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Barolo
Matthew Gavin Frank
Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 2010
224 pp. $24.95 (cloth)

There is a kind of fever that afflicts some of us. It takes hold of our imagination and our dreams and sustains us through our darkest days. The fever is a romantic, all-encompassing desire for the sensual pleasures of Italy—for Italian food, wine, and culture. I know, because this fever struck me and didn’t subside until I spent nearly a year studying, working, and traveling through “the boot.” For food writer and restaurant veteran Matthew Frank, this fever is even more specific; it is Barolo.

Barolo is the story of the author’s time spent in a revered region of Italy where Barolo is produced—working, cooking, drinking, and dining. It is part travel guide, part memoir, and thoroughly engaging. Barolo is one of the most celebrated wines in Italy, and Frank gets to know it well through his time with cult winemaker Luciano Sandrone. But life in Italy is not all wine and roses, and Frank shares not only his rapture with all things Barolo but also the gritty side of working illegally in the vineyards. It is backbreaking work, to put it mildly, and living out of a tent in a garden doesn’t make it any better. Frank sleeps in a soggy sleeping bag and works for free and for the occasional bottle of rare wine. This is a story most will enjoy reading rather than experiencing firsthand. It is a whirlwind of contrasts. One minute Frank is mopping the floor, and the next dining on Barolo braised rabbit with white truffle shavings. But all of this adds to the appeal of the book. The author’s passion is clear and his enthusiasm absolutely genuine, no matter the trying circumstances.

Barolo comes from the hills of the Langhe in Piedmont, which is not as well known outside of Italy as Tuscany. The region is renowned for food as well as wine, including baci di dama cookies, luxurious pasta like ravioli al Plin, salumi, and truffles. It is also where you will find more obscure and exotic delicacies like Parmesan flan served with carne crudo, rosolio (a rose liqueur), and salamina da sugo, an ancient sausage made of offal, spices, and wine. Frank describes them all in mouthwatering detail.

The book delves into the culinary history of the region, including the economy of Barolo, the truffles of Alba, and the Slow Food movement of Bra, with scholarly detail and insight. Even the minor details are entertaining, like learning how grissini were created to sustain a weak and sickly duke who went on to recover and become the first Savoy king. An American through and through, Frank repeatedly uses Big Macs and Bon Jovi as points of reference, which gives the book an interesting perspective.

A brief visit to the Salone del Gusto in Turin is captured in tasty snapshots of prosciutto, ice cream, sausage, and vinegar, as much as in the observations of the vendors and flirtations with a salon ticket salesgirl. At times the scenes are a blur. Those of us who have lived in Italy are familiar with this blur. Even under the best of circumstances there are cultural differences that can make one’s head spin.

Frank accurately depicts the “lost in translation” sense of confusion one experiences in Italy. Does the butcher really expect him to eat raw tripe? Well, yes, he does, and it is something the author and the reader will never forget.

Being shy does not serve one well in Italy. As many a visitor can attest, one meets family, friends, and friends of friends until it seems that everyone is connected to everyone else. It is the interaction with Italians that above all else shapes one’s experience. The author makes connections with locals person by person, from a bed-and-breakfast proprietor to a winemaker to chefs and bakers. It is these acquaintances that lead to brief apprenticeships in restaurants and shops, always with the singsong invitation viene qua, viene qua meaning “come here.” Frank describes people colorfully. His writing is full of tiny details and thoroughly original impressions: the bakery twins are a hydra, truffle hunters and their dogs are modern-day Santa Clauses and Rudolphs.

There is pleasure not just in the subject of Barolo, but also in Frank’s writing. A master of the unexpected metaphor, Frank commands prose that is lively and original; he never resorts to cliché. At times the writing seems a bit over the top—“As the sun drips the last of its hazelnut panna cotta with a glass of Perdaudin Passito 1985” (p.28)—but that is easily forgivable. After all, this is Italy we’re talking about, the land of abbondanza.

—Amy Sherman, cookingwithamy.blogspot.com/

Foodies: Democracy and Distinction in the Gourmet Foodscape
Josée Johnston and Shyon Baumann
New York: Routledge, 2010
256 pp. $31.95 (paper)

In sociology, the notion of omnivorousness has for a long time been shorn of its original gustatory denotations to connotate instead the myriad practices by which status-seekers today set out to achieve the aura of distinction by openness.