

Wine Stories:
A Little Sip of Italy

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Excerpt – Sample Chapter

Prologue

I dreamed of Tuscany, and Italy, as other children dreamed of Disneyland.

Italy has always fascinated me—the history, the food, the wine, the diverse geography—perhaps because of the stories my grandfather told me about Italy. As Italy was rising out of the ashes of World War II, he had been stationed at Camp Darby, near the town of Livorno, in the region of Tuscany. It was there that he found the love of his life, Sophia. He brought her back to America with him.

I never heard my nonna's stories, as she died not long after I was born, but I know her Italian blood runs in my veins, and her Italian spirit shapes my character. And because of his love for her, and Italy, Grandfather carried on many traditions of the Italian home, including wonderful food and almost always wine with dinner. With his encouragement, I, too, came to appreciate wine, Italy, and all things Italian.

My grandparents never traveled back to Italy, constrained by finances and the demands of the farm and work and family. But I could occasionally get Grandfather to tell me a story or two about his time there.

I found myself particularly drawn to Tuscany, my grandmother's birthplace. It seemed a magical place, with golden sunlight pouring onto green hills topped with towns out of a Renaissance painting. I daydreamed over Italian paintings and photos and travel guides. I read histories and came to know the de Medici family, Michelangelo, and da Vinci. As I grew up, I frequented Italian restaurants, bought cookbooks, and came to know a little about Italian wines, searching wine shops for new and different wines to try. I even had an Italian boyfriend, Giotto.

After I graduated from college, Grandfather offered to send me to Italy. I asked if he might come along with me, but he declined. His health, he said. But I perceived that he might have other reasons as well. Perhaps he did not want to face the changes time most certainly would have wrought to the places he and Sophia knew, instead wanting to preserve his beautiful memories. Or perhaps facing those places would be too painful without Sophia there on his arm.

And so, Grandfather would send me to Italy, alone. “For love,” he said. Those two words encompassed so many things, I thought. He was sending me because he loved me. Because I loved Italy. Because he loved Italy. Because he had found love, great and true love, in Italy. And perhaps, because he hoped I might find love there as well.

I decided, however, that I did not want to spend only a week or two as a tourist. I wanted to experience Italy, the real Italy, as he had. I wanted to spend at least a year exploring Italy. But to be able to do that, I needed a job. After a little research, I discovered I could get a job teaching English as a second language. And so, after a little work, and prayers, and with some good luck thrown in, I found a position in Florence, the capital of Tuscany, and one of the most beautiful Renaissance cities in Italy, a city full of art, history, and culture. And of course, a city renowned for its excellent wine and food.

I was ecstatic. I was going to Tuscany!

Dining with the Three Ms—Inspired by La Sala Chianti Classico Riserva

STORY: Medici, Machiavelli, Michelangelo...these names roll over the tongue like a fine Chianti, great names in Italian history. Their histories are also the history of Tuscany, and of the Chianti Classico region in particular, where each of them lived for a time, and no doubt enjoyed the best wines the surrounding vineyards could offer. Both the Medici and the Machiavelli families owned vineyards here and produced wine; in fact, the La Sala vineyard, where Paolo and I are once again visiting, was owned by the Medici family.

It’s a warm summer afternoon, with soft breezes moving through the vines where bees buzz lazily. We’ve splurged with a bottle of La Sala’s Chianti Classico Riserva. We are soon lost in another world. Perhaps it is the wine, the warmth of the sun, the soft caresses of the Tuscan breeze, and the strong sense of tradition and history that permeates the vineyard, that combine to magically transport us back into another time.

There, just at the edge of my dream, a man is walking from the vineyard, wearing clothes in the style of centuries ago, dusty and sweaty from the day’s labor. Who is that tall dark-eyed man, with the long aquiline nose? “Quite handsome,” I think to myself, “and somehow familiar.” Where have I seen him before? Perhaps in a commercial for a motorcycle, or for those aviator sunglasses that make anyone look sexy, especially Italian men?

And then I recognize him from my visit to the Uffizi Museum in Florence, the statue of Niccolò Machiavelli by Lorenzo Bertolini come to life. I seem to have drifted back to the early sixteenth century and found Niccolò on his family estate in San Casiano. Machievelli, credited today as the father of modern political science, wrote the classic manual for the ideal politician of the Renaissance, *The Prince*, here while exiled from Florence by the Medicis. But he did not just write—he also continued his father’s work as an olive grower and winemaker, producing a wine called “Vermiglio.” “Surely today,” I muse, “he would be making this wine.”

The scene shimmers and shifts. I’m now in a large room, hung with tapestries and lined with books, lit by the last amber rays of the sun and glowing, flickering candles. There is wine and food on the large, sturdy rustic table. I’m one of several guests, well-dressed gentlemen and ladies, joining Machievelli for dinner.

Wine is poured. We all raise our glasses in a toast to our host, and I take a sip. It’s a wine suitable to the occasion, to the court of Machievelli. “Has this Chianti Classico Riserva also been transported back in time with me?” I wonder.

I suddenly recall reading a letter of Machievelli’s describing this very scene: “When evening comes, I go back home, and go to my study. On the threshold, I take off my work clothes, covered in mud, and I put on the clothes an ambassador would wear. Decently dressed, I enter the ancient courts of rulers who have long since died. There, I am warmly welcomed, and I feed on the only foods I find nourishing and was born to savor. Four hours go by without my feeling any anxiety. I forget every worry.”

My dream fades, and I am back in the present. Paolo and I talk over another glass of wine, and I discover that the magical time-travel dreams of the afternoon seem to have affected him as well. I describe my “visit” with Machievelli, which Paolo agrees may well have been inspired by the wine and influenced by our recent visit to the Uffizi and the research on Machievelli I did for one of my university courses. Then Paolo smiles and says, “Remember when I was researching Italian recipes from the Renaissance?”

“Yes.” I smile.

That’s one of the fascinating things about Paolo—sure, he’s handsome and sexy, and he knows how to make me feel like a real woman, in that way that seems to come so easily and naturally to most Italian men, but he’s also a great cook.

“And I found several recipes attributed to the court of Lorenzo di Medici?”

“Yes, of course, I remember,” I say. “How could I forget? You created a fabulous dinner based on those recipes!”

“Then perhaps it’s not surprising, being here on land once owned by the Medicis, who I think I just shared a glass of wine and dinner with in my dream.”

I eagerly answer, “Lorenzo the Magnificent, probably the greatest single figure among the panoply of famous Medicis—poet, ruler, statesman, and Renaissance man. It has to be him. Lorenzo, whose life’s works—his patronage of the arts, literature, learning, scholarship, and his own diverse poetry—earned him the title ‘Il Magnifico.’”

Paolo’s smile broadens further as he nods in agreement. “They were all there, the artists he knew and secured commissions for—Leonardo da Vinci, Ghirlandaio, Botticelli, and Michelangelo.”

As Paolo describes the scene, I remember that Michelangelo is said to have lived with Lorenzo for five years, dining at the family table. I can only begin to imagine the conversations between Lorenzo and Michelangelo over glasses of the excellent wine from the Medici Estate. Perhaps if I drink another glass of this Chianti Classico Riserva, I can transport myself back to that time and place yet again. I wonder, will I be able to linger longer? Will the pasta be as good as Paolo’s recreated recipe?

DESCRIPTION: The gold border on the seal with the black rooster (the “gallo negro”) on the bottle of a Chianti Classico Riserva should tell you this is a special wine, and indeed it is. The best grapes are selected at the time of the harvest for the production of Riservas; only 20 percent of Chianti Classicos are good enough to wear the gold and the “Riserva” designation.

This La Sala Chianti Classico Riserva is made solely from hand-harvested Sangiovese grapes, carefully selected so only the very best grapes are used. Because it is 100 percent Sangiovese, it displays all the distinctive, unique, and enchanting characteristics of this grape to the fullest. The wine is aged for at least two years—a minimum of twelve months in oak, and then another six or more months in the bottle. While this wine can be enjoyed as soon as four years after harvest, it will reach its peak after a few more years in the cellar. The result is a wine that would not be out of place on the table of Lorenzo the Magnificent, or as a gift from Michelangelo to Pope Julius II—elegant, velvety, and with imposing structure.

TASTING NOTES: As with all great red wines, La Sala Chianti Classico Riserva is best oxygenated before serving, to release its full aromas and tastes. As you pour it into a large tulip-shaped goblet, enjoy the deep, rich ruby-red and garnet colors, almost glowing in the glass. In addition to the characteristic violet aroma of the Sangiovese grape, you’ll sense lush ripe berries and complex spice tones—hints of cinnamon, pepper, and vanilla—as you swirl and bring it to your nose. The taste is magnificent—intense, with great depth and balance. Complex and fruity, with nuances of vanilla from its time in oak casks, tannins gentled by maturity. This is a truly elegant Chianti.

FOOD PAIRINGS: Chianti Classico Riserva is a wine for a special dinner, when you want the best. It is the ideal accompaniment for game dishes (venison, pheasant, lamb, or wild boar), or with aged cheeses. If you are splurging on a serious steak, grilled to rare perfection in the manner of the Tuscan specialty “Bistecca alla Fiorentina,” go for the gusto and serve this wine. All you need add is a simple green salad.

Or, for something totally different, pair this with Lorenzo’s Pasta, Paolo’s re-creation based on his research on Renaissance and Medici court recipes. It’s perfect for a memorable, history-based special dinner. The dish showcases ingredients that were all rare and costly in Lorenzo’s day—oranges from Spain and spices from the East, served over pasta, with duck à l’orange, which was originally an Italian recipe. The pasta sauce is made from the juice of fresh-squeezed oranges and orange zest, simmered to reduce it until slightly thickened, seasoned with a hint of sugar and spices such as cinnamon and allspice. Paolo usually adds little duck or chicken stock, and a splash of a fruity white wine as well. Stir the sauce into al dente pasta, and slice the duck over top (we like boneless duck breast, pan seared and finished in a hot oven, skin crispy and meat tender and succulent). Garnish with peeled orange segments, sliced almonds, and a little fresh parsley or rosemary. Steamed green beans or fresh peas complement this nicely. Add candles and a bottle of Chianti Classico Riserva, and you might find yourself enjoying an idyllic evening in Lorenzo’s court.

Real Men Do Drink Pink—Inspired by Ceppaiano Rosé Toscano

STORY: Summertime. Thoughts of beaches and vacations, long dinners under the stars, with family and good friends, and good food and great wine. Trust me; this is a little of what goes though the mind of an Italian at this time of year.

And so, Paolo and I are in Viareggio, one of the oldest and most famous seaside resorts in Tuscany. Viareggio is known as much for its excellent cuisine and exciting nightlife as for the wide, sandy beaches that fall gently into the Mediterranean Sea. We are sitting in one of the many cafés on the promenade that runs along the beach. The air is perfumed with the scent of salt and the pine forests that shelter the town.

Paolo has lived in this area most of his life.

“When I was little,” he says, “I remember spending some of my summer holidays here. I would swim and play, but when I was tired, and my parents wanted to sit and relax, they gave me a time-consuming chore that kept me out of trouble and happily busy—digging in the sand and finding *arselle* or *telline*. This also gave me a culinary focus and goal.

“You see,” Paolo explains, “arselle, telline, or zighe are tiny clams found in some areas of coastal Tuscany, including here in the Viareggio area. They are small but have a distinct flavor, and if you’re patient enough to collect quite a few, the resulting recipe is unforgettable.

“See,” he continues, “here it is on the menu, in the traditional manner, arselle with garlic and tomatoes. And you must try the *cacciucco*, our Tuscan seafood stew, full of all the bounty of the sea. And the *spaghetti alla trabaccolara*—the pasta will be as fresh as the fish the sauce is made with. It takes its name from the *trabaccolara*, the name of the boats of the local fishermen, who prepared a sauce, simple yet perfectly delicious, on board the boat or right on the shore, from the leftover fish that they could not sell.”

Paolo adds caponata to our dinner order, in memory of his grandmother who was from Sicily and made this eggplant dish often, and veal carpaccio, “simply because it’s so good in the summer.” I have to agree, although I happen to know it was created in Venice, not in Tuscany, in 1950, by Giuseppe Cipriani, the owner of the famous Harry’s Bar, for a countess. It seems our meal will literally span Italy.

I wonder what my soccer-playing, motorcycle-riding friend has ordered to drink with dinner—perhaps beer? It’s summer; we have beef and fish, some spicy, some not. “Oh, no,” he says, and assures me he has found the perfect wine to accompany what promises to be a most memorable meal. “It is from a vineyard not far from here, on the banks of River Arno, near Cascina. You remember Cascina. It’s between Florence and Pisa.”

I nod, vaguely remembering seeing the sign on our drive to the coast.

“*The Battle of Cascina*—one of Michelangelo’s famous ‘lost works’—it was commissioned by a Florentine statesman in honor of one of Florence’s notable victories over the rival city-state of Pisa, but never completed, and only copies of Michelangelo’s drawings, and a few individual sketches, exist.”

I wonder how a macho guy like Paolo knows this. Maybe it has to do with being Italian.

The wine arrives first, our aperitivo. It is a very cold bottle of rosé, from Tenuta di Ceppaiano (Estate Ceppaiano). It seems real men do drink rosé.

“Rosé wine,” Paolo explains, “can be traced back to ancient Greece, when much of the red wine produced was pale red. You see, wine was not left to macerate on the skins for as long as it does today and, thus, never became fully red. It was our Roman ancestors who popularized darker red wines. So today we have a relative scarcity of Italian rosé wines, compared to reds, unlike France, where the Greeks introduced wine making to Provence some twenty-six

centuries ago, and their traditions, not the Romans', continued. Provence is still famous for rosé wines today. But Italy is gaining, with rosé wines like this Rosato di Toscana."

We raise our glasses. The wine is, indeed, perfect for the entire meal. Dry, fruity, yet with a slightly minerally or herbal quality that is refreshing and savory. Almost salty. "Ah, yes," Paolo says, "you can taste the Mediterranean breezes over the vineyard, and the marine fossils in the soil.

"I like to think," says Paolo, "that Lorenzo de Medici, Lorenzo the Magnificent, and perhaps Michelangelo and Leonardo da Vinci, who loved good wine and lived in this area, would have enjoyed a wine like this. Who knows, perhaps they did. It is made from one of Italy's oldest grapes, the Sangiovese. And what could be more macho than drinking 'Jove's blood,' which is the literal translation of Sangiovese, even if it is pink?"
