

Wine Spectator

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THINGS WE LIKE

The Italian lifestyle is endlessly appealing. Italians make pleasure a priority, especially through the enjoyment of wine and food. It may look easy, but Italians work hard, upholding tradition and exploring new ideas. In this issue we celebrate Italy. We highlight some distinctive food items (below), as well as the best cheeses of Piedmont (page 26). On page 29, we review books by Americans passionate about Italy. Finally, we interview a young Italian art collector who also makes wine (page 116).

SPOTLIGHT
ITALY

TRADITIONAL BALSAMIC

FORGET SUPERMARKET balsamic. This is the real thing. Balsamico Tradizionale denotes rigid production—so rigid that output is minuscule. The grape must is cooked down by about two-thirds, with evaporation and a solera-like system further reducing yields as it ages at least 12 years.

There is an upside, though. At 12 years, true balsamics are unctuous, with forward fruit, sometimes chocolate, and refreshing acidity. At 25 years, the wood starts coming through (they are aged in a succession of small barrels of distinct woods), giving a *sous-bois* frame to the red fruit. And the acid is pronounced, but in balance.

The two above are Acetaia del Cristo's Nonna and its Amelia, which come from barrels started at least 100 years ago. Pouring them reminds me of the old ketchup ad ("Anticipation..."). They are truly viscous, and bead on a surface. They have a deep chestnut color and bright, jewel-like sheen. The flavors are unparalleled. Where a wine might improve by growing into itself over time, and gain some complexity, some delicacy through atrophy, balsamics take on complexity and vitality as they concentrate. To me, they are like Madeiras. The Nonna is a bit sweeter and less aromatic, but that's splitting hairs. Usually, one would drizzle a bit on hard cheese. I have been pouring a drop on the divot between my thumb and forefinger and eating it straight. It is a great restorative.

—Owen Dugan

Acetaia del Cristo Nonna and Amelia, \$295 per 100ml;
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