
ARTISANS

BY RACHEL WHARTON

BACKYARD GRAPES AND BASEMENT WINE

For one Bensonhurst family, fermentation is a natural part of life.



Photographs: Akiko Nishimura, brooklynphoto.com

BENSONHURST—In his 67 years, Alberico Istri has had many professions. Slim but strong, with bright blue eyes and a patch of slicked-back hair, he's been a saxophonist, a pie-baker, a hair stylist and, now, the manager of a public school cafeteria.

And every October, he's also the man who makes wine.

Like others who immigrated to his Bensonhurst neighborhood, Istri is from southern Italy, arriving in the States from a rural town near Naples. There—as in the rest of the Mediterranean—fall means the grape harvest and the time for making wine.

For centuries, writes anthropologist Patrick McGovern in *Ancient Wine: The Search for the Origins of Viniculture*, families in grape-growing regions have pressed their own fruit and bottled the results.

And generations later, when those Italian, Greek, Croatian and Albanian winemakers moved to cities like Boston, Philadelphia and Brooklyn, things weren't about to change. Sticking together, they grew their own herbs, dried their own sausages, simmered their own sauces and pressed their own grapes in basements or brownstone backyards.

For each of the past 49 years, in fact, Istri has done all of the above with help from his wife Emilia. "I never missed," he says, in his harmoniously sing-song, heavily accented English. Not even the season he suffered from a stroke, despite Emilia's disapproval.

She had a point: Winemaking is a lot of work. It begins in early October, when 36-pound cases of wine grapes begin to stream into Canarsie's Terminal Market. (Like the better-known Bronx market,

it sells produce and plants wholesale.)

Before he buys his grapes, though, Istri must clean and prepare. This means dragging out the two wooden barrels he keeps in the

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winemaking room he dug under his house in 1979. (Cement from floor to ceiling, it's also perfect for homemade sausages. In February, the family lights a small barbecue, seals the door and presto: a smoke-house.)

Bought in Brooklyn in the 1970s, Istri's battered barrels look more like they came from ancient Rome. For several days they're filled with water, so that the wood swells together to prevent leaks. Then, says Istri, "it's time to start a squeezing."

What gets squeezed is California grapes bought in Canarsie. Istri prefers their flavor—at least in past years—to Hudson Valley or New Jersey varieties. Over the decades, he's also watched the price rise from around \$7 a case to \$26.

And what about making wine from his homegrown grapes, which cover his patio? "Fugheddaboutit," as Istri likes to say. In Brooklyn, grape arbors mainly supply shade and table fruit, since it takes about 18 pounds of grapes to yield just one gallon of wine.

He usually makes about 100 gallons, from around 20 cases of red and white fruits. These are crushed a case or so at a time by a manually operated wooden crusher. The fruits are then poured into the wooden barrels, leaving a few inches of headroom for fermentation.



Above: Alberico's granddaughter, Emilia Mazzola, demonstrates how grapes are pressed in his basement wine-sausage-and-canned-goods cellar

Opposite: Alberico Istri, winemaker.

MAKING WINE, BROOKLYN STYLE

TAKE A CLASS: Next year the Brooklyn Botanic Garden will offer two courses for aspiring urban vintners. The first, this spring, will focus on cultivating locally appropriate wine grape varieties in an urban environment. In summer, they'll follow up with a course about making wine at home. For more information, visit www.bbg.org.

BUY THE GRAPES: While grapes grown for winemaking are occasionally available in larger produce markets in Bensonhurst, says Istri, your best bet is the Brooklyn Terminal Market at the intersection of Foster and Remsen Avenues 718 444-5700. They're usually available in early- to mid-October, but be sure to call first.

GET THE GEAR: While wine-making shops used to dot Brooklyn's Italian neighborhoods, they've largely disappeared. Find crushers, barrels, jugs, presses and wine kits (which come with grape juice) online through places like www.grapestompers.com or www.homebrewit.com.



Istri, in fact, owns modern plastic wine barrels and has been offered an electric grape smasher from a friend. The offer? Declined, and those barrels now collect water for the garden. “It’s gotta be wood or glass,” Istri insists, “forget the plastic.” He’s tried it, and says it affects the flavor of the wine.

These and other gadgets, like those wine kits that come with sugars, yeasts and plastic bags of pre-juiced grapes, Istri dismisses out of hand. “I don’t want it,” he says. “I do what I used to do for 50 years. That’s what I want to do.”

His methods, passed along from parents and grandparents, include a recipe with just one ingredient: grape juice, with fermentation provided by the natural yeasts found on the fruit. (Many wine recipes call for sterilization, added yeasts and sugars, for reasons ranging from food-safety to flavor. Before you attempt Istri’s natural methods, do your homework.)

For fermentation control, Istri just relies on the temperature: too cold (around 30 degrees), “it won’t start, like a car,” says Istri. Too hot (around 70 degrees), and “it’s gonna boom.”

Most Octobers, the temperature hovers around 50 degrees, and as fermentation begins in the barrels, the skins rise to the surface. Istri tamps them down twice with a special sterilized metal pole. When they slowly come back up a third time, it’s time for step two in making wine.

The juice goes to large glass jugs, while the goopy remains of the grapes (called must) are pressed for 24 hours. (Afterwards their skins are buried around the base of his fig tree.) This last bit of juice is added to the jugs, all equipped with special glass tops that lets oxygen escape as grape sugars turn to alcohol.

Throughout the next few months the mixture sits, and Istri watches the temperature, releasing an inch or two of juice if the level gets too high. Later on, he’ll pour the wine into still smaller vessels—mainly glass carafes labeled Paul Masson.

Around January, depending on heat waves and cold snaps, “all the juice, let’s put it this way, becomes wine,” says Istri, and those



Above: Tomatoes and mushrooms for the pantry. **Left:** Alberico Istri savors his backyard figs with his daughter Tina Mazzola, who lives next door.

carafes officially become bottles.

They join shelves already groaning with good food: last year’s wines, boxes of dried sausages and jars and jars of basil-flecked sauce, porcini and peppers, peeled tomatoes and artichoke hearts, many prepared in the downstairs kitchen Emilia uses just for putting by.

An enthusiastic cook, she’s a perfect match for her husband, cutting all her own pasta, kneading all her own pizza dough. She dries and crushes Alberico’s home-grown red peppers, makes homemade cheese, biscotti and cookies, and, of course, helps out with the wine.

In fact, while older Brooklynites often reminisce about pressing parties or tell tales of grandparents who made their own food, winemakers here like the Istris “have long ceased to exist in large numbers,” says Frank Sorrentino, the deputy executive director of the Italian Historical Society. Some people use shortcuts, like machines or kits, he says, but except for a few staunch hobbyists, few still make it at all.

The reasons are plentiful. Older immigrant communities have moved out of the city, modernization means less homemade food of all kinds—even in Italy, says Istri. And Sorrentino points to another reason, too. As good quality fresh grapes got harder to find for most home vintners, a lot of their wine just didn’t taste good.

Taste, in fact, may be the secret of Alberico Istri’s winemaking longevity. His family drinks his wine daily with dinner and neighbors sing its praises.

“He should be in the headlines,” proclaims Nancy Sottile, the executive director of the Federation of Italian American Organizations of Brooklyn, which is based in Bensonhurst.

And it may not be a Brunelli or a Planeta, but this Brooklyn vintage—especially served with a piece of Alberico’s cappicola and a spicy slice of one of Emilia’s homemade pizza pies—should suit even the pickiest wine geek just fine. □