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**Title:** “They Go By The Moon”: An Anthropological Perspective on Home Winemaking Among Italian Americans in Boston

**Author(s):** Chris Maggiolo

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# “They Go By The Moon”: An Anthropological Perspective on Home Winemaking Among Italian Americans in Boston

**abstract** | *The Italian American home winemaker is a steward of the winemaking process, but this means more than simply guiding grapes through fermentation. As custodians of a masculine winemaking environment and masters of a male-dominated process, master home winemakers are keepers of Italian American patrimonial heritage. Under the tutelage of older generations of Italian American male winemakers, younger generations of Italian Americans engage in a home winemaking environment which embodies physical and sociocultural manifestations of masculinity and domestic gender roles, and in doing so these younger generations internalize what it means to be an Italian American man. Through the cases which follow, I aim to illustrate how Italian American home winemaking in Boston, Massachusetts, may be used as a lens with which to view aspects of cultural patrimony within the Italian American cultural experience. It is my hope that this will help introduce wine, especially homemade wine, as an element of Italian American culture which invites scholars of Italian American studies and food studies to perceive wine and other alcoholic beverages in a new light.*

**keywords** | *Italian American, Wine, Homemade Wine, Masculinity, Heritage*

Home winemaking, like any culinary tradition, exists as a dynamic performance of culture, a value-loaded operation which produces, reconstructs, and stabilizes dominant and subversive ideologies and identities. In particular, Italian American home winemaking functions as a discourse on Italian and Italian American masculinity and on heritage, both tangible and intangible. Boston, Massachusetts, with its deeply historic and continuously evolving community of industrious and oenophilic Italian Americans, presents a unique setting to explore these traditions of home winemaking.

Boston, a city well known today for its generous production and consumption of beer and for its love of spirits and cocktail culture, also harbors a thriving history of do-it-yourself winemaking, and this winemaking tradition, which survived the gauntlet of Prohibition relatively unscathed, may be the oldest continuous mode of alcohol production and consumption in the city.<sup>1</sup> An anthropological investigation of Italian American

home winemaking in Boston not only showcases an important and underrepresented aspect of Italian American culture while fleshing out the history of wine as it pertains to an iconic American city but also strengthens a growing body of literature which seeks to move past the academic medicalization of alcohol, instead presenting wine and other alcoholic beverages as meaningful lenses of inquiry within the realms of anthropology and food studies.

Home winemaking by Italian Americans in Boston is a constructive process which deliberately and unconsciously produces an environment richly encoded with cultural and social data. As Mary Douglas once argued about food, wine and winemaking is a code; it contains a sequence of possible cultural and social messages.<sup>3</sup> At its most tangible, the educational sphere of home winemaking takes the form of studies in craftsmanship and technique. Fathers teach sons the proper physical methods of winemaking through experiential training: how to set up

equipment, how to recognize the development of wine across its stages, and how to press, age, and bottle. Less concrete, but still regulated by the senses, are lessons in taste and appraisal or beliefs about purity and cleanliness. Finally, but certainly not least of all, comes the transmission of intangible morals and ethics such as punctuality and the importance of hard work, or elements of social structure such as hierarchies and gender roles. Through the cases which follow, I aim to illustrate how the act of Italian American home winemaking in Boston, Massachusetts, may be used as a lens with which to view various aspects of the Italian American cultural experience. It is my hope that this will help introduce wine, especially homemade wine, as an element of Italian American culture, inviting scholars of Italian American studies and food studies to perceive wine and other alcoholic beverages in a new light.

Boston's Italian American community is a tight-knit group comprising several satellite neighborhoods; among them are the city's famous North End, East Boston, Stoneham, and parts of Medford. I first encountered this community and its members at the homebrew store but soon became aware of several local "clubs" founded over the last century to foster fellowship among Italian Americans and to preserve Italian American culture. Several of these clubs, such as the Appian Club of Stoneham, Massachusetts, host home winemaking competitions. In September 2013 I contacted Nicolas Orichuia, the founder and editor-in-chief of "*Bostoniano*," a news website

and print magazine featuring Boston's Italian American community. Nicola in turn put me in contact with clubs, individuals, and families whom he knew to make wine. As with many artisans, home winemakers are impassioned individuals who enjoy speaking about their craft, and I was quickly taken in by the community. By early October, the tail end of Boston's 2013 home winemaking season, I had collected ten interviews, shared a traditional meal of tripe with a table of home winemakers, and participated in a day-long crush event with Vincenzo Capogreco, the Capogreco family, and select family friends.

Semistructured interviews lasted an average of one hour per person. I prompted informants by asking questions regarding their personal winemaking histories and their winemaking processes and beliefs, noting that I was interested in the heritage and traditions of Italian American home winemaking. Not surprisingly, discussions required little further prodding on my part. Individuals were quick to share their thoughts and beliefs and frequently navigated their own stories and timelines without requiring me to keep our dialogues on topic. All interviews were recorded digitally, which allowed me to participate in winemaking processes as needed and, in some cases, to engage in the meals traditionally prepared by women for winemaking days or by men for Appian club meetings. I have chosen to transcribe these interviews verbatim in this paper. Because of the nature of spoken language, and because English is not the first language of many of my participants,

Name, Affiliation	From	Current Location	Year of Immigration	Learned From	Winemaker Since
Vincenzo Capogreco	Calabria, Italy	East Boston, MA	1962	Father, father-in-law	1962
Luigi Zeraschi, Appian Club	Parma, Italy	Melrose, MA	1958	Father	1968
Dominic Candelieri	Calabria, Italy	Braintree, MA	1983	Father, grandfather	1968
Franco DiStefano, Appian Club	Isernia, Italy	Stoneham, MA	1972	Father, grandfather	N/A
Vincent "Vinny" Festino, Appian Club	Massachusetts	Stoneham, MA	N/A	Italian and American cousins	1979
Charles Uglietto	Massachusetts	Cambridge, MA	N/A	Father, grandfather	2006
Susi Remondi	Connecticut	Somerville, MA	N/A	Father, uncle	2012



**Figure 1:** Vincenzo is observed by a grandnephew while straining new wine.

these excerpts often appear with grammatical and lexical inconsistencies. Punctuation has been added to help facilitate the flow of conversation.

The table above presents some of the winemakers with whom I spoke and organizes some demographic information regarding their winemaking histories. It is of note that Franco, Dominic, Luigi, and Vincenzo—the “old guard” of winemakers—are a generation older than Vinny and Charlie. In her midtwenties, Susi represents another generational gap. Though Susi now lives in Boston, she is originally from Connecticut, and her father, with whom I did not speak, still lives there. Though Susi does not come from a Bostonian background, I nevertheless felt that her insight as a female winemaker would lend a unique perspective to this conversation on Italian American home winemaking. The “Winemaker Since” field notes the year in which the individual self-identifies as becoming a primary or “head” winemaker, rather than as an assistant. Typically, these individuals have been making wine, or have somehow been involved in winemaking processes, for most of their lives. Because Italian American home winemaking is a highly patriarchal and patrilocal process, these winemakers did not engage in their own acts of home winemaking until immigration to the United States removed them from their established familial winemaking environments. If winemaking mentors were still present in the United States, such as Vincenzo’s father-in-law or Charlie’s

father and grandfather, then personal winemaking practices usually began after the death of a mentor or after the individual moved from the locus of winemaking (such as Susi moving from Connecticut to Greater Boston).

I met Vincenzo and his daughter Lisa at their home in East Boston. It was a nice house, small, but with a sizeable backyard which Vincenzo had converted into a thriving garden, cantina, and curing room for salumi. Vincenzo had built the cantina himself, a retirement gift which also fulfilled his life goal of owning and operating a personal winemaking space. It was the focal point of much discussion, and Vincenzo used it to explain to me the differences between contemporary home winemaking and that of the early twentieth century.

*Most of the people in the South of Italy have the cantina. Make the grape. Then make the wine ... I learned from my father. It's tradition. And then come over here. It my father-in-law. He make the wine over here. But he no make it so good because he no have the place. He make it good. He know how to make good but he no have the place to make the wine.*

*First thing: The place to make the wine. Second thing: You got to buy the tools, the right tools. Three thing: The qualita. You got to pay the best. And keep it clean. And keep it clean. And the wine come good. So far make good wine every year. Every year. We drink wine every year. We don't have to put it in the refrigerator. Don't have to put no way. No chemical. Nothing. I make natural. Natural.<sup>4</sup>*

Vincenzo originally learned to make wine with his father in his home region of Calabria in southern Italy. After 1962, when he immigrated to the United States, he continued to learn from his father-in-law. By this time, the tide of Italian immigration to the United States had long ebbed. The 1850 United States census, which first recorded nationality, noted 3,645 Italians. By 1890, this number had risen to 182,580, though over three hundred

thousand Italian immigrants were reported to enter the country between 1881 and 1890. With another two and a half million Italians immigrating to the United States between 1890 and 1910, the bulk of immigration would be complete by 1914 and the start of World War I.<sup>5</sup> Though several of my informants immigrated to the United States in the last fifty years, many had family and extended family who were already practicing home winemaking in the United States. For Italian Americans who have lived in both Italy and the United States, winemaking education in Italy was frequently supplemented by further teachings by Italian family members in the United States.

“First thing: *The place to make the wine.*” It is hard to avoid a discussion of *terroir* when engaged in studies on wine production and consumption. While I am certain that a connection between *terroir* and home winemaking could be drawn, it is my belief that home winemaking, especially in the context of Boston’s Italian American home winemakers, is less a question of “the taste of place” and more a question of “personal taste.” In other words, home winemaking reflects more noticeably the individual or individuals engaged in the process rather than the delicate expression of the vineyard’s socioenvironmental climate. In Vincenzo’s case, he literally built his cantina, his space of winemaking. Home winemakers typically have little to no connection with the region, let

alone the vineyard, from which they source their grapes. In Boston, for example, grapes and the more common prepressed grape juice can be purchased from retail locations specializing in homebrewing and home winemaking. Alternatively, bulk grapes can be purchased from a market in Chelsea. Some Italian families, such as the Capogrecos, do continue to grow grapes, though they rarely grow enough to produce wine and instead use the fruit for preserves and other domestic uses. With the winemakers alienated from the vineyard and with the supply of grapes bottlenecked through a small handful of markets and retail establishments, *terroir* no longer exists as a factor of distinction among homemade wines. Instead, the quality of homemade wine directly reflects the capability, and the individuality, of the home winemaker. For Vincenzo, the cantina plays a leading role in not only the winemaking process but also the development of Vincenzo’s identity as a winemaker.

Even though *terroir* plays less of a role in the discussion of home winemaking than in discussions of its commercial counterpart, the concepts of space and place remain important pieces of the Italian American home winemaking experience. In his exploration of memory and space, Pierre Nora describes *les lieux de memoire*, the most material “sites of memory” which help cultural actors symbolically relive and perform an otherwise lost collective history.<sup>6</sup> It could be



Figure 2, Left to Right: Vincenzo's Cantina; An Old Wine Bottle; Vincenzo, Apprentice, and Wine Press

said that Italian American home winemakers engage in tradition and history through these *lieux de memoire*—after all, personal cantinas and winemaking objects imbued with memory and meaning are commonplace features and artifacts of Italian American winemaking. These objects create portals, negotiated by an experience of winemaking, by which Italian Americans may interact with personal histories and memories. However, as the very act of winemaking within the Italian American home produces space and transforms space, so too does it challenge Nora’s assertion that *milieux de memoire*, the true sites of memory, are all but extinct.

In addition to winemakers experiencing memory through objects, the act of winemaking creates a new environment, practiced and performed yet each year new and distinct from the one before it. Though the performance of winemaking itself is attached to a specific location, the winemaking atmosphere resonates outward from the cantina or cellar, converting the usually dormant workshop into a place of energy and excitement and then progressing to swallow the yard and house in a contagious field of joy and fellowship. The actors participating in these environments may be referencing memory through specific *lieux de memoire*, but they are also engaged in the production of a new, dynamic space and memory-building experience, a true *milieu de memoire* or what Lefebvre conceives of as *l’espace* or a “spatialization.”<sup>7</sup> Charlie, a newer Italian American winemaker who remembers his father and grandfather making wine out of a shack in their Cambridge home, describes how the smell of winemaking transforms his home:

*In the basement we’ve made a little bit of a, kind of a working wine cellar. So it’s not with the tile floor and the nice stained glass, it’s really a working wine cellar. And now we’ve set up an area where we set up all our fermenting tubs. I think this year we had ...uh 2012 ... six fermenting tubs set up as we’ve increased a variety of grapes, more fermenting tubs. We don’t have a lot of space. I wish I had made*

*more space for it, but we make it work. We make it work. And I will always tell you, once we crushed the grapes, Thursday after we’ve crushed the grapes, I get up in the morning and it’s like Holy Jesus. The entire house smells like wine, it’s unbelievable. And you go, “Well, I know the fermentation process is moving along quite well.”<sup>8</sup>*

The smells of winemaking which flood Charlie’s house paint a more concrete example of the winemaking experience overstepping the physical boundaries of the wine cellar. When I joined Vincenzo at ten o’clock on a Saturday morning to help with the wine crush, the smell of grapes was not present in the Capogreco household. Still, something else had taken hold. On my way to the backyard, to its heirloom tomatoes, fig trees, and of course the cantina, I passed through the downstairs kitchen and dining room. Though I was the first apprentice winemaker to arrive that morning, work in the kitchen had already begun. One of Vincenzo’s daughters was hard at work preparing *zeppoli*, broadly speaking Italian doughnuts. Rather than being coated with sugar, they were to be each stuffed with an anchovy in the traditional Calabrese way. It was quite the laborious feat, considering the massive bowl of dough which sat on the counter next to a pan of frying oil. As the day’s other apprentice winemakers—friends and cousins and Vincenzo’s son Pasquale (the apprentices were always male)—joined us in the cantina, children, wives, sisters, aunts, and girlfriends congregated in the basement kitchen and dining room. For many Italian American households, winemaking is a festive occasion, a day of celebration and commensality peppered with traditional foods such as *zeppoli* and home-cured *sopressata*. Though the pungent tang of fermenting grapes did not fill the Capogreco home, some other transformative energy was certainly in the air.

“Second thing: You got to buy the tools, the right tools.” With the arrival of assistant winemakers, we immediately got to work. The grapes had been fermenting in large tubs for between one and two weeks. For the most part, the clusters had been

destemmed, though the skins remained in contact with the juice to provide flavor, color, tannins, and yeast. Vincenzo confided in me that all the help in the cellar sometimes annoyed him. It was a small space, and today's winemaking practices simply did not need the number of bodies and hands required by the older methods.

*Before it's all by hands. Everything by hands. You have ... you don't have it no more. You grind them up with the thing by hands. Then you put the thing and tie them up, push them up. Now today, everything automatic. But everything from Italy, everything ... When to press, we got the machine, but you had to work hard. Today, one man can make the grape. Before, two or three men, four men would do this. Now you get everything. Oof, it change a lot. And we lose a lot of wine with the thing antique. Now you don't lose nothing. You come the press, the temperature, it's all controlled.<sup>9</sup>*

Despite his grumblings, Vincenzo still teaches his son, his nephews, and his friends the correct techniques and processes. For my fellow apprentices, winemaking occurs with Vincenzo, at Vincenzo's house, regardless of whether you have your own equipment at home or not. Vincenzo is the master winemaker; everyone else is present to learn. Indeed, space was tight; the small concrete room pressed in on half a dozen full-grown men and a couple hundred pounds of freshly fermented grapes. Auxiliary containers soon made things even tighter as we prepared to squeeze the fermented grapes in a large, hand-cranked, and (of course) Italian barrel press. Meanwhile, an electric pump— notably juxtaposed against the pneumatic press— moved juice to empty vessels. Dominic Candelieri, another local home winemaker and Italian cookbook author from Braintree, Massachusetts, describes his own labor-intensive winemaking process. It is not unlike the work we performed with Vincenzo.

*When I do the white Moscato, I take every bit of the stem out. So once the grape is grind you cover. And you cover, every two or three nights you will look to see what will happen. And because the alcohol, it starts boiling. And then the wine will come up. And then you take a big stick, and you break them. And the sooner you break them and you stir, it is going to go down again. And then you cover. And then you check it again in a couple of days. I don't let my wine ferment for more than a week. So once it done with fermentation, I put it in the squeezer and you know. One you put in the squeezer, there is a lot of juice or a lot of stem. In other words, you put in the squeezer and you start a-squeezing and you will see that the juice is coming out.<sup>10</sup>*

Dominic and Vincenzo, like many older Italians— what I refer to as the “old guard” of winemakers— maintain a minimalist approach to winemaking. They ferment using the grapes' natural yeasts. With the exception of lighting a sulfur stick to sterilize barrels, they clean equipment with water. Wine is aged in glass demijohns, large carboys, or repurposed wine barrels. In Vincenzo's case, the wine barrels are old whiskey barrels. The recycling of whiskey barrels is a common practice among the old guard of Boston's Italian American home winemakers, perhaps adopted from the days of the Old Mr. Boston distillery that operated in Roxbury, Massachusetts from 1933 until 1986.<sup>11</sup> Whiskey barrels are frequently discarded after their first use and are a cheap and reliable source of barrels for do-it-yourself winemakers, none of whom seemed to mind the sweet, strong, bourbon-like flavors and aromas which the barrels impart to the wine.

Some techniques are older than others, yet remain equally important as or more important than evolving practices. I sat at the Appian Club meeting in Stoneham, surrounded by a table of the club's most respected home winemakers. It was a special night—Frank had spent the day preparing a classic Italian meal of slow-cooked tripe. It was a delicate process, arguably more delicate than the winemaking techniques we discussed at the

table. Vinny Festino, the club's president, called my attention to the gentleman who moved to join us.

*Chris, this is Luigi. He's one of our best [in the competition]. He either comes in first or second, never third. But always either first or second. And most of the time, first. He's really a master winemaker.<sup>12</sup>*

We exchanged salutations, and Luigi sat down to my right. Without hesitation or prompting, he launched into an explanation about his winemaking beliefs.

*Number one, you got to buy the best grape. That's the key. That's the number one key. Wine is like milk, you got to be clean. You got to watch the moon. Old moon all the time. When you got to move, got to be old ... That's the key ... You got to watch, even, when you move a clear day is even better. The old moon, a nice day, when you make the fortieth day, you squeeze, you take it out, you put them in the barrel. For forty day you're not supposed touch. The grape has to ... after forty day the wine is clear. Things at bottom. And when you move, don't shake. You got to leave it there. The bad wine at the bottom, you throw it away. If you shake them up, it doesn't come clean. That's one thing.<sup>13</sup>*

Luigi's discussion of the moon phases—I was continuously and emphatically reminded of the importance of “*mancanza and crescenza*,” “waning and waxing”—is reminiscent of home winemaking's agricultural and peasant ancestry. Until after World War II, winemaking was a widespread rural and familial activity which generated a product for personal consumption, for guests, and for manual laborers. As the moon phase has guided agricultural processes for hundreds of years, so too did it guide the timeline of winemaking. Home winemaking is still present in Italy, though since the second half of the twentieth century the process has noticeably declined, yielding to the prominence of commercial winemaking.<sup>14</sup> Interestingly enough,

since the majority of Italians immigrated to the United States in the early twentieth century, long before the rapid modernization of post-World-War Italian food culture, Italian American food traditions occasionally retain significant traces of pre-war peasant culture.<sup>15</sup> Sometimes, such as with Luigi, these beliefs are overt. In other instances, these traditions have long since been assimilated into contemporary cultural practices and only hints remain. Charlie Uglietto, home winemaker in Somerville, Massachusetts, remembers making wine with his grandparents and father. In fact, he can still see the house where winemaking occurred from the office window of his family's oil company. Though he remembers his family's winemaking traditions, Charlie has deliberately strayed from the old guard's ways and instead follows more modern winemaking practices.

*My father's father used to crush the grapes—however they crushed the grapes, stomping on them. Put them in the tubs, and let them ferment. Natural yeast, whatever it was. Ferment it. Then they would press them, put the wine in the barrels, top off the barrels, and then that's it. And they used whiskey barrels. Now, what we do is crush the grapes, throw them in the fermenting tubs, we add potassium metabisulfite to kill the natural yeast. Then we inoculate with yeast and a nutrient so that we can, you know, a cultured yeast so that we can control the process there.*

*We started paying a lot more attention to, well, what's the acid—well, if we have to add, let's add some. If we don't, then let's cut it a little bit. So we really tried to—it has become more of a chemistry type of thing. So once we got it that we've let it uh ... ferment in the primary fermenters, you know, anywhere five to seven days, 'cause I like a darker red. We usually typically make a cab or a merlot, but typically mostly cab. Then what we'll do is we'll press it and we'll put it in—we use strictly French oak wine barrels. So we'll put it in the French oak wine barrels.<sup>16</sup>*

Charlie's choice of techniques is very indicative of the winemaking processes I learned while working at wineries in Virginia and while making my own wine out of the homebrewing store. He speaks of malolactic fermentation and of blending varietals to achieve a desired balance in flavors. Though he adheres to a chemistry-driven process that combines calculations and numbers with personal tastes and experiences, Charlie frequently refers to his winemaking experiences as a youth. Charlie fondly recalls riding with his cousins in the beds of delivery trucks, keeping boxes of grapes from falling out during transit. But gone are the days of stomping grapes and aging in bourbon barrels. Instead, Charlie uses destemming machines and French oak barrels, and he even has a bottle-filling machine to help with the bottling process. The savoir faire of winemaking that Charlie learned from his father and grandfather has been adapted to meet Charlie's understanding of contemporary commercial winemaking. It is this new tradition, grounded in a winemaking heritage at least three generations deep, which Charlie passes to his sons.

*Last September, my wife and I went out to see one of our boys and we left my brother-in-law Gene and my older son in charge of the winemaking. And they stepped up and handled it on their own. And handled the chemistry on their own. And they really did a great job. I think the tradition is ... it's a pride thing to say, as a family, collectively, we've produced something that people like. But also from my standpoint again, being a little bit more selfish, it's a reason to get people together.<sup>17</sup>*

Pressing wine is a long and arduous task, and Vincenzo's apprentices frequently rotated in order to evenly distribute the labors at hand. One dug through the tubs of grapes, pressing with a colander to release more of the fermented liquid while simultaneously maneuvering a hose to transport the liquid out of the tub. Another watched a receiving container, a twenty- or thirty-gallon Rubbermaid, managing the other end of

the hose to ensure that the precious wine would not overflow its new vessel. Two other gentlemen manned the press, a hand-pumped pneumatic barrel press which required constant management. Too much pressure, and the grapes would squirt out the side. Too little pressure, and the flow of squeezed juice would be insignificant at best. Vincenzo oversaw the entire operation, helping when needed, barking orders, and offering advice and opinions.

In his 1677 *Mechanick Exercises*, Joseph Moxon described the "Craft of the Hand" as something "which cannot be taught by Words, but is only gained by Practice and Exercise."<sup>18</sup> The Italian American winemakers of Boston subscribe to a similar ethos. As an art or craft, winemaking must be experienced in order to fully understand how and why it occurs. Descendent from an agricultural past, the skills and lessons codified in the physical act of winemaking can only be learned through oral instruction and the process of making. It is precisely when these older, more "traditional" winemaking exercises interact with modernity and contemporary production methods that the performance of winemaking becomes a locus for discourse.<sup>19</sup> Vincenzo entertained questions throughout the entirety of the crush. Why do we do it this way? Is this how you made wine in Italy? Are we there yet? At the intersection of old and new, the physicality of winemaking produces a dialogue of education, mediated through actions and tools and spaces.



Figure 3: Vincenzo and apprentices transferring remaining grapes

Charlie, on the other hand, took advice from winemaking experts in California. He reads books detailing contemporary winemaking practices and the chemistry of winemaking. His take is indicative of a widespread contemporary trend whereby consumers trust professional experience and scientific knowledge over familial authority and traditional practices.

*“Three thing: The qualita. You got to pay the best. And keep it clean. And keep it clean.”* Living with one foot in the sensual sphere and one foot in the mental sphere, concepts such as taste, quality, and cleanliness blur the lines between corporeal and incorporeal. Nearly every winemaker with whom I spoke preferred lighter, sweeter Moscato wines and big, flavorful Zinfandels. The telltale flavors of bourbon, imparted via barrel aging, were a more acquired taste.

*I enjoy a lighter wine, myself, only because I don't drink wine to get drunk. I drink wine to enjoy with my meal ... I think most Italians like a nice, hearty, full-bodied wine. And I think Zinfandel—Cabernet is the same, I think—but I think Zinfandel give you a nice hearty wine.<sup>20</sup>*

For Luigi and several others, Zinfandel represents the pinnacle of grapes appropriate for winemaking, and no place was more suitable to purchase these grapes than the New England Produce Market in Chelsea, Massachusetts.

*I buy in [Chelsea]. There's two place you can buy in Boston. There's one in Woburn. It's more expensive. It's got the same grape. I check. You got to know wherever you go look at the grape, don't look one time and buy, you look around before. Check all the grape. The best sweet. Zinfandel is still the number one grape. They don't cheat. They give the Zinfandel. Zinfandel is the best wine. See, I get one box of Alicante for the color. Alicante give you the color.<sup>21</sup>*

Viticultural research indicates that the Zinfandel grape is a clone of the Croatian varietal

Crljenak/Pribidrag and shares a DNA profile with the southern Italian grape varietal Primitivo.<sup>22</sup> As closely related cultivars, Zinfandel and Primitivo exhibit nearly identical flavors. By law, Italian winemakers may import Primitivo as Zinfandel, though American winemakers must still label them as separate varieties.<sup>23</sup> Zinfandel's thick skin allows it to better withstand long-distance travel from California to Boston,<sup>24</sup> which allows distributors to deliver a sweeter grape to the market. For Luigi, this sweeter grape makes all the difference. That Zinfandel also looks and tastes like Primitivo, a common home winemaking varietal of southern Italy, may also play a role in its popularity.

The Chelsea market, the country's largest privately owned terminal market, is constituted in part by several Italian produce and fruit vendors, many of whom left Boston's North End neighborhood in the early 1970s after the Supreme Court ruling for desegregation.<sup>25</sup> Most of Boston's old guard winemakers make the bulk of their purchases here, where the intersection of quality and price seems to be at its most beneficial point.

*The main thing, it has to be sweet. You could buy Barbera, or Zinfandel, or Merlot. The more important, it looks good. And the box got to be heavy. And that means you have the value there. Some people want to make wine and they go buy the cheap grape. They want to save money.<sup>26</sup>*

As important as knowing how to correctly produce wine is knowing how to correctly source grapes. Participating in the purchase or delivery of grapes is an important learning experience, and the value and sweetness chosen by Luigi's discerning eye may be notably different selection criteria than the chemical properties which drive a newer winemaker's selection. Charlie describes an encounter with the Chelsea market that ultimately led him to purchase from a more expensive store in Woburn:

*We [purchased grapes from Chelsea] once and it was terrible. I shouldn't say that. I think*

*that may be harsh. They were less worthy of the \$50+ dollars a box I was paying for them. So they were older than they should have been. And then the other thing was when you're asking people, you know, "What are the brix on the Cab grapes?" "Oh, they're good. They're good. They're great grapes. Great." "No, I understand that. I just want to know, what's the brix because I need this for my calculation to figure out what the alcohol content's going to be." "Oh, it's high. It's good." It doesn't work that way. And it's like, if you don't know, say you don't know. But give me the number of somebody I can call that can tell me what it is, so I know what I'm doing. So, yeah, we were disappointed with the quality of the grapes there.<sup>27</sup>*

Charlie notes that he lacks the contacts within the Chelsea market who can notify him of new shipments. Though home winemaking as a whole can be viewed as an inclusive, welcoming process, the reality is that quality grapes are a rare commodity. Winemakers must compete with each other while navigating a fluctuating window to make sure that they are available to receive quality raw ingredients. Even if Charlie were to have an inside contact, he might continue to purchase grapes from the Woburn store, which can tell him the specific brix (a measure of the sugar content) and acidity levels of a shipment and can ensure that the delivery is fresh.

A discussion regarding quality is a discussion of taste, of personal preferences, and of choice.<sup>28</sup> Within the old guard, quality grapes are defined in terms of sweetness; a quality purchase is defined in terms of weight and value. For the new guard, quality may be expressed in terms of proper brix or acid levels, a quality purchase reflecting freshness and dependability. Following Bourdieu, these tastes are indicative of a group's broader social preferences. Value, for instance, is a concept that is known to the contemporary consumer but in many ways means far more to a generation which knew the Great Depression and the scarcity of the World War era. Similarly, dependability and a

correct chemical composition indicate a modern trend which emphasizes the importance of an enlightened consumer and transparent business practices.

Cleanliness is also an important part of the home winemaking process and was perhaps the most frequently addressed topic during my interviews with home winemakers. Paralleling her discussion in "Deciphering the Meal," Mary Douglas also explores concepts of purity, cleanliness, and dirt. In *Purity and Danger*, Douglas notes that "dirt is essentially disorder. There is no such thing as absolute dirt: it exists in the eye of the beholder."<sup>29</sup> Comparable to the symbolism present in and around a meal, dirt and cleanliness are also symbolic concepts. They represent order and chaos, politics, right and wrong. They are inextricably linked to the production and reproduction of cultural and social capital. Through discourses centered on dirt and cleanliness, experts in a field, be it cultural or natural, can communicate lessons in distinction. The arena of home winemaking is no exception.

Regardless of a winemaker's subscription to old guard or new guard ideology, cleanliness plays a fundamental role in the winemaking process. For Luigi, "Wine is like milk. It got to be clean." Just as milk has long been a classic symbol of purity, cleanliness, and wellness,<sup>30</sup> wine can also be a symbol of the sanctity of body, space, and place. Sabatino, another old guard winemaker, agrees that cleanliness is the most important part of the winemaking process. "Otherwise the bacteria makes all the impurity and stuff. It makes the wine sick."<sup>31</sup> As an expression of the winemaker and by its very existence as a fermented product, winemaking is regarded by the older Italian Americans as a living product. As such, it remains important to keep the wine happy and healthy. If neglected or treated poorly, the wine, just like milk and the body, will spoil. In a comparison between her personal life and the writings of Homer, Italian American oral historian Joanna Clapps Herman recalls a moment of failed winemaking:

*My father loved to tell this story about the importance of wine to his family: His grandmother, his father, and his father's closest friend, Canio, stood solemnly in the cellar passing around the first taste of Canio's wine. They were the arbiters. The glass was passed in turn to each. No one said a word for a moment. Then Mamanonna, my father's grandmother, broke the silence grimly: "Canio's season is shot to hell." Poor Canio's wine wasn't any good, and so now he had no way to welcome guests to his home.<sup>32</sup>*

To Herman, a failed wine yield represents a moment of significant personal and social conflict. Without wine, Canio's home is less inviting, even less complete. The magnitude of his failure is not expressed in terms of bottles or even barrels but rather as an entire season of resources, time, and energy. It is not explicitly stated that Canio's winemaking failed for lack of cleanliness, though infection is certainly the most common avenue to homemade wine spoilage, especially if the wine is still young and has not been exposed to many factors of aging. Among the first lessons communicated by Italian American home winemakers is how to rinse equipment, how to clean barrels with sulfur sticks, and that neatness and order aid in the swift assessment of cleanliness and the execution of cleaning. Vincenzo's strict policy of "No food. No potato. No bread ...just have the bottle of wine" also illustrates the rich set of rules which helps to govern the state of the cantina and the sacredness of the winemaking space.

For the new guard of Italian American home winemakers, cleanliness takes the form of an escalating chemical war between winemakers and hosts of undesirable microbes. Fueled by an arsenal of chemicals which alter pH, salinity, or any number of other variables, the new guard of Italian American winemakers uses cleansers and sanitizers to mold the winemaking environment into submission. Sulfur sticks remain the most efficient way of sanitizing barrels, but winemakers primarily use sodium metabisulfite and potassium metabisulfite to sanitize equipment. Percarbonate

cleansers (think OxiClean, but without the detergent) scrub away particles. Winemakers test acid levels and sugar content, using tools such as refractometers to obtain accurate readings. With this shift, gone are the days of sensory-oriented home winemaking. No longer do home winemakers rely on the sights, sounds, smells, touches, and tastes of the winemaking process; they instead follow prescribed instructions and work off of precise chemical measurements.

*I make wine because it reminds me of home. And my dad makes wine because it reminds him of home. And my grandpa made wine because that's what they fucking do in Italy. [laughs] But yeah, I think that it's a really cool skill to have. But I don't think that I have a skill. I think I have a good knack at following [my father's] sticky note instructions. Which is going to turn into a skill eventually. I'm getting better at it.<sup>33</sup>*

In teaching proper methods of cleaning and sterilizing, winemakers not only convey which techniques and cleaning agents to use but also communicate the importance of sensory perception and a hierarchy of the senses.<sup>34</sup> For old guard winemakers, a clean wine is a happy wine. It is produced in a positive space with quality ingredients and is tended to by an attentive winemaker, a steward of the transformative winemaking process. Throughout our crush day, Vincenzo pattered around the small cantina. He tasted the new wine; he noted its bright purple color and the deeper purple of the must. To me, the wine press appeared a simple machine, but its older pneumatic construction required the learned observations of a seasoned machinist. Nearly inaudible hissings and clinks let Vincenzo and his apprentices know when the press was under too much stress or if the mechanism had gotten caught on a chain. Throughout all of this, it was understood that a clean environment was important, but this understanding was rarely acted upon. I was told once of a hat which fell in a previous season's grapes. Vincenzo was furious

about what it might do to the wine. Now, no hats are allowed. As important as cleanliness is to the winemaking process, Vincenzo only mentioned it in the context of cleaning out vessels. Submerging hands into the grape must while physically pushing a colander (as Vincenzo and his apprentices did) into the wine is not, by contemporary standards, a sanitary process, but the intimate and interactive performance between winemaker and wine is an important part of traditional winemaking and in the moment eclipses questions of sanitation. In Braintree, Dominic remarks on his own experiences with cleanliness and spoiled wine:

*If I don't do the proper cleanliness on the containers, the wine in less than a year will go a little vinegar. Very very rare in all this years, I had one bad year. I believe that was a year of bad grapes. If I was doing something wrong it would be something wrong I would do every year. But it was okay. I give it to a friend of mine, and he make the grappa out of it.<sup>35</sup>*

The ends—the finished, drinkable wine which emerges some three-plus months from the pressing—justify the means and modes of making. A successful wine indicates a successful and clean winemaking process. Modern winemakers, on the other hand, are taught to minimize personal contact with the wine, lest bacteria and yeast contaminate the product. Dominic, in over forty-five years making wine, only had one bad season. He was able to sterilize and save the product by having his friend distill it into grappa, and he remains adamant that the fault lay with the grapes, rather than with his techniques and attention to sanitization. If the finished wine is drinkable, then the sensory-driven processes used to create it cannot be questioned. Since Dominic's practices over the remaining seasons continue unchanged, he believes the contaminating variable to be the quality of the grapes.

For the younger generation of Italian American winemakers, contemporary home winemaking is less of a sensual experience and more of an interaction with tools and equipment.

Thermometers and thermostats help read and regulate temperature. Filtering machines strain out particles. Chemicals treat and sanitize wine and equipment. Taste and touch are downplayed in this environment. It is suggested that gloves be worn during many chemical treatments, and physical contact with the wine is strongly discouraged. Instead, sight is preferentially elevated above all other senses. Properly reading measurements or noticing clarification and fining stages becomes more important than tasting, smelling, or listening to the wine in order to determine its progress. Modern winemaking books, such as *The Joy of Home Winemaking*,<sup>36</sup> champion the act of record-keeping so that the exact moment of contamination (should it occur) can be more easily recognized. Closely follow certain steps, log your actions, and your wine will come out perfectly. The means and modes of production justify the ends.

Home winemaking among Boston's Italian American community is a performative process symbolic of Italian heritage at large which helps construct an ever-evolving identity of Italian American masculinity. As an act of making, the process of producing wine in the Italian American household is encoded with not just the rules and techniques of craftsmanship but also with cultural value, elements of social structure, and countless other markers of tangible and intangible heritage. The social environments produced and reproduced through home winemaking facilitate the diffusion of this encoded knowledge. The narrative of home winemaking in Boston emphasizes the



Figure 4: Pasquale, Vincenzo's son, cleans out a fermentation tub

communication of concepts such as quality, cleanliness, gender, and tradition.

Just as the production of heritage through the act of home winemaking is constantly changing, so too are the fields of food studies and Italian American studies. Wine, overlooked and downplayed by academia throughout the emergence of these fields, might soon be rewritten as an important and valuable cornerstone of cultural and social inquiry. Like many forms of alcohol, wine sits on the border between food and medicine. It uniquely engages the physical body as nourishment and, at times, impediment. As a symbolic comestible, it also fulfills a more unique role of spiritual and ritual nourishment. As such, the lens of wine and wine-related culture is particularly well-suited to address a vast number of relevant social and cultural concerns. Among the most principal of these issues is the transmission of intangible heritage, which in turn begs for a continuation of the study of alcohol and its relationships to gender, heritage, space, and the Italian American experience.

Of shocking interest is the expediency in which intangible heritage may be lost from a community. As illustrated in this paper, the current generations of Italian Americans rest on a confluence of traditions and modern ideas. In a moment's notice, what was commonplace to parents and grandparents may be altered irreparably or all together lost. Perhaps because of its place in the private, sacred sphere of the household, or



**Figure 5:** Winemakers enjoying a lunch of sandwiches, zeppoli, and homemade wine.

through its relationships with spirituality and cultural festivals, the richly encoded tradition of home winemaking has not experienced nearly as much revision as its more public counterparts. Even so, within another generation or two, many of the contemporary traditions present in Italian American home winemaking will be lost, and with them their symbolic relevance to generations of Italian Americans. I do not mean to suggest that home winemaking will no longer remain a symbol of Italian American heritage but rather that the meaning encoded within the act of home winemaking will have in part changed once again, and that future research on the subject is imperative lest we lose the traditions in their entirety.

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