



Fall brings memories of home winemaking and dad

OPINION

The temperature in our garage and the less than sterile equipment my father used was hardly conducive to producing sublime vintages.



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The autumn sight of a Dutch Boy grape crate at Jean-Talon Market always makes me think of my father making wine in our garage, writes Ralph Mastromonaco. PHOTO BY JEAN-PIERRE MULLER /AFP/Getty Images

Autumn rouses thoughts of winemaking. As a son of Italian immigrants, I grew up with this tradition that was both familiar and strange to me.

Italian immigrants to Montreal adeptly blended into the society they came to call home. By dint of determination, many achieved that important first step to the better life they envisioned while crossing the Atlantic — home ownership. They aimed to live quiet lives and avoid attracting attention to the language and customs they retained from the life they left behind.

Every fall, however, the anonymity of Italian households in neighbourhoods across Montreal would be breached by the sight of 36-pound wooden crates of California wine grapes lining driveways that lead to garages housing the oak barrels, grape crushers and presses, siphons, funnels, demi johns and gallon jugs required for the art of winemaking. The art that filled the autumn air with the aroma of fermenting grape must.

The emptied crates would be used as kindling wood for the outdoor fire pit that would be lit for the other fall tradition — boiling jars of crushed tomatoes.

The temperature in our garage and the less than sterile equipment my father used was hardly conducive to producing a sublime wine. Ergo the vintages we mixed with 7Up, giving us the curiously delightful sangria-like libation we often shared at the supper table.

My father lived by an uncompromising work ethic that left an indelible impression on me. Ever the strong silent man, he provided for our family by working as a self-employed gardener. He worked hard, rarely complained and was much loved by his customers.

He ensured a roof over my head, clothes on my back and food on our table — really good food. But whatever else I wanted in life was up to me. I had to work for it. No one owed me anything.

My father had no hobbies, rarely read for pleasure, and never watched Hockey Night in Canada.

He wore a suit, tie and his fedora to Sunday mass.

But my father did indulge one passion.

On Saturday afternoons he would lie on the basement couch and watch Jack Curran host Grand Prix Wrestling on CFCF-12. He refused to believe that professional wrestling was fake. I can still hear his loud infectious laugh as Édouard Carpentier drop kicked Killer Kowalski or Abdullah the Butcher judo chopped Mad Dog Vachon in the throat. It was heartwarming to see my father in childlike awe, watching wrestling heroes Gino Brito and Dino Bravo take on the Cuban Assassins.

My father made his wine the way he made wine in Italy. He did not use any accessories like a hydrometer. I once asked him how he knew when to rack the fermenting grape must from our demijohns into gallon jugs. He answered that he put his ear to the demijohn and listened to the must. When the hissing of fermentation became hardly audible it was time to get the siphon. A method of dubious accuracy but very telling of my father's character. He was very good at listening, especially to my mother. Like many other Italian families, ours was led by our matriarch and my father followed her lead.

My father was not perfect. The people we love never are.

The autumn sight of a Dutch Boy grape crate at Jean-Talon Market always makes me think of my father making wine in our garage.

And then I miss him a little more.

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