

WINE (A True Story)

Los Gatos, CA, Thanksgiving 1998:

All eyes are focused on the waitress' hands as she pours a little red wine into a small glass. Then all shift to the taster to watch him as he swirls the liquid, raises the glass to study its color and sniff its bouquet, and finally takes a sip. He smiles and assures the waitress that this wine is a good one for our meal. He must know what he's doing because he has spent many years at this. The rest of us are relative neophytes who now can begin drinking, confident that this wine has passed the test of a wine connoisseur. How would we manage without them?

Terceira Island, Azores, September 1976:

It is still dark outside when the last person climbs out of the warm hole his sleeping has created in the corn leaf mattress. Already there is a flurry of activity about the house because today begins the first day of the vindimas or Azorean grape harvest. Breakfast is bread and soup with wine, pretty much the same bread and soup with wine that's been served almost every day for the last two months. Only the vegetables in the soup have changed. There's no fresh water to quench one's thirst here, no orange juice in the refrigerator. In fact there is no refrigerator. The only available water is that which lies stagnant in a deep cistern by the side of this lava-rock house, captured as rainwater runoff from the roof. At least the roof is clean. Supplies needed in the harvest and a noonday meal of fried fish, bread, and wine are loaded aboard a camioneta. That's a truck with a large flat bed and removable rails. Everyone jumps aboard. A last look about the countryside girding the small village of São Mateus reveals the faint white shapes of some of the nearer houses appearing in the pale light of early dawn. All is so quiet, so still. Then the camioneta roars away, those in the back hanging onto the rails for dear life.

The camioneta swings westward onto the island's main artery, Caminho do Meio, navigating a road that is rarely straight and always narrow. Its horn blares at every bend. The vehicle slows only once to pass a carroça, its rider clutching at the reins of his frightened animal to keep it from bolting. An elderly widow, dressed head to toe in black, sits in her house at a window overlooking the road. She follows our progress as we speed past. The camioneta barrels into the central square of the village of São Bartolomeu with a blast of the horn and makes a quick left in front of the church, its date of construction, "1500" carved in large letters over the main door, already visible in the early morning light. He keeps to Canada da Igreja (Church Lane) as it meanders through a countryside of tiny fields and lava rock walls, continues on past Canada do Casado, or Lane of the Married One, and finally brakes beside a field. Once again, silence. If rain came, we'd just wait another day or two to go to work, but already the blue expanse of ocean and the majestic island of São Jorge can be made out. Behind São Jorge, Pico's mountain dominates and, as everyone here knows, if Pico can be seen, it will be a fine day indeed.

The driver is known as Contente, who earned enough money in America to

buy this truck and now no longer has to work so hard. He roars off after everything is unloaded. Also here is Francisco Machado Esp  nola, the owner of the field and a goodnatured person who is widely liked. Usually called Tio Chico (pronounced SHEEK-oo), he is dressed in his better work clothes for his wife wants him to project a proper image when he is away from home. And that's his wife standing over there with the ever mischievous smile, Serafina Adelaide Rocha, or Tia Serafina to the rest of us. The world will be a lonelier place when this couple depart it. A sister, Tia Rosa, is standing by Tia Serafina's side. A neighbor boy only 15 or so and already a man is helping to haul the wicker baskets, or cestas, to where the grapes are located. Maria Chinelo is also here to earn some spare cash. Let us not forget her brother, Jos   Chinelo, may he rest in peace, and how he gained fame from his daring confrontations of the bulls in the street, touros na rua, as they are called here, spinning his black umbrella and leaping at the last second; until the day he wore shoes, slipped on a rock, and was gored by a famous bull everyone called Mulato. There is also an American turista here, Tio Chico's great-nephew who the family calls David, or, so we get it right, duh-VEED. Tia Serafina thinks he's a bit thin - she really means he's too skinny - and keeps him stuffed with bread and vegetable soup. We shall call him "o Americano" - most everyone else does.

The camioneta is not the only way to haul grapes. Many on these islands rely on the old standby of two oxen pulling a wooden cart, or carro de bois. Top speed is about two miles an hour. But who cares about speed when there is always a tomorrow? The wooden wheels emit an irregular, discordant screech as they turn about the shaft. What an enchanting melody it is, too! There is nothing quite like it. Tio Chico does not use an oxcart since he does not own any oxen. And if he has to hire transport, he might as well hire a camioneta which can haul all the grapes and people in one trip.

But back to the grape harvest. Women's lib has not made it to this corner of the world where the women crawl wherever crawling must be done while the men walk about, carry cestas, and reach for the more accessible grapes. The men are silent, but the women carry on a continuous banter because work is made easier when there is someone to share it with and because Maria Chinelo is generous with her supply of snuff, her tabaco para cheirar. "O Americano" helps out where needed because he has not yet learned where he belongs.

As evening approaches, Contente returns and the overflowing baskets are lifted onto shoulders and onto his flatbed truck. The women move off to rest and to watch the men stagger under the heavy loads. "O Americano" tries to help by sliding a cesta off a wall and onto a shoulder, but the weight is too much and he ends up on his back. Once the last of the grape-laden cestas is hefted into place, everyone climbs aboard. But the truck does not move so fast now since Contente doesn't want to risk spilling any of the precious cargo. The sun has already gone down when the group arrives back home for a late dinner of - Guess what? - bread and vegetable soup, cooked quickly over bean straw. Owners of gas-fired stoves really miss out here. In seconds a fire has engulfed the blackened, cast-iron pot and the soup is soon boiling. For refreshments the choice is between wine and stagnant water. Everyone chooses wine.

Over the course of the next few days, grapes are inspected, macerated,

and pressed. Eventually a newly relined cement basin is full of rich red juice which is poured into large wooden casks. Already Tia Serafina is sampling the new juice, called vinho doce, which has not yet had time to ferment and has almost no alcoholic content. Beware, she tells the rest, too much will send one running to their casinha out back.

Then the day comes for the tasting of the vinho cheiro, as it is called. Standing close together in a humid cellar are: Tio Chico, now dressed in his usual work clothes for he's at home and doesn't have to worry about what other people think, though if the truth were known his patched shirt and pants are no worse than what his neighbors wear when they are on their own property; Casquinho, a jack-of-all-trades who knows the way of making wine, just don't ask him to work in the fields, he has to draw the line somewhere; and "o Americano", the skinny turista from America who can't lift a loaded cesta. Tio Chico pours. Let us excuse their lack of knowledge in the area of wine tasting protocol for there are no experts here to teach them how to do it correctly. The glasses are too large, are of various sizes, and one is even cracked. All three men fail to swirl, study, and sniff before gulping down the dark red liquid. Yet smiles cross their faces as they look at each other. There is no doubt about it - this has to be the best wine ever. At least until next year.

Oh, by the way, I'm the skinny turista they call "o Americano"

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