, Alberto Del Giudice

Introduction

Two of the many wine-related idioms with common conversational currency in our Toronto Italian household, were: *lu vinë fa bon sanguë* [wine makes good blood],¹ and *l'acqua fa malë e lu vinë fa cantà* [water is bad for you [but] wine makes you sing]. Both equate wine consumption with good health.

* I thank those who contributed to this study by allowing me to interview them: Giulio and Amelia Belli (July 7, 1998), Antonio and Jolanda D'Angelo (April 13, 1998), Gianpaolo and Anna Del Bianco (April 12, 1998), Alberto and Liliana Del Giudice (April 13, 18, 1998), Carlo and Marisa Del Giudice (April 14, 1998), Egismondo and Esterina Del Giudice (April 13, 1998), Vincenzo and Ada Di Ninno (April 12, 1998), Franca and Sam Pantaleo, Rossana (Di Zio) Magnotta of Magnotta Winery Corp. (July 30, 1998), Nick Fasola of Cilento Wines, and Anthony Martelli (architect), Greenpark homes. I thank others for acting as consultants and mediators: my sisters: Claudia Del Giudice Galletta, Franca Del Giudice Poldi, Irene Del Giudice D'Angelo, and brother-in-law, Domenico Galletta. The debt to my father, Alberto Del Giudice, a font of information, is vaster and abiding. Without his enthusiasm for life and for wine, I might never quite have experienced their full significance. Collectively, the following Italian regions were represented in fieldwork: Abruzzi, Calabria, Friuli, Lazio, Puglia. Since many interviews alternated between Italian and Italian dialects, I have simplified their citation in this essay, by translating and paraphrasing passages into English.

This paper represents a radically reduced version of research on the Italian historical and ethnographic contexts of immigrant wine culture, which will appear in a future collection of my food and wine writings: *In Search of Abundance: Mountains of Cheese, Rivers of Wine and Other Italian Gastronomic Utopias*.

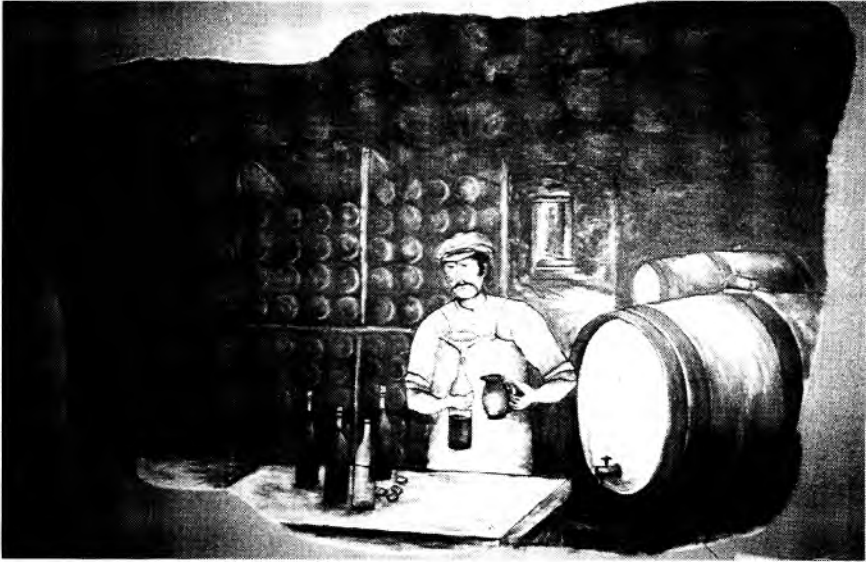
1. A Terracinese codicil to this proverb states: *e la fatica fa ittà lu sanguë* [and work causes you to shed blood].

Because Italian immigrants to Toronto largely emerged from regional peasant cultures, it is not surprising that wine continued to be central to health beliefs, foodways, expressive and material culture, and a food-centered cosmology, and that it ultimately embodied sacred truths.

Past research on Toronto Italians variously explored food's place in the domestic and mythic landscapes of immigrants: from the kitchen, garden, and winecellar of home (Del Giudice 1993), to the mythic *Paese di Cuccagna* (Land of Cockaigne), a "gastronomic utopia," still embedded in immigrant consciousness (Del Giudice 1998, 2001). While these previous writings touched only briefly on wine and winecellars, the present paper elaborates the wine nexus and explores the meanings of wine — material and symbolic, historic and contemporary — in the culture of predominately first-generation Toronto Italians. The larger picture (cf. unnumbered note) delineates how wine figures in several primary binary oppositions in Italian folk culture, which oppose wine to water; wine to bread (in gendered terms, embodied in mythic Bacchus/Ceres); blood to body (in Christian terms); and the semantics of red vis à vis white wine. But here I focus on Italian life in Canada, and how Italian historic and symbolic contexts intersect the culture of Toronto Italians, through family history, through personal experience and anecdote, and to a lesser extent through direct historic sources. I intend thereby to provide snapshots of how cultural history and personal experience constantly intertwine in the praxis of folk culture.

As is true for many Toronto immigrants, viticulture formed an integral part of my own family history. My father's was a grape-producing peasant family in Terracina (southern Lazio), on the maternal and paternal sides.² My father's parents, Giovanni and Luisa (Palmacci) Del Giudice owned approximately 10,000 square metres of vineyards. They were primarily grape growers, not vintners, and whereas quality was a prime concern with regard to table grapes prepared for markets in Rome, only discards went into home winemaking. My father did not particularly like nor drink wine as a young man in Terracina. His own winemaking and consuming days largely began when he immigrated to Toronto in the mid-1950s.

2. Curiously, issues of gender equity have crept into my research. Just as wine research seems to balance a predominately female perspective in previous food writings, it also complements recent work on women healers and my female genealogy (Del Giudice forthcoming), with something of a male counterpart through the present focus on my father's occupational genealogy.



Photos 1, 2. Stylized hand-painted murals at Cilento Wines, Vaughan, “demonstrating the old world tradition of wine making”.



Terracina vineyards were the locus of many family narratives (e.g., my grandmother’s buried treasure story), of communal life (e.g., choral singing), as well as the source of many sad memories (e.g., family feuds over inheritance). The vine had been the blessing and the curse of their peasant life. My father developed a hatred for the land and from a young age vowed never to remain a *contadino* (peasant). Ironically, had they not sold off the vineyards (particularly in the now fashionable San Felice seaside area), to earn passage on trans-Atlantic ships, they too might have enjoyed the payoffs from rampant post-WWII land development. The

thought of what *might* have been haunts my father still. He had spent most of his childhood and adult life in Italy working the fields and although he has not practiced viticulture in over 40 years, has retained a technical dialect lexicon which is impressive and still called forth with ease — so engrained had those movements, those judgements, their words, become. The vine was life. In Terracinese dialect, at least, they are one and the same: *la vita*. Wine therefore was indeed, “life’s blood” — through genealogy (literally in the *bloodline*), as much as providing the family’s *livelihood*. Wine made good blood in more ways than one.

Wine/Blood and Notions of Health

The majority of Italian immigrants to Toronto came directly from the land, by-passing modernization and the industrialization of Italy’s Post-War Boom in the 1960s altogether. Their attitudes remained deeply imbedded in a hitherto unbroken continuum of peasant civilization. Wine was at the center of their cosmology, as well as their religious system. In the sacramental body and blood of the Eucharist, the wine/blood equation became firmly rooted in Christian cultures (Bernardi 1995: 8). Wine, indeed, was one of the contributions the southern Mediterranean made to Christianity and its rites, as were bread and olive oil (Montanari 1993: 24-30). Yet Christian culture here merely built upon pagan usage and pagan symbols already firmly in place, and endowed them with new meanings. Many rituals of Italian folk Catholicism continue to re-enact the blood sacrifice quite literally (e.g., the *battenti* or flagellants of Basilicata), and blood-related miracles (e.g., the liquification of St. Gennaro’s blood in Naples) continue to capture the popular imagination, even though they are no longer sanctioned by the Church. Blood and religiosity in Italian folk culture continue to be intimately linked. It may not require a large leap of faith, therefore, to extend the *spiritual* benefits of blood (wine) to notions of *physical* wellbeing. In other words, sacramental blood (wine), along with sacramental flesh (bread), make one spiritually *and* physically whole. The blood-wine binomial runs deep, permeates many areas of expressive culture, belief (official *and* unofficial), and notions of health, and is widely operative in folk medicinal practices. I might even speculate that it was the strong liturgical association of wine as blood that contributed to a widespread preference for *red* wine (besides its assimilability to notions of health, i.e., rosy cheeked, a “picture of health,” vs. “white as a ghost” sickly).

The medicinal uses of wine are millennial, and, in the Italian folk pharmacopeia, feature prominently. Wine is taken internally, fortified with herbs, cooked into syrups, and as distilled spirit used externally as linament. But apart from such uses, from specific intestinal to muscular ailments, wine is seen as contributing to general wellbeing. Wine (along with bread) is largely considered a staple *food* of great nutritional value and as such is considered the best preventive medicine. Full-strength wine (as opposed to *vinello* cf. *infra*), was traditionally reserved for the sick, the convalescent (e.g., postpartum women), and the aged (for whom it was considered the “milk of old age”), and was frequently set aside for periods of particularly strenuous labour, such as the harvest.³ Wine gave energy, prevented illness, but played an important role in social health too, marking convivial and celebratory gatherings of joy and grief.

Wine and Children

No less than to the aged, wine was considered beneficial to children. When we children had colds, we were given wine cooked down to a delicious syrup (together with honey, lemon, and bay leaves), and several fortified wines were cheerfully given to us as tonics, such as *vino di China* (“*Ferro China*”) — of which I was *not* fond, and *marsala all'uovo* (egg-fortified marsala, “Sperone” brand) — which was never given in large enough doses, as far as we children were concerned. Marsala (or coffee) was added in limited amounts each morning to a *zabaione* — known to us simply as *ovè sbattutè* (beaten raw egg yolk with sugar), to fortify us before we set off on the long walk to Duncan B. Hood school — often through snow and rain. Daily wine consumption was strongly encouraged in children as well, to make healthy and strong bodies. [Red] wine makes good [red] blood. As an anemic child, I was given not only red meat (and also, then-loathed liver, cooked to resemble shoe leather), but red wine as well. In this equation of red wine with red blood can perhaps be seen a transaction of sympathetic magic (similar to the supposed effects of eating walnuts to improve brain power, given their loose resemblance).

3. Various photographs capture this moment, but one in particular features a priest, prominently dispensing largesse as he pours wine for his workers (*Alimentazione* 1998: 167); another shows a Bergamasque farmwife pouring wine for the men at the time of haying (Merisio 1983: n. 24).

Indeed, the acculturation of children to these wine values was valiantly practiced among first-generation Italian immigrants for whom the idea of a legal drinking age was foreign. We were served wine with dinner, even if it had to be made more palatable by mixing it with *gassosa* (carbonated white soda) or ginger ale. I recall watching the dark red wine trickle in plumes down into the effervescing glass, turning its contents a pleasant rosé, and feeling rather important about having partaken of some forbidden fruit. The game was for my father to pretend that he had slipped in more than he had intended, and that we had gotten away with it. But by the time we grew past the age of 9 or 10, not even this fiction washed, for we shunned wine altogether.

The issues of the correct use of alcohol and the *cultural* attitudes towards temperance⁴ have often caused a direct head-on collision (pardon the macabre pun) between traditional immigrant attitudes and the Anglo-establishment in Canada. Some immigrants may even have used wine consumption, as Piedmontese American Joe Cappello apparently did, as a marker, stating: "I am not a member of mainstream Anglo-Saxon-derived [American] culture" (Clements 1990: 22). Anglo-Canada has now been partly converted to wine culture, thanks perhaps to the great numbers of wine-drinking immigrants from many ethnic groups, who have shared their customs, their attitudes, and their homemade wine. But the victory may have proven pyrrhic, since the general conversion of 2nd- and 3rd-generation Italian immigrants from wine to carbonated drinks (and beer), and hence from ethnic to mainstream credo, has been vast.

Water and Wine

A significant binary opposition in Italian peasant culture was that of water vs. wine, an opposition that might be viewed in Levi-Straussian terms, as analogous to *le cru et le cuit*, that is the natural vs. the cultural, or in this instance, the natural vs. the cultured (fermented). While wine was considered

4. On the acculturation of Italian Americans to American drinking habits, cf. Lolli/Serianni/Golder 1958 (esp. pp. 98-101). On the importance of generational data on the acculturation of Italian American drinking behavior, cf. also: Simboli: 1985. Among interesting findings cited are that Italians (in Italy) disassociate drunkenness and alcoholism in their perception of problem drinking. Italians indeed, have a high rate of cirrhosis, while they have a low rate of social problems connected with drinking.

healthful, water frequently was not. If wine was thought to produce good blood, conversely, many proverbs often expressed negative judgements on water such as: *l'acqua nfrascica i ponti* [water rots bridges, cf. Galanti 1981: 65, 68]. Or, put more succinctly: *L'acqua fa male, e il vino fa cantà* (cf. supra). Carrying this belief to absurd lengths, my father still prides himself — transferring a centuries-old prejudice to the New World — that during most of his life he has never drunk water!

The custom of mixing water (later soda) with wine is ancient, but in most parts of peasant Italy, this blend seems to have been made by necessity, and remained in immigrant culture largely by force of habit, or also as a way of softening frequently poor-tasting homemade wines (cf. infra.). *Lu vinu havi ad essiri turcu* [wine should be Turkish (i.e., Muslim) — that is, “unbaptized” with water, cf. Alaimo 1974: n.1109], tells one Sicilian proverb! Strong, unadulterated wine, was the ideal. Weak, tempered, watery wine, was the reality.

The wine/water (cf. *vinu/vinello* or full-strength vs. watered wine) opposition marked the boundary between the festive and the quotidian. Festive days of gastronomic abundance alternated with the many days of want and privation, that is, the common daily lot of peasants over the centuries (cf. Ciceri 1983: 366; Del Giudice 2001). *Vinu/vinello* also functioned as social marker. In general, the best wines went to landowners, while the dregs or once-pressed grapes could be enjoyed by labourers. The practice of second-pressing (watered) grapes was common all over Italy, and was known most frequently as *vinello* or *vin piccolo* — a *small* wine (cf. small beer), the wine of daily consumption. The barrel containing this *vinaccia* might be watered frequently — as long as some colour and flavour were present, but resulted in wine that easily turned moldy and acidic. Water ran through the skins and stems again and again till spring, as the wine became ever lighter in colour, and progressively lost any alcoholic content. Again, red (wine) and white (water) lay in stark opposition, setting up a common perception of wine/life and strength, against water/weakness and lifelessness, as peasants witnessed the progressive blanching, or loss of the fluid's vitality. There were many ways of prolonging the life of grape wine itself through a series of recyclings to the last drop of all possible juice, colour, and flavour (e.g., *vinello*, or distilled as *grappa*). There were also many grape wine substitutes, made with plants, fruits, and berries (cf. *Alimentazione* 1998: 168-72), known as *vini dei poveri* (poorman's wines) — the ingenious concoctions of largely mountain folk.

Virile Wine

Red wine, life's blood, was closely associated with manhood and virility. This virility was socially determined as well: the relative gradation of alcohol coincided with social hierarchies, so that *small* wine (*vin piccolo*, *vinello*), was the domain of peasants as *low* men on the totem pole. Further, wine figured at the center of a male cosmology, creating and cementing male bonds across generations (cf. Clements 1990), in a sort of brotherhood of the grape. Visual corroboration of the hypothesis that (red) wine functions as a symbol of virility may be found in a genre of photograph which poses conventionalized convivial (and largely male) settings. Here someone inevitably holds up a bottle or a glass of wine (as in a toast), or is captured in the act of pouring wine for the camera's benefit. Women were rarely photographed in the act of drinking wine. From a female perspective, the wine-virility nexus instead was often a source of conflict and dread. Wine may have been important for male bonding, bringing forth a song, a tale, or two, but it also unleashed other darker behaviours such as violent sexuality.

Drunkenness was considered foreign to Italian culture and generally abhorred. Excessive drinking was instead associated with northern Europeans (emblematically by Germans — “trinkers” — considered drunks from the Renaissance onward),⁵ and in Toronto with the *Ingles* (a generic term for Anglo-Canadians and other northerners). Anglo drinking habits (including binge-drinking, hard liquor, and drinking alone) have always been an object of criticism among Italian Canadians, whose traditional drinking behaviour is characterized by drinking in moderation, at meals, and in convivial settings foremost. Indeed, Italians for whom the prevailing notion of health called for equilibrium, considered drunkenness to put this balance (and hence general health) at risk and therefore avoided it (cf. Migliore 1996). Further, liquor laws created by Anglo-Canadians — in general, hostile to wine (cultures) in the earlier part of the century — made *private* wine consumption among immigrants the norm, and helped increase the importance of the domestic winecellar as a haven against estranging cultural values.

5. My father recalled that among his non-Italian neighbours was one in particular, who would have “drowned himself” in wine (“he would have [even] drunk mud!”). This man would buy jug wine by the week. “They really drank when they drank,” my father recounted, with evident disapproval.

Winecellars Old and New

To the older first-generation Toronto Italian immigrant (65+), with a direct experience of life in Italy, the *cantina* of memory varied widely, and was alternatively identified as: a communal winecellar; the village vintners' wine cooperative (cf. Fr. *cave*) where bulk table wine was made and sold; a tavern,⁶ traditionally marked with a *frasca* (branch, frond) — the universal Italian sign of the tavern since Roman times. In addition to these public uses, the term also referred to: a privately-owned (domestic) cellar, normally sparsely-stocked; a corner of a barn; even a roughly-finished back room; or semi-interred, underground dugout, separate from, but close to, the farmhouse where wine, wine accoutrements (and, more rarely, food) could be stored. This "*cantina*" was designated by a variety of dialect terms⁷ — variation which itself suggests the *cantina* had no single conventional form. It is likely this last type, a cross between a dugout and roughly-finished room, which provided the closest equivalent to the later, fully-evolved, Toronto winecellar. The *cantina*, as it is presently known among Italian immigrants to Toronto, is an uninsulated (North-facing) basement room of varying dimensions (from 5' x 5' to 20' x 22', or beyond, in tune with the "archvilla" mentality).⁸ It functions both as a repository for wine and pantry for foods. There is some debate as to whether foods and wine can or should coexist, but the fact is, in most *cantine*, they do. Winecellars are now a regular feature of new homes, especially of those built by Italian-owned construction companies.

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6. This use of *cantina* was also transferred to some New World public settings as well, as attested in Boston's North End, in Simboli 1985: 70. Much recent Italian scholarship has explored the place of the tavern in Italian folk culture. It was a bastion of male culture, with its own preferred games: cards, *passatella* (for rules, cf. Giggi Zanazzo in Rossetti 292-299), *scalino*, *morra*, *ruzzica* (in Rome). The osteria had its (often deadly) rituals and found its way into literature as a frequent locus for fights and tragic endings, of intrigue and conspiracies, etc. It was a favoured meeting place for Rome's *bulli* (whence bully or thug in English), as it necessarily was for the carters who delivered wine from the surrounding provincial wine producing areas (cf. "L'osteria, club dei bulli," "I giochi" in Rossetti: 1979:194-210).
 7. E.g., *solare* in Abruzzo, *cellare*, *ceddaru*, *solaru* in Calabria, *càneva* or *canevin* in the Veneto, *crota* in Piedmont, *rispensa* [*dispensa*] in Sicily, *slér* [cellar] in the Swiss Alps; cf. AIS VII 1342: s.v. "*cantina*."
 8. Anecdote has it that at least one *cantina* was so large, its owner (a young computer specialist) actually created a computerized inventory to keep track of it!



Photo 3. Traditional demijohns protected with basketry, and bushel baskets in Di Ninno *cantina*. Note the potted bay tree weathering the cold winter in the *cantina*.



Photo 4. *Prosciutto* (ham) curing in Di Ninno *cantina*.

The *cantina* has become a well-defined area of the home, and there is surprising uniformity as to its contents. It typically contains wine in glass gallons jugs or demijohns (Photo 3) (bottles and barrels more rarely); wine equipment (funnels, press, siphons, etc.);⁹ Mason jars of garden vegetables (especially tomatoes),¹⁰ *giardiniera* (mixed, pickled vegetables) or fruit; cured meats such as *prosciutto*, *sopressata*, and sausages; more rarely cheese; but also store-bought canned foods, pasta, oil, and other items found *a spèce* (on special; Photos 4, 5, 6, 7). (Bargain-hunting is more than part-time pastime for many.) The *cantina* can also contain wild foods such as mushrooms and snails (a greatly prized delicacy for many peasant Italians; Photo 8).¹¹ Frequently, in the battles for winecellar space, between wine and food, the scales tip on the side of food. When such *cantina* divisions do occur, they tend to develop along gender lines: a winecellar for him, a food pantry for her.

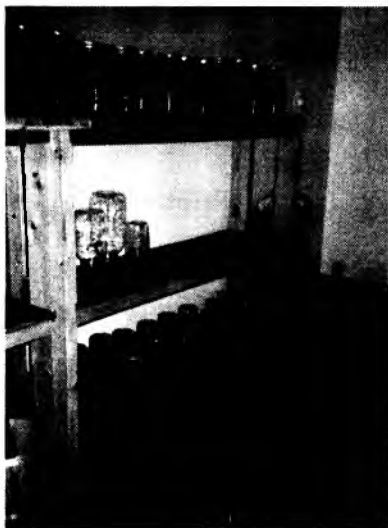


Photo 5. Del Bianco *cantina* with tomato jars, cured *sopressata*.

9. A very small number of these objects made the trans-Atlantic voyage and are being progressively reincarnated into plastic, while the wine press (and barrels) are actually becoming obsolete, thanks to ready-bought juice. Immigrants did add one item, however: the glass gallon jug, the obvious unit in the Anglo-American system of liquid measurement, which in America gave the name "jug wine" to the bulk table wines immigrants generally produced.
10. A recent evolution in methods of preserving tomatoes, a staple of Italian diet among Italians in Toronto, is to freeze them whole, rather than can them, which apparently long maintains their fresh flavour and requires less work. When cooked into a light tomato and basil pasta sauce (*sugo finto*, faux sauce, as we call it, because it has no meat), they are indistinguishable from the fresh tomato variety. My aunt Marisa, who processes about 3-4 bushels of tomatoes a year, is now freezing about half and canning the rest.
11. G. Belli recounting with evident joy, the pleasure of collecting snails in the Humber Valley area, noted with an expert's eye, how this variety, small, but tasty (and still black and white), was actually preferable to the larger Italian variety (with more fat in the neck) as he remembers them from past experience in the Lazio region. Although he does not go often, eating snails about 2-3 times a year made him content — a sentiment I share completely.

While a fair measure of Italian wine culture may have been lost, home winemaking itself, and the *cantina* specifically, not only survived in diaspora contexts, but may actually have increased in size and certainly in importance. So much so among first-generation Italians that one man might declare: “without the *cantina* [there] is nothing” (*senza la cantina non c’è niente*). How and why did the *cantina* acquire such significance? In Italy, many factors contributed to the relative *insignificance* of the domestic winecellar. Pre-WWII peasant incomes were so meager that stockpiling of wine (and food) was impossible.¹² Because table wine was easily obtainable locally, in most parts of the Italian



Photo 6. D’Angelo’s *cantina*, with homemade *sopressata* and *prosciutto* curing.

peninsula, home winemaking was not a necessity. For immigrants however, good table wine was not readily available at reasonable cost, so they had to make their own. Many, in fact, acquired direct winemaking experience only in Canada. Just as for many of the other staples in the traditional diet, only great personal/familial efforts, including kitchen gardens and home winemaking, could guarantee such items. Further, while frequent but *small* purchases (e.g., of food, of wine) characterize buying patterns in Italy, in Toronto peasant habits of thrift, long familiarity with the seasonal harvest, and increased income made large scale purchases (and hence the domestic winecellar) ideal. Never had their *cantine* been better stocked, and during the long Canadian winter months, *all* summer food savings were a boon.

12. “[The *cantina*] is much more important here. We store everything in it. In Italy we bought food day by day; we didn’t have money. Here I used to buy 200-500 lbs of meat and put it in the deep freezer! In Italy you wouldn’t even have seen that much meat at the butcher’s! Who ever saw that amount of meat?” (A. Del Giudice).



Photo 7. D'Angelo's homemade cheeses curing.



Photo 8. Snails being purged on a diet of polenta (corn meal), in Belli's *cantina*.

The mantra of *abbondanza* and its practice made the ever-larger winecellar necessary. This abundance even spawned new customs, such as inviting family and friends to dinner, whereas “there [in Italy] you couldn’t, [because you] didn’t even have enough for yourself.” The *cantina* (and the freezer) made a spontaneous, simple supper always possible. Indeed, the most frequently cited reason for making such vast quantities of wine even today is that it should be shared with family and friends when they come to visit. Wine could also acquire professional currency: in his early Toronto days as a self-employed painter contractor, my father would give gallons of his wine to clients and superintendents of apartment buildings, as potential employers. Around the holidays however, he would purchase as gifts cases of whiskey and 10-20 turkeys to thank those who had helped him throughout the year. It is interesting to note that while homemade wine could be given informally, store-bought, and hence more special (certainly more mainstream) foods and drink seemed to be more appropriate gifts for the high holidays. Store-bought bottles of whiskey or Italian liqueurs also marked special gift-giving occasions among Italians, however.

I have suggested elsewhere that the *cantina* filled primarily a deep-seated *psychological* need (Del Giudice 1993: 62-63). To Antonio D’Angelo, for whom the *cantina* was fundamental (“without the *cantina* there is nothing”), and who had known hunger during the war years, I asked if he still feared hunger in this country. He answered: “who can say it won’t return? It can always return: war is war.” Hunger may indeed be a thing of the past, but the *fear* of hunger is not easily vanquished.

Wine was but one of the items which came to fill the centuries-old desire for abundance. In fact, the *cantina* likely became a focal point of the home *because* of its association with the dream of *Cuccagna* (cf. Del Giudice 1993; 2001) — and not merely among Italian Canadians but to Italian immigrants elsewhere.¹³ The powerful and ever-surfacing mythic Land of Cockaigne, a largely gastronomic utopia, featured flowing rivers of wine as an important

13. For example, even among the poorest Veneto immigrants, who had emigrated to Brazil in search of the Land of Cockaigne, the praises of the *cantina* continued to be literally sung. In a poem entitled “*Cantina*” (by Pe. Joao Leonir Dall’Alba, *Stianni in Colônia*, Editora Lunardelli, cited in Bernardi 1994: 222-223) and in analogous poems on the harvest, foods, kitchen utensils, the kitchen, *polenta*, and so forth, the author gives a catalogue of all the riches (“*ben di Dio*,” God’s bounty) found in the winecellar, and explains how it is used in times of feasting.

element in Italian *Cuccagna* iconography from the Middle Ages onward. Sometimes, though, real life events proved just as marvelous. My mother vividly remembers an incident which occurred in Terracina over 40 years ago: a carter returning from an olive mill in the mountains, was carrying a precious load of freshly-pressed olive oil in demijohns. The roads were rough, unasphalted, and the apparently unswathed glass containers hit up against each other...and broke. Oil gushed out, running along the stone gutters (*canaletti*) on this and that side of the road. Everyone came out to collect as much as they could. What a feast for them, but what a loss for the carter. A similar, real life Terracinese *cuccagnesque* tale, tells of people coming to gather fish after a tornado at sea (*tromba marina*, sea “trumpet”) dropped a great load of them on the beach — like manna from heaven!

Between Tradition and Toronto

What happened when the time-honoured wisdom about making and consuming wine, learned in the sunny villages of Italy, was transferred to frigid Toronto? Agrarian calendrical proverbs provided the peasant a sort of farmer’s almanac. The problem with much traditional wisdom, of course, is that it is locally-produced and therefore, often only locally-applicable. As Rossana (Di Zio) Magnotta (cf. Nusca 1998), professionally-acquainted with Italian home winemakers in Toronto, has observed:¹⁴ why is winemaking still largely an *October* event when the conditions and materials are available all year round?

14. Unlike California, where Italians have been well-represented in the wine industry, there are fewer Italian vintners in the province of Ontario — perhaps because it is a fairly new sector of the economy. Yet, because Italians are so abundant demographically, one might have expected their greater representation within the Wine Council of Ontario. There are exceptions: Rossana and Gabriel Magnotta (Magnotta Winery), Grace and Angelo Locilento (Cilento Wines), Ron and Nicole Speranzini (Willow Heights Estate Winery), Carlo Negri (Colio Estate Wines), Sal D’Angelo (D’Angelo Estate Winery), Giovanna and Rosanna Follegot (Vinoteca Premium Winery), Leonard Pennachetti and Angelo Pavan (Cave Spring Cellars), Gary Pillitteri (Pillitteri Estates Winery), Donald Ziraldo (Inniskillin), among approximately 40 listed in the 1998 Wine Regions of Ontario *Calendar of Events* (cf. guide: *Wine Regions of Ontario*, Spring 1998 Vol. 7 for some history and description of Ontario wineries).

Interestingly, both Cilento Wines and Magnotta Winery began as suppliers of must (Vin Bon and Festa Juice respectively) to home winemakers and evolved into wineries with their own line of bottled wines (and “retail boutiques”) in the 1990’s. Magnotta produces wine, beer, and distilled spirits.

Why do Italians still insist on making and fermenting wine in the ill-suited *cantina* where the temperature is much too cold, and fluctuates greatly?¹⁵ Further, the cleaning and preparation of barrels require more serious consideration than traditional methods provided. While Italian conditions were ideal and produced practically fool-proof wine, she noted, the conditions for home winemaking in Canada are markedly different: grapes are often not completely ripe when picked, they travel long distances, and they become contaminated or moldy. New environments create discrepancies for traditional ways which no longer apply, or require modification. “Unscientific” methods of determining the length of fermentation, according to Magnotta, simply produced disastrous effects in many instances.¹⁶ I too have many memories of wine that tasted like vinegar,¹⁷ and of my father, in constant denial, claiming, against any “objective” taste test, that the quality of the homemade was superior to store-bought wine, dismissing the latter as *pieno di medicina* (full of medicine [chemical additives]). But peasants had a long history of drinking bad wine, of valuing quantity over quality, so why should they think any differently now? Quality, for Italian men and their homemade wine, I have come to conclude, is largely subjective anyway.

Wine technologists have been engaged in a battle over traditional methods on this and the other side of the Atlantic. For instance, a strong bias against any sort of additive (natural or not) exists among peasants. In our family these were designated with the generic term “*medicina*” (medicine).¹⁸ Foreign or unnatural additives still provoke suspicion and fear, for vinification had essentially been considered a *natural* process requiring *natural* (lunar),¹⁹

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15. Actually, Toronto winecellars become so cold at night that low temperatures arrest fermentation and often merely postpone it to the spring, when the wine is in bottles. Alternately, the fluctuating day/night temperatures cause constantly interrupted fermentation.
 16. Many of these Italian wine beliefs, some aspects of traditional vinification, and the problem of their transferral to the Canadian environment, were discussed in an interview with Rossana Magnotta. I thank her for her generous and intelligent *disponibilità*, or openness.
 17. In the Eversfield Rd. house, the first basement room adapted to *cantina* use was too close to the furnace and turned wine consistently to vinegar. But when my father and his brothers pooled their efforts to put in a proper *cantina* under the veranda (but not North-facing), I don't remember that the quality of the wine appreciably improved. The Dallas Rd. (Willowdale) *cantina* may have produced better wine.
 18. Cf. Engl. “doctored wine” (treated with chemicals, adulterated).
 19. According to tradition, the position and phases of the moon seemed to be especially



Photo 9. Home winemaking supplies at Magnotta Winery, Vaughan.

and perhaps *supernatural* (i.e. saints') intervention, but *not* chemicals. Some immigrants fear ready-pressed must (juice) for similar reasons, that is: one cannot know what additives it might contain.²⁰ Yet the school of hard knocks has forced many home winemakers to finally add sulphite to barrels, to bring their wine in for analysis, and finally, to buy ready-pressed juice from companies such as Festa Juice or Vin Bon, thereby avoiding the mess and guess work. The trend to purchasing juice (*mosto*) ready for vinification has made the wine press almost obsolete in Toronto, except for the diehards who refuse to give up old ways (Photo 9).

important during the most delicate phases of racking (*travaso*) and bottling (cf. *Cultura Popolare in Emilia-Romagna*: 60, caption to photo 19). In folk culture, empirical observation of the moon's phases dictated many agricultural activities: harvesting of grain, cutting of trees, planting of seeds (Bernardi 1995: 10). A modern fringe of organic vintners seeks to revive such folklore under the label "Biodynamic."

20. My father tells an Italian joke about the dishonest vintner calling his son to his death bed, and finally divulging a trade secret, since his son would be carrying on the business. He says: son, I want you to know that wine can be made with grapes too!

Several objective factors in the winemaking process could be problematic, of course, but folk belief also pointed to *cultural* hazards which might influence the quality of wine — e.g., women. It was (and partly, still is) commonly believed that menstruating women should not be involved in winemaking (or in the canning of tomatoes, for that matter — note the common colour denominator). This belief was possibly due to a perceived conflict of lunar phases, for both winemaking and menses were determined by such lunar activity. Perhaps though, it was also perceived as a case of “bad blood” (menstrual), *contaminating* “good blood” (wine). Among the battles Rossana Magnotta has had to wage among Toronto Italians, by far the most challenging was indeed a gender battle. While one battle pitted scientific methods against traditional winelore, the second involved her being a woman in a man’s (wine) world. A supportive husband and partner, Gabriel Magnotta, who publically deferred to her lab expertise whenever a customer asked for advice, her own Italian heritage and ability to speak Italian, as well as a strategically astute manual on home winemaking (Magnotta 1988) — allowing information to be transmitted through the neutral medium of print, requiring no face-to-face encounter, eventually brought her victory²¹. In fact, Magnotta Winery Corp., the company which went beyond Festa Juice, now sells a wide range of wines, is the third largest winery in Ontario, and is on the Toronto Stock Exchange. It has maintained a large and loyal home winemaking clientele.

His Winecellar, Her Food Pantry

While I pursued the gender question tangentially, it became clear during my research that gender distinction was woven into the culture. For example, gender determined patterns and types of wine consumption (e.g., women’s wine vs. men’s wine). The use of winecellar space sometimes resulted in separate winecellars altogether (e.g., his *cantina*/her *cantina*). The functions and uses of wine as they related to health and nutrition (e.g., women used wine for health remedies and for cooking) are opposed to wine used as a vehicle for male socialization, hence figuring largely in the contexts of male leisure and pleasure.

21. While the Italians were largely won over, due to the common strategy of convincing a few loyal clients who then spread the word among friends and family, the more intransigent Portuguese clientele was another story altogether. Her gender apparently, largely has remained an insurmountable obstacle for this ethnic group.

First, and at the most general level, the entire domain of winemaking and wine consumption has been a male one since Roman times (cf. Ciceri 1983: 556, n. 484). Further, there were effeminate wines (sweet dessert wines, light white wines), and manly ones (potent red wines). In our household, reds were for drinking, whites for cooking. Among immigrants, men make wine (with the help of women and children, normally in assisting roles — cleaning, fetching, and so forth), bestow wine as gifts, age it for special celebrations, boast about its alcoholic content, challenge each other over its quality and over quantities consumed. Wine has often served as a symbolic surrogate of, or a vehicle for, issues of virility, both individual and collective. Through such traditional drinking games as *passatella*, common experiences of social impotency and class struggle in the macrocosm of society could be transferred to the microcosm of the game, as one player asserted his dominance over the others, by playing boss (*padrone*). The quantities of wine consumed in this game (and the power to deny wine to others), directly reflected on one's manhood, power, and savvy — which is why the game so frequently ended in violence. A “dry” game (*restare “olmo”*) proved an affront to one's manly honour and required avenging.

Passatella soon lost its *raison d'être* among a socio-economically fairly homogenous immigrant society in Toronto. And because wine became widely affordable and hence abundant (no more *vinello*), it may no longer have been viewed as a limited good. But hierarchies played out through the medium of wine found other modes of expression, nonetheless. For instance, in our household, one of the ways the pecking order unfolded between my father and my brothers-in-law was through the never-ending debate regarding quality, relative alcohol content, and choice of whose wine to serve at special celebrations (and hence who would reap the ritual wine compliments). Denial of the superiority of my father's wine was/is viewed as a direct affront to him as patriarch, for in the “natural” hierarchy, the older man is due the respect of the younger men. Tensions with few other means of expression in a shared household can thus be diverted into (symbolic) wine talk.

Questions of virility and dominance were raised through male-female tensions as well. For instance, I sought to determine the extent of female vs. male use of the *cantina*. In Italy, the *cantina*, as winecellar, was male space. In Toronto, it is largely shared, yet not without evidence of some contestation, for an ambiguous line demarks the food (female)/wine (male) *cantina*

domains.²² A few men protested the presence of food as contaminants to wine (as wine technologists concur, I might add). One *cantina* fanatic dismissed canned tomatoes as pertaining to his wife's *cantina*. When their children were asked to fetch up tomatoes, confused, they frequently asked: from which *cantina*, Mom's or Dad's? Such completely discrete spaces however, are not common.

Red seems to be the *cantina*'s predominant colour, and certainly varying hues of red account for the most important items stored there: red wine, canned tomatoes, *prosciutto*, sausages, and other cured meats. Indeed, red wines — deep, full-bodied, and potent — had a prestige among immigrants that the whites could not match (cf. Malpezzi/Clements 1992: 237). In our case, although Terracina was famous for its muscat grapes which produced a deep golden wine, the wine we made in Toronto was blood-red (i.e., zinfandel, alicante, and later cabernet). The fate of white wine, on the other hand (only a few gallons' worth made each year), was for women's work of cooking (chicken, fowl, sausage, snails, etc.) and baking (e.g., *ciambelle*), or, mixed with red to produce a rosé vinegar for salad. Only recently have white wines — perhaps markers of upward mobility — made a dent in this predilection.²³

Immigrant culture sought to festivalize daily life and in so doing made several traditional celebrations obsolete (e.g., St. Martin's Day, Carnival). This cult of abundance required the multiplication of once special foods (e.g., cured meats, potent red wine), and hence intimately linked the *cantina* to the festivalization process.²⁴ In an attempt to finally sate our appetite for cold cuts (*affettati*) as children, my father once brought home an entire *mortadella* (the large size!) — but no slicer, to hang in the *cantina*. We soon became disgusted with the thickly-sliced slabs with which school lunches and after-school snacks were made, for what seemed to be unrelieved months on end. We children became responsible for its consumption. It took approximately 15 years for

22. In my case, this competition has been transferred to the refrigerator: how much space should wine (and other potables) take (husband), as opposed to food (me).

23. In at least one folk riddle, in fact, white wine is equated with urine: *vino vinello,/ sincero e bello,/andrai in prigione e ci resterai tanto/finché da nero diventerai bianco* [wine little wine,/pure and beautiful,/you will go to prison and will remain there a good while/until from red you will become white].

24. It was during one of the family gatherings to make *coppa* (or head cheese), in fact, that I first remember hearing the archaic traditional songs from Terracina (particularly the pilgrimage song to Vallepietra), an experience which influenced later folklore career choices (cf. Del Giudice 1994).

any of us to want a *mortadella* sandwich again!²⁵ My father's cult of (food) abundance had, in this instance (and in others, alas), gone too far. He summed up the experience of many Italians, when he stated that:

To me the *cantina* was truly important; it was the heart of the house, and provided *grascia per la famiglia* [abundance for the family]. We [immigrants] are attached to our families, we give them *abbondanza*, everything we can. We'll turn handstands [*salti mortali*]. I have never allowed my family to want for anything. It was ugly in the old days, [but with the *cantina*] you felt more protected. Everything is in the *cantina*.

It was generally understood that hunger and want were evil, but that abundance could be more so, for it induced a sort of satiety and apathy. And yet, as a *paesano*, Vincenzo Saccoccia, whom we viewed as a wit and wise man, said, somewhat settling that account: *la grascia è più brutta della carestia, ma io voglio stare in mezzo alla grascia* [abundance is more terrible than famine, but I want to be in the midst of abundance].²⁶ This is one of my father's favourite sayings.

The *cantina* indeed was especially memorable around the time of major festivities: Christmas, Easter, communions, or baptisms. At Christmas, for example, we could find there, reassuringly the same every year, *lasagne*, roasted chickens, Roman-style minted artichokes (*carciofi alla romana*), eggplant parmigiana, *broccoletti* (rapini), fennel, homemade sausage with coriander seed, *casatella* (a traditional Terracinese coffee, liqueur, and *ricotta* pie), *ciambelle* (in its Terracinese variant, something of a hard donut made with flour, oil, anise seeds, cinnamon, sugar, and wine), *torrone* (nougat), persimmons, tangerines, and assorted unshelled nuts. The winecellar was a place of body-warming nourishment and joy, despite its bone-numbing cold in winter. I'm

25. Now, I consider it comfort food, and nothing can quite recall a mood of innocent childhood, as can a fresh baked panino with *thinly* sliced *mortadella*. When in need of a dose of home (Toronto, family), I go to San Pedro (Los Angeles' port, with a sizeable Italian community) with my daughters, to pick Mediterranean snails on public land, overlooking the ocean; we also buy fresh bread and *mortadella* and enjoy them under the trees in a park.

26. A published variant upon which Saccoccia's seems to elaborate comes from the same region: *la grascia stufa* ('abundance becomes tiresome' Galanti 1981: 63). As an illustration of the negative side to abundance, my father tells of searching the entire vineyard over as a child, looking for that perfect bunch to eat, and never seeming to find it. When there is too much of a good thing, one never seems to be satisfied, is one of the possible lessons to be learned from this anecdote.

not certain which scenario was more exciting to us children: sneaking in to sample foods being prepared for the feast, or returning at leisure to the *cantina* afterward, to finish up these specialties, before those foods disappeared and we awaited the next cuccagnesque glut. It was not visions of sugarplums which danced in *our* heads!

That childhood memories should immediately come to my mind when the *cantina* is evoked does not seem coincidental. The *cantina* may be to foodways what the folktale is to oral expression — primal, symbolically-packed, and linked to the early oral years. Childhood “*cantina* narratives” are plentiful and meaningful to immigrants and I can relate one or two of my own. I remember cleaning glass gallons and admiring them all gleaming and in a row on the wooden plank shelf in a somewhat cave-like *cantina*, in our first Canadian house at 14 Eversfield Rd; the exciting gush of juice rushing from the wine press as the grapes were crushed; and the pungent, acidic smell around the cellar. I would try my hand, applying all my strength, to the back and forth action of the wine press rod, hearing the clicking sound as the wooden blocks were pushed down. But I especially remember the delicious taste, slightly alcoholic and effervescent, of freshly-squeezed juice. Another childhood gustatory recollection involves a night spent at my cousin Amelia’s, with whom I had grown up in the old Rogers and Dufferin neighbourhood, but who had by then moved to a newer suburban home in Downsview, as we had to Willowdale. We waited until parents had gone to sleep and all was quiet to sneak into the *cantina*. Our victim, a *prosciutto* (cured ham) which had just been “started,” hung all moist and ruby red. We attacked with blunt knives and gouged out large chunks, took them back to bed, and slowly gnawed as we talked late into the night, savouring the salty pork (without fat, and without bread!).²⁷

27. Eating foods, especially prized foods, without bread accompaniment, was considered wanton and somewhat sinful (cf. the term *companionico*, in Italian, to mean everything that could accompany the main food — bread; on bread in Italian folk culture, cf. Del Giudice 1997). We even have a term for it in our dialect: *cannarutizia*, and one so guilty is called a *cannarutièla* (large-throated, big-gulleted). Of course, in those cholesterol-innocent days, we were expected to eat all the fat attached to whatever meat was being served, including the long strand of disconcertingly white fat that ran the length of a slice of *prosciutto*. Hand-sliced *prosciutto* could make the width of meat wonderfully thick, but that of fat disgustingly so.

Conclusions

Current and changing health concerns have taken a toll on traditional foodways, some of which are now perceived to be quite unhealthy. Wine, cheese, and cured meat production/consumption has dramatically decreased, and, in some cases, has been abandoned altogether. At least one man is in denial, protesting that such foods should *not* be victimized. As a former shepherd, he took great pride in making his own cured meats and cheeses, but now, afflicted with diabetes, high cholesterol, and cancer, he can no longer indulge in these delicacies. Others insist that these health biases are culturally-determined and state that, while an Italian doctor understands the health value of wine, the *magnacake* (or simply “cake,” “cake-eater,” i.e. Anglo-Canadian) doctors did not.²⁸ “When we are gone, it (these foodways) will all be over,” was a leitmotif running through much of my fieldwork. Of course, these statements often veiled a sense of mourning for the loss of fortitude, virility, health, and one’s own youth. Some room for optimism exists though, for as Magnotta has noted, a recent trend toward home wine (and beer) making, as a hobby, will mean that the art will not be completely lost, even though it may no longer be linked to traditional methods. And the *cantina* continues to be filled with plenty of Italian foods, although not necessarily handmade, for thrift continues to be considered a virtue.²⁹

In the old days wine flowed in our house, and the *cantina* was well-stocked with glass gallons, as well as musty old barrels and pressing equipment. Two bypass surgeries for my father have meant that only a demijohn or two of wine remain in his shared *cantina*. His winepressing equipment, no longer needed, remains a curious artifact of an earlier time. For decades, wine and winemaking had appeared to me shrouded in mystery. Only through fieldwork did the relative simplicity of winemaking reveal itself, although accompanied by a

28. Is wine good for you, I asked? “*Per dio se fa bene!* [By God it is!]. You go to Italy and doctors will tell you that a glass of wine, not more, is great for you. It is *come lu furmaggio sop’ ai maccaronè* [“like cheese on pasta”] [...] These *magnacacchi* [*mangiacake* in “standard” Itagliese] doctors, don’t understand anything, but now they are changing because they’re beginning to understand from us.”

29. It may be a peasant heritage, or the home winemaker’s eye to thrift, which inspired Magnotta’s motto, “affordable excellence.” The economic factor is still a crucial one which favors the continuation of home winemaking. One man insisted that few would continue to make their own wine if winestores sold reasonably priced wines. Making wine from juice or grapes varies in cost from \$1.50 to \$3.00/bottle.

glimpse of a very rich and complex cultural system behind it, which I am only now beginning to decipher. I have also come to appreciate that many of my wine attitudes have largely been shaped by Italian traditional culture: e.g., wine should be consumed with meals (not before); drunkenness is intolerable; wines should be honest and simple, and so forth. I have little patience with the fetishisms, high cost, and hoopla of wine connoisseurship — all a matter of silly excess. And I have come to appreciate why a now deceased brother-in-law, Giuseppe (Pep) Poldi (a quintessential Terracinese, to my mind; cf. Del Giudice 1999), didn't care if he drank wine that came from a *plastic* bottle, so long as it was intrinsically good (*genuino*), and could be put to good *convivial* effect. I now have Pep's well-worn and absolutely ordinary wine glasses, as a reminder of his love of wine and the many outdoor (*abbendate*) (grilling parties) behind their hilltop house in Terracina, overlooking the sea and olive groves.

What caused me to venture into this foreign land? Perhaps wine culture acquired special significance for me only recently, as my father's health began to ebb. In April of 1998, he faced slight chances of surviving his second bypass surgery at the age of 75. While he lay on a hospital bed facing the grim future, I tried to bring forth happy and restorative memories through wine talk, allowing us intimacy without emotive effusions. These charged moments elicited deep memory. As he spoke into the microphone, I was painfully aware that these might be his last recorded words. I tried to understand how wine, life, death, and memory might be connected.

My father's wine press awaits shipping to my home in Los Angeles. I am honoured and burdened by the responsibility of this gift. Beware the (family) gifts you accept, for eventually they exercise an irresistible pull and seem to call on you, perhaps against your will, to pay *them* homage.³⁰ But if wine *did* make good blood, it did so for me too, and on many fronts. The "bad blood" between my father and me, from those estranged adolescent years, has been replaced by the good. When I visit him in Toronto, I often joyfully share in his wine. We are reconciled, and through research such as this, I have come to more fully understand and appreciate him. Wine is healthful and life-giving, but so are wine memories. Is it ironic that sickness and fear of death brought many such memories urgently to the fore? In thrifty peasant fashion, in fact,

30. For other such charged gifts: a rosary from my grandmother and an archaic written prayer from my a great aunt — both of whom were healers, and the spiritual odyssey these entailed, cf. Del Giudice forthcoming.

together we seemed to be pressing all possible substance from the grape, to the last drop and beyond, so that even the fermented vapours themselves — the ethereal and evanescent wine memories — might sustain life still.

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