

BOOK AND FILM REVIEW

Robert Camuto: *South of Somewhere: Wine, Food, and the Soul of Italy*

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Authored by a *Wine Spectator* contributor, *South of Somewhere* has earned Best Wine Book Awards from *The New York Times* and *The Washington Post*, among others, as well as accolades from wine world luminaries such as Eric Asimov, Jancis Robinson, and Kermit Lynch. But it is easier to describe what *South of Somewhere* is not than what it is.

While the book provides very general descriptions of various southern Italian wines, it does not approach the level of detail that one finds even in, say, Anderson's (1980) *Vino*, let alone Wasserman and Wasserman's (1991) weighty tome or D'Agata's (2014) magisterial work. In fact, the tasting descriptions are as much about how well the wine matches the author's personal preferences—for lighter, less alcoholic, fresher wines—as they are about more objective descriptions of what is in the glass. Similarly, although the book provides brief descriptions of local meals that sound delicious, it does not provide as much detail as one finds even in Root's (1977) treatise, *The Food of Italy*, let alone an actual cookbook. Of course, on the positive side of the ledger, the reader is spared the time commitment entailed in reading works like the aforementioned ones.

So, what is *South of Somewhere* about, then? It is a collection of interesting anecdotes—personal recollections of numerous visits with southern Italian winemakers, mostly, I infer, over the past 20 years or so. Camuto begins and ends the book with visits to his ancestral village of Vico Equense on the Mediterranean coast south of Naples—memories of a 10-year-old in 1968 in the first case and an actual visit 50 years later. Although Camuto lives in Verona, his heart is in the south, which he considers “truer to the heart of the Italy I remember from my childhood” (p. 8).

The chapters of the book chronicle his visits. Each region of “southern” Italy—from Umbria to Sicily and most of what is in between (except Molise)—gets a chapter. The discussion centers around producers—several from each region. The profiles focus on the producers as individuals—their backgrounds, philosophies,

and families—along with a bit of the history, geography, and culture of each area. Some of the producers are rock stars in the wine world—Emidio Pepe and Francesco Valentini in Abruzzo, Frank Cornelissen and Alberto Graci in Sicily, and Elena Fucci from the Vulture. Others, such as Giampaolo Tabarrini of Umbria and Vito Paternoster of the Vulture, are less well-known but highly respected by the cognoscenti. Still others, like the winemakers from Calabria and Lazio, are relative unknowns, and to find their wines, you would need to go perhaps to Eataly, if they are available anywhere in the United States.

Most of the chapters juxtapose one or more established producers with a younger up-and-coming winemaker from the same region; the latter are especially part of a “new generation of educated, environmental, and open-minded winemakers who are combining the best of their schooling with the traditions of their ancestors” (p. 9).

Most readers will learn something new from the book. There are interesting personal observations: In Emidio Pepe’s opinion, Edoardo Valentini made better whites, but he made better reds. “He had soils and altitude and exposition that are better for the whites. But for reds, I always beat him” (p. 41). Campanian winemaker Sabino Loffredo of Pietracupa, who makes noteworthy Fianos and Grecos, does not drink white wine. The dominant ethnic group of Vulture is Albanian Christians, who fled the Ottomans 500 years ago. A familial conflict between two brothers led to the sale of Paternoster to Tommasi. Some excellent wines come from grapes largely unknown outside their regions. Tabarrini is making a white wine from Trebbiano Spoletino, a clone that stands out by being a heavy producer grown on the fertile valley floor. It ascends into trees and is harvested by pickers on ladders. Camuto notes that some of the wines he tasted are from grapes better left unknown.

One small criticism is that while the book is ostensibly aimed at a general audience, some observations will be baffling to non-experts. For example, arberello trained, pergola trained, and a cappano trained vineyards are noted, but the differences are not explained.

I suspect that I am typical of many readers of this Journal in having considerable familiarity with the wines of Piedmont and Tuscany but much less knowledge of the wines of southern Italy, save for some specific areas like Etna and Taurasi. Thus, I approached this book with considerable anticipation. While I believe the book will appeal to a number of constituencies, hard-core wine lovers will probably find it somewhat less interesting. Years—maybe decades—ago, before the explosion of papers seeking publication, journal editors often allowed referees the option to recommend “publish if space is plentiful.” That sentiment captures my reaction to this book: read it if your time is plentiful. *JWE* subscribers who are not terribly busy will find it an easy, enjoyable read that can be divided into tasty morsels and digested at leisure.

References

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