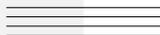


M Y F A T H E R A N D
T H E W I N E



I R I N A D U M I T R E S C U

The making of wine binds me to my ancestors who were tough-sinewed peasants and whose feet were rooted in the earth.

– Angelo Pellegrini, *The Unprejudiced Palate*

Now and then I click a link to find out what the hipsters are up to. The hipsters are raising chickens and slaughtering them at home, I read; the hipsters are distilling hooch. This is trendy and far out and probably how we should all live, despite being smelly and arduous. No doubt they have it right, the hipsters, and if they are fermenting cheese and spritzing meat into sausage casings in Brooklyn, then we will surely soon follow them in the lesser metropolises. But the romance of do-it-yourself is tainted for me. I cannot muster up the enthusiasm to kill my own rabbit and pickle it. There is a droning voice in my head that says, You do this because you never had to. You do it because you do not know the humiliation and occasional physical danger of an immigrant father who held on to his past using food. You do this because the ethics of the undertaking are clear to you, and you don't – yet –

understand the exquisite liberation of food that comes from a supermarket.

First, and last, and every time, above all things, was The Wine. It was never just wine, it was always The Wine, that year's massive household production, the gravitational pull of which none of us could escape. This is not because my father came from the country. He was a city boy par excellence, but he could remember days when Bucharest had dirtier hands, or at least cleaner dirt on its hands. He used to tell me with a grin how when he was a child, chickens were always bought alive. The housewives would go out to the street with a knife and flag down a passing man to kill the bird they wanted to cook for dinner. Businessmen who wanted to display their machismo refused the knife and wrung the chicken's neck barehanded. This was the old Bucharest, when my father's father still had his sausage factory, when salami still hung in their attic to cure and my father was responsible for tending to it. It was when my grandfather still made his own wine.

After we had moved through two new countries and multiple apartments in each, after we had finally settled in a house in the blandest cookie-cutter suburbs we could find, my father started to talk about making wine. Enough moving around and you'll want to reach for a bit of what was good back home. Enough moving around and you'll want to drink, I suppose. The decision to start making wine was helped along by the fact that alcohol sales are controlled by a government monopoly in Ontario, the L.C.B.O., leading to small selection and high prices for a liquid as essential to Romanians as milk is to white-bread North American families. My father saw this as the oppressive fruit of Canadian puritanism, and he set about staging his own private revolution. In this, he had the help of "the Italians," purveyors of everything needed by the suburban vintner with Old World sensibilities: massive bottles, special corks to let the gas out, industrial quantities of grapes, and the facilities for turning them into must. I was in my early teens at this point, still excited by the enterprise and even a little proud. As my father studied the chemistry of winemaking with the assiduousness of the university professor he had once been, I designed wine labels on the computer with the title "Casa Dumitrescu," and struggled to align a sheet of sticky labels in our dot matrix printer so that the graphic would come out right. It was not very good

wine, though back then I couldn't tell, but it was ours and it was cheap. My father calculated the cost per liter to two dollars, a magnificent savings to our family over retail wine, and clearly a wise financial move.

A fifty-gallon barrel cut in two will provide two excellent stomping vats. The heftier children and maiden aunts with heavy bottoms will be delighted to do the treading to the accompaniment of a tarantella or lively Irish jig.

Soon enough, our own Casa Dumitrescu became more crowded, as my surviving three grandparents came over from Romania and moved in with us. My grandfather was aged and absent by then, but I still remember him making sausage once, his trembling hands struggling to work the sturdy old meat grinder. My father became more ambitious in his winemaking, deciding that the Italians were good for grapes but that he did not trust their pulping machines not to adulterate his must with traces of other varietals. He went to Price Club, the daddy of Costco and perennial favorite of immigrant families in search of a deal, and bought a giant gray plastic garbage bin. This he carefully washed out, set up in our garage, and filled with muscat grapes. And then, for days on end, my two grandmothers and I stood around this bin and squeezed grapes. With our bare hands. I do not know if you have any experience of making must in this way, but muscats are tough, tight little berries, and you have to strain to crush every last one, and each bunch of grapes made our hands ache even more. My grandmothers and I tried to work out how we might get one of us into the garbage bin to apply feet to our common problem, but it was narrow and had two wheels at the bottom, and hopping in seemed an unsafe, if tempting, proposition. So we squeezed on into the night, tired but not thinking to question my father's imperative. This was, after all, The Wine.

At some point it occurred to my father that the price-gouging, racketeering deviousness of the Ontario government was not limited to wine; a greater injustice was also being perpetrated. A typical Romanian meal begins with plum brandy, *țuică* in Romanian, or *slivovitz* as it is more widely known in Eastern Europe. Now, while fine wines could be had at extortionate prices, *țuică*

was hard to come by at all in the L.C.B.O. stores, and even when available, it was inevitably industrially produced and tasteless. The situation has improved over the years, but if you wanted a decent țuică in the nineties, you had to smuggle it back from Romania, nonchalantly lying to the customs officer at Pearson Airport and hoping she did not discover the four quarts of hard liquor in plastic bottles and various massive country salamis and cheeses nestled among, and stinking up, your clothing.

But my father, an engineer who had designed a bridge to go over the Danube and paper-light satellites that went into space, and who, even more breathtakingly, had failed two terminally stupid students with parents high up in the Communist Party – failed them not once, not twice, but three times, until the dean took the exams out of his hands to protect him from his own probity – my father was not going to be frustrated in his basic, Romanian male desire for plum brandy at dinner. My father could design a joint for the Canadarm and a wind tunnel for testing airplanes. My father could assemble Ikea furniture efficiently and without error. My father sure as hell could put together his own still.

Now here was more treacherous territory, for while Ontarians were allowed to make wine and beer to their hearts' content, hooch was another matter. You couldn't just have a bunch of grandmas and a teenage girl making it in open daylight. This was closed-garage-door business. The garbage bins multiplied. Now there were some for fermenting plums, some that held a mix of fruit from our own backyard, and just to make any foray into the garage as confusing as possible, a few with enough pickled cabbage and cauliflower to keep a Transylvanian village free of scurvy for a winter. A metal boiler appeared from somewhere, as did a large plastic bucket and some copper tubing. And a spout. My father explained to me the physics of the thing (he was always so good at teaching what he wanted to teach): how the alcohol would be first to vaporize in the boiler due to its lower boiling point, how it would travel up through the copper tubing he had painstakingly coiled and, upon reaching the bucket filled with cold water, would condense and drip out of the spout into a waiting bottle.

The experiment was a success. After his first year of lonely distillation, my father's friends began fermenting plums in their

homes, too. Groups of them gathered in our garage in the evening, in the hazy yellow light of the one bulb hanging from the ceiling, and took turns boiling their own țuică in his still. They smoked and talked for hours, watching the single drops emerge from the spout. It took ages to fill a bottle, and they probably consumed the liquor much faster than they made it. But even then I suspected the true draw was the solitude of the process, the absence of nagging wives, children, and elderly parents, the heavy fumes of hot alcohol, the trancelike peace of drip, drip, drip.

In many regions, blackbirds, sparrows, catbirds, robins, and larks are purely destructive and a menace to crops. People now and then complain that their cherries, raspberries, strawberries, or blueberries are entirely eaten by the birds. . . . When this is true, the offending songsters should be captured and eaten.

Making liquor happened also to be an ecologically responsible hobby, as my father insisted on using the sparse fruit that grew in our yard for experimental blends: a few cherries produced by our insect-decimated trees, some bruised strawberries I had painstakingly planted and tended, the riotous bounty of a raspberry bush that grew beyond our expectations. And then there was the grapevine. Our dining room opened out on to a tiled patio covered by a wooden trellis. My father planted grapevines at the base of the posts that held up the sides of this trellis, and after a while, with a bit of care and nudging and wires to guide them in the right direction, the vines worked their way up the posts and over the wood slats. Their leaves grew large and gave cool shade in the summer. They even grew fruit. But the berries never really ripened; the grapes disappeared or fell to the ground still hard, a source of unending frustration to my father. We found out that the culprit was a raccoon that liked to clamber all over our trellis, disturbing the delicate grapes. Thus began the feud between one, or perhaps more, Upper Canadian raccoons and an East European professor of engineering, and if you have ever had any dealings with raccoons you probably already know who won.

My father began by hanging bells from the trellis, hoping to scare the beast away with noise. Raccoons are not frightened by

the tinkling of bells. Then he bought a foul-tasting substance that he painted around the bottoms of the posts, so as to prevent the raccoon from climbing up them. But the trellis was attached to the roof, so the raccoon could reach the vine that way. Clearly it was time for more extreme measures. My father went to Price Club and bought two weapons, a plastic pellet rifle and a pellet pistol. These he placed on the dining-room table, so that if he happened to hear or see a raccoon he could quickly grab a firearm on his way out. When we protested, he insisted he did not want to kill the raccoon, simply to scare it away from the grapes, which had, after all, been destined for greater things. After a few weeks of having two plastic guns lying ready on our table as if we were the Hatfields expecting a visit from the McCoys, my mother put her foot down and made him take them back to the store.

Things were at a standstill when I came back from school one day to find my father covered in blood. Covered in blood, and angry. The story went like this. He had been in the kitchen chopping onions with a large chef's knife when he heard a rustling on the patio. He rushed out of the house, knife still in hand, and there it was: the raccoon. He looked at the animal. It stared right back at him, unfazed. Exactly what happened next is unclear, but there seems to have been a skirmish. My father lunged at the raccoon with his knife, and at the last moment the animal moved out of the way. The knife-tip stuck in the wooden post, the blade broke off from the handle, but my father's hand kept going in its trajectory along the blade. The raccoon escaped unharmed. My father never tried to salvage any of the grapes again.

This was the way things worked in the logic of do-it-yourself. What began as an eminently practical proposition would soon get out of hand. Always, behind the inanities of our everyday existence, there were two unassailable arguments: it was cheaper to do things this way, and it was authentically Romanian, part of our identity. I found it easy to argue against the first. Few normal families buy at retail the amount of wine we produced in a year, so it was hard to be convinced of the great savings involved. We would have simply drunk less, and had fewer authentically Romanian family fights in the middle of dinner, if our wine had cost ten dollars a liter instead of two. But the nod to tradition was harder to counteract because it spoke to something I felt too. True, I longed

to eat out in restaurants and use ready-made salad dressings, as native Canadian families did. Still, even then I could tell there were dishes in our cuisine that were better than anything Canada had to offer, and that they were worth extra effort, a bit of sweat, a few burns and cuts. There was an element of community in it too, because you made massive amounts of food and drink partly so you could serve it to other Romanians at parties. Even in a huge city like Toronto, with its thousands of immigrants, there were few Romanian restaurants, and no good ones. If we wanted the food of home we had to make it or have friends who made it. Ideally, everybody prepared his or her own version, and the evenings after a gathering could be spent in fruitful discussion about whose recipe for cabbage rolls was best, whose cooking had too much Hungarian influence, which live-in grandmother was the most gifted baker, whose wine was never going to be as good as my father's.

I think this feeling of diasporic togetherness is part of why my father got involved with the lambs. He had a younger co-worker who ran a farm north of Toronto, an Italian, and therefore automatically a kindred soul. More important, he raised sheep. The succulent memory of a party where a bunch of Romanians set up a spit in their yard and roasted a lamb on it must have gotten to my father because he set about coordinating a mass purchase of lambs for the coming Easter. Fourteen families were in: each would buy half a lamb, and my father would organize it all with his Italian engineer-cum-farmer friend. The deal got messy, for predictable reasons. There were seven lambs ordered for fourteen families, but every family wanted the front part. It was not unusual at that time to hear my father furiously slamming the telephone down and yelling, "I told them at the start, *they* have to decide who gets the ass and who gets the head!"

I was able to maintain a bemused distance from it all until one afternoon when the doorbell rang persistently. I opened the door to see my impatient father, who thrust a large black garbage bag in my arms and said, "Clear some space in the fridge and put this in there." It took me a moment to realize what was happening, but as my arms felt the round contours of a small body through the plastic bag I understood this was one of the lambs, our lamb. Fighting back tears, and as quickly as possible, I shoved bottles

and Tupperware aside in the largest part of our fridge, folded in the animal as best I could, and leaned against the door to press it shut. To this day, I can't remember if we got the ass or the head.

Still, after all the drama of his various projects, nobody could have guessed it would be yogurt that would nearly do us all in. Yogurt is a tricky issue: I have inherited some of my father's madness on this point. Since leaving our house in the Toronto suburbs I have moved through five cities in the United States and Germany. In each new home I must spend an enormous amount of energy finding an acceptable yogurt, not too sweet, not bland, not adulterated by bananas or vanilla or cappuccino goji berries, or whatever other abomination is currently being used to sell yogurt to people who actually do not like yogurt. Then I try to find the largest possible container sold of that yogurt, so as never to be without. When I lived in Dallas and was addicted to a Bulgarian-style yogurt made by, appropriately, an aerospace engineer in Austin, I had to fight the urge to buy the gallon-sized jars despite living alone. So I understand my father, understand that once he had found the "Balkan style" yogurt that was closest in taste to what we knew from back home, he didn't want to have to buy a fresh container every day.

The normal thing to do in this circumstance would be to purchase a yogurt maker, but making yogurt in miniature cups would not do it for us; it was not really the point of the exercise. Romanians do not serve food in miniature cups. Modest, individual portions are basically inimical to our culture as a whole. Again, my father carefully explained the process to me: how a cup of starter yogurt would provide enough culture for a gallon of milk, that it was important to keep it warm, but not too hot, over many hours. Instead of a little electric machine, my father used a large pot which he wrapped in towels to keep it cozy overnight after it had been heated on the stove. The resulting yogurt was watery and lacked the firm tartness I loved about our chosen brand, but my father was convinced we would save an enormous amount of money by never having to buy yogurt again. And really, it was the least objectionable of his undertakings: it didn't involve guns or illegal distilling or the transport of dead lambs. Until, that is, I woke up one night to the smell of something burning. The entire house was dark with smoke, and our fire alarm had not sounded. It

turned out that my father had forgotten to turn the stove off, and despite the electric element giving off such a small amount of heat, eventually the contents of the pot began to burn, badly. After that, yogurt was something we got at the store, though years later my father did give me a yogurt machine with six little cups that he had found on sale somewhere. I haven't had the courage to use it yet.

When, a year or so later, he managed to burn up the kitchen properly, the ample bounty of Casa Dumitrescu came in handy. It was a simple grease fire that began when he left some onions he was frying to answer the phone, but it destroyed a good deal of our cabinetry before he managed to put it out. My mother was at home to receive the assessor from the insurance company a few weeks later, and since it was lunchtime and his presence in our house made him a kind of guest, she offered him a bowl of soup. He accepted, and, I imagine, warmed and comforted by both soup and the empathetic smiles of my understanding mother, told her his story. He was Polish and was going through a heartbreaking divorce. My mother quite naturally poured him a glass of the house wine, and they continued talking. Afternoon turned into evening, and my father came home from work. Knowing well the therapeutic properties of țuică and assuming that the poor insurance man hadn't had anything so good since leaving his native Poland, my father pulled out a bottle and started filling little glasses. I think the assessment lasted until about 10 P.M. My parents soon had an entirely new kitchen.

Every fall I make wine for the family dinner table and for the good friends who cross my threshold. These have learned to enjoy it as any European. They praise its quality and drain their glasses like true sons of Bacchus. If they do not make it themselves, it is because I dispense it so freely, frequently bringing it to their table when I dine with them.

The kitchen remodel was a high point, but as the years passed The Wine became more and more of a burden on our family. Even when money was tight there was never a question of sitting out a year of wine production. The economic rationale for it was, after all, unbeatable, or, rather, none of us had the emotional energy to

challenge my father on something so clearly central to his life. I grew embarrassed at the gallon-sized jug that was always at the foot of our table, envied my friends whose parents bought wine in decent, normal-sized bottles. My father probably knew more about the different varieties of wine than any of them, but *we*, his family, didn't. For us there was no Bordeaux or Côtes du Rhône or Merlot, there was only the special blend of Casa Dumitrescu, always changing in composition, always tasting the same. Part of my father's goal in making wine was to revive our Romanian heritage in Canada, a place that never really felt like home for him. Unfortunately, what he kept alive for us was the familiar feeling of life under communism, where you could only ever have one brand of any product and daren't complain about it lest the big man who ran things got sour.

This is not to say that there were not still occasional moments of pride, even as my father and I went from being tight accomplices in my early teens to arguing almost constantly as I approached twenty. My small residential college at the University of Toronto lived off stuffy Anglophile pretension and a measure of worldly sophistication, and I discovered to my surprise that I could impress the provost or an influential alumnus with an exotic bottle of homemade țuică. As more time passed, I also cared less what other people thought. Somewhere at the core of my father's obsession was a set of values that still feel true to me: that wine is just a beverage that goes with food, neither demon nor fetish; that local stores should not determine the limits of your culinary pleasure; that there is a warm joy in giving people food you made yourself, even if it is simple. Especially if it is simple. That gardening and cooking and fermenting and decanting can give you, if not a home, then at least a feeling that you belong to yourself even if you're not sure who exactly you are anymore.

As trendy as immigrant foodways and home canning and novels by ethnic women with "spice" in the title are nowadays, the dream of authenticity in food is old romance. When I discovered Angelo Pellegrini's *The Unprejudiced Palate*, originally published in 1948, it seemed I had found my father's script and bible. No wonder my father loved the Italians so! Pellegrini, who left hunger-ravaged Italy and settled in the bountiful Northwest, waxes poetic on the spiritual value of tending a small vegetable garden, the joys of

serving guests out of your own cellar, and the sheer deliciousness of fresh ingredients, put together simply but with a measure of peasant cunning. His book is a paean to immigrant wisdom, pungent and coarse though it might seem from the outside. Even in the 1940s, he notes, I read with some guilt, how the second generation grumbles about the unappealing, unhygienic food practices of their Old World parents. And yet Pellegrini is also uncannily like me, a child immigrant who grew into the language of his new home, becoming a professor of English literature. Although his mother did a great deal of the cooking, his father is Pellegrini's model and authority, the one who taught him how to think about food and, naturally, how to make wine. Like Pellegrini, I could write a chapter on "The Things My Fathers Used to Do," but while the émigré Italian paid attention and followed in their footsteps, I strayed.

There is little else that strengthens the filial bond so much as a father's patient acquiescence in the children's preoccupation with matters a little beyond their years. As they grow older, you will draw more and more upon their assistance at vintage time. At the end of the day's labor you will frequently drink together of the wine produced by your joint efforts. It will be pleasant to observe the children grow conscious of their skill and to see the pride they take in accomplishments realized under your careful tutelage. In the years ahead, the meaning of these experiences so intimately related to life will be reflected in the bond of friendship and understanding between father and son, and in the family's wholesome attitude toward alcoholic beverage.

I left for graduate school in the wake of one of our family's uglier moments. That summer my father's get-rich scheme was to buy fixer-upper houses, renovate them, and resell them at a profit, none of these activities fitting into what one might call his skill set. My mother was unwilling to risk their life savings on this business venture, and he presented her with an ultimatum: compliance or divorce. In the middle of this, he and I had our worst fight, so furious that when the power went out all over the eastern seaboard I was sure that my anger had blown out the lights. We

had patched things up into cold civility by the time my parents drove with me down to New England. At that point he had also dropped the idea of buying property and with it, quietly, the threat of divorce. But my mother had not forgotten, and she had her own thoughts about a marriage that could be traded in for a rundown house. She made her mind up when, having said their good-byes to me and set out on the highway, the first thing my father asked was, “So when are we going to start making *The Wine*?”

Years later, a family friend confessed to my mother how much he had dreaded coming over for dinner. You see, when someone makes their own wine, you can’t simply drink it when it’s served to you. You have to comment on it. You have to discuss its qualities, how well it turned out this year, how successful this particular blend of grapes was. Basically, you have to act like you’re at a wine tasting and it’s the pinnacle of sophistication to detect the fine nuances distinguishing Casa Dumitrescu 1998 from Casa Dumitrescu 1997. A failure of hospitality of this magnitude is the stuff Greek tragedies are made of, but its core is innocent, a natural imbalance of interest and passion. Here is what no one admits in their gleeful reports on the year of planting their own vegetables, baking their own bread, and brewing coca-cola with self-harvested cane sugar and home-grown cocaine: some undertakings require absolute, unyielding dedication, and not every member of the family or community can match it. Oh, it’s one thing to go berry picking with the kids on a farm and make a pot of jam at the end of the day. But if you are pickling tomatoes because you miss a taste from your childhood, you have to try to get it right, which means you have to do a lot of pickling. It also means the people around you will have to eat a lot of sour tomatoes while you work out the recipe. Wine is even more demanding, requiring copious equipment, knowledge, and most of all time. It has to be tended, observed, cared for. You have to judge the fermentation, know when to rack it to another bottle, siphoning it away from its sediment. It is intimate, too, in the various demands it makes on the body of its maker: my father labored to lift bottles and bruise grapes, and he always racked wine the old-fashioned, unsanitary way, by sucking on one end of a hose and placing it in the fresh bottle, allowing the pressure to drive the wine into its new receptacle. The liquid that a proud vintner puts on the table is the fruit of months of plan-

ning, mixing, crushing, washing, testing, tasting, pouring, and smelling, but all the guest knows is that he is drinking mediocre wine. The wine was my father's second child, one whose faults he couldn't see.

The deep irony of the years that followed the divorce was that my father's liquors improved. His wine was now more than palatable, and his țuică was the real thing, a pleasure to start a meal with. We had all put in time, but he stuck it through. It took a long while for us to be able to talk to each other after our fight and my parents' subsequent split, and even then our encounters were awkward, veins of hurt pulsing under the surface. But it helped that all we ever did, on those tense holiday visits, was eat and drink together. On the worst days, food and alcohol were social lubricants, keeping mouths from talking too much, giving the illusion of celebration and togetherness around a table. On the better days, it was easy to enjoy a good plum brandy, to appreciate it honestly, to see him enjoy the compliment. He would send me off with several bottles to take home with me, some pure țuică, some experiments he had colored with tea, flavored with fruit, or aged in a bourbon wood barrel. I didn't know what to do with that much hard liquor, but inevitably something would come up – an exam passed, a dissertation submitted, another move to yet another new city – and the țuică I found in my stores provided the punctuation.

We do not speak anymore, my father and I. The decision was his. When I went to pack my things for my most recent move, now so far from Toronto that I'm almost back where I started, I found one more plastic bottle of țuică. It was full, and it would clearly be the last I would ever have from his hands. I decided not to put it in the container with all my other belongings, wrapping it instead in a plastic bag and hiding it in my luggage; it was perfectly legal, but it felt illicit. This is also an authentic Romanian gesture, one I performed instinctively. One of my parents' friends escaped from Romania in the 1980s by hiding on a train, leaving his family behind but tightly grasping, under his jacket, two bottles of exquisite wine from the vineyard where he had worked. He opened one bottle with great pomp on his twenty-fifth wedding anniversary, and told his guests he was saving the second for his elder daughter's wedding, which he did not live to see. I did not wait so long. The bottle of țuică was a little crushed by the time it reached

my new home, looking as if it might crack the moment I tried to unscrew the cap. But it held, and to celebrate the start of our new life, I poured a generous amount into espresso cups for me and my husband. I expected the fresh, clean punch-in-the-face of all-natural, home-made plum brandy, but that is not what I tasted in the cup. This bottle, it turned out, was one of my father's experiments, an infusion with orange peels that had taken on a powerful bitter note over the years. It was undrinkable.

They will want to suck at the siphon hose and taste whatever you taste. They will laugh and smack their lips and assure you that the wine is very good. When you leave the cellar they will insist on carrying the bottle to the dinner table. As they ascend the stairs with uncertain step, you may be tempted to take the bottle clutched in the infant arms lest it drop with a crash to the pavement. But you will resist the temptation; for it will seem fitting that your children should carry the wine to the dinner table. And as they cling tightly to the bottle, with all the elaborate care of which little ones are capable on such occasions, you may possibly glimpse a comforting symbol – the child drawing closer to the father.