

Philadelphia, October 2000

## WINEFELLAS

**The mob wars are over, but there's a new feud fermenting in South Philly, with clan against clan and red-stained hands. Listen up, boys: Nobody leaves this basement sober.**

In South Philadelphia, the question of who makes the best wine in the city is a matter of some controversy. For each of the past three years, it has been put to a vote at the Vendemmia wine festival, an autumn gathering in the heart of the old Italian neighborhood. By that measure, a strong argument can be made for the zinfandels of Ed Barranco and Frank Spezzano. In 1997, the year the Vendemmia began, their 1995 zin placed first. Some deemed this a fluke. Even the festival organizer, Dr. Gerald Vernose, called the winning wine "good, not so great." The next year, however, Barranco and Spezzano cemented their status by taking first *and* third. Barranco, the owner of Society Hill's Chef's Market, and Spezzano, an insurance broker, have worked long and hard on perfecting their zinfandels, and are known to spare no expense when it comes to buying the best grapes and the newest winemaking equipment.

But the South Philly winemakers with the greatest renown are surely the Blues Brothers, a gang of 60-something rivals who, although they have never won first place at the Vendemmia, are a legend among the rowhouses south of Passyunk Avenue.

At last year's Vendemmia, held in Girard Park at 21st and Porter, the Blues were in their element. While no fewer than 23 judges (there's never any shortage of volunteers) were sequestered behind a building, sniffing, swirling, and supposedly spitting, a baby-faced man crooned "Alma Mia" in a gorgeously doleful tenor, and neighborhood restaurateurs dished out pasta and red sauce to wash down with the freely flowing homemade wine. The crowd, wearing HELLO MY NAME IS tags (Domenic, Frankie, Angela, Candida), was aswirl with Calabrian and Sicilian facial features. Though it was a chilly and overcast Sunday afternoon, more than a few people wore sunglasses. A nun wandered past gripping a cannoli.

A boozy, joyous block-party-meets-family-reunion, the Vendemmia festival has illuminated and catalyzed a hidden Old World ritual that persists in garages and basements from South Philly to the suburbs. It's not bootlegging; by federal law, individuals may produce up to 100 gallons of wine a year, and households of two or more may produce up to 200 gallons. In its first year, 1997, the Vendemmia drew about 25 winemakers and 300-odd festival-goers. Last October, some 75 amateur vintners entered 125 wines in the competition, which was attended by 2,500 people; judges included Anna Verna and Frank Rizzo, Jr. (The fourth Vendemmia will take place on the first of this month.)

The winners had yet to be announced, but on the east side of the square, clustered near an oak tree, the Blues Brothers were getting plowed. I had just finished a glass of Barranco's '97 merlot, which was deep red and smelled of cherries. The Blues Brothers didn't think much of it, though: "I'll tell you what," one member of the Blues group told me. "We drank that guy's wine who won and we spit it out." Barranco's Jewish winemaking partner returned the favor, dismissing the Blues Brothers' new cabernet as "*farkatke* wine." Personally, I found it jammy, if a bit young.

Frank "Frankie Blues" Valloreo is a retired truck driver for the *Inquirer* with a pencil mustache, a sweep of greying hair, and the velveteen voice of an aging teen idol; he was wearing jeans, a leather coat with lapels, and tinted glasses, and was sucking on a stogie next to his winemaking partner, "Big Al" Benigno. Big Al, a retired truck driver for the *Daily News* ("Route analyst," he corrected me), has a beefy, rounded build and pomaded silver hair that juts off his forehead like a spit curl, lending his appearance a boyish aspect. He was holding forth on the secrets of winemaking. "Cleanliness," Big Al said, wagging an index finger instructively. "Cleanliness and good grapes."

"The grapes got to have good sugar," elaborated Lenny Procacci, of produce merchant Procacci Bros., one of the main sellers of wine grapes to the South Philly community.

“I feel sorry for people who don’t drink wine,” added a friend wearing sunglasses and a gold necklace with a crucifix pendant, “cause they’re missing the happiest thing in life.”

The boys and their friends had arrived at 10 in the morning, 18 gallons of their homemade wine in tow. By a little after four in the afternoon, they were on the verge of running out. Although the Blues Brothers had entered four wines in the competition this year—1997 and 1998 cabernet sauvignons as well as a 1998 merlot and a 1998 sangiovese—by the time the winners were announced, they weren’t even paying attention.

The festival gradually broke up, the crowd tottering home, but the Blues Brothers lingered, combing the square for empty wine bottles. They gathered eight cases in all, which would save them \$96. When they finally decided to leave, it was close to 9 p.m., and the temperature was falling. Carmen the Cousin went to get his van, so they could move the cases of empties. He drove up on the sidewalk, but as his van mounted the two steps onto the square, the vehicle scraped to a stop. Carmen gunned the engine, but the axle housing stuck fast on the concrete. He tried going backward, but it wouldn’t budge.

For two hours, the boys drunkenly rocked the van back and forth, trying to dislodge it. Frankie Blues Jr. got in the driver’s seat in an attempt to help, but his effort merely crunched the metal underside of the van. The boys were freezing their *castagne* off. Finally, around 11 o’clock, they managed to lift the van up and push it back down to the sidewalk.

Then they headed back to the clubhouse to drink more wine.

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In Southern Italy, almost every family makes its own wine. Immigrants brought the tradition to America, and for those Delaware Valley descendants who continue it, the activity is a shared reference to their common heritage, linking all generations and classes, if not the sexes. (It is an almost exclusively male ritual.) The passion for turning grapes into wine connects regular rowhouse fellas with the likes of Councilman Frank DiCiccio and Luca Sena, the owner of Ristorante Panorama, who both bottle their own vintages. At a time of Mafia disintegration, the internationalization of the Italian market and the ethnic diffusion of South Philly itself, making wine is also a last stand against assimilation. It runs deep, this compulsion to buy grapes and crush them, to separate must from pulp, to ferment grape juice into wine and then share it with family and friends.

Dr. Vernose, an ear, nose and throat specialist at St. Agnes and Jefferson hospitals, first tried to take up winemaking two decades ago, when he was just starting out in medicine. But his father, concerned that his son would be distracted, canceled the equipment order. Only five years ago did Vernose finally act on his youthful urge. He launched the Vendemmia because his patients (including a nun) kept bringing him bottles of their own wine, each claiming to make the best. “You’d taste some stuff, it would really be rotgut,” he recalls.

It’s a safe bet that home winemakers are never going to find a market for their product in state stores. For one thing, the stuff is more potent than most wine drinkers prefer. I only grasped this fact after a long afternoon spent drinking homemade wine in South Philly. Unable to find a cab to haul me back to my Rittenhouse Square apartment, I hazily negotiated a hack ride from a stranger in a beater of a Plymouth, with an open can of Schaefer wedged between his legs.

There are more obvious ways in which professionally made wine differs from the homemade variety. Good wines are finely tuned models of balance, clarity, depth, flavor and complexity. They are made from first-rate grapes and aged in top-quality wood, and can drive wine lovers to rhapsodize about “subtle hints of eucalyptus and chicory on the nose.” Even the bulk wines of a Fetzer or Sutter Home are technically perfect, if not particularly interesting.

But homemade wines, though they can be eminently drinkable—at least with food—generally lack complexity and are out of balance, often puckering the mouth with high acidity, cloying sweetness, or unrestrained tannins that give them flavor notes reminiscent of an old tea bag. When a friend and I drank a Blues Brothers cabernet and a Barranco/Spessano zinfandel side by side with dinner at the South Philly BYO Tre Scalini, we at first regretted

not bringing a bottle of store-bought as backup. Both wines were barely palatable, though the zin was at least recognizable as descended from grapes. But as our meal proceeded and the wines began to breathe, they underwent a startling transformation in the glass. The harshness receded, and they became pleasantly fruity. Ultimately, we found that we preferred the Blues Brothers' cabernet, with its heady perfume of sour cherry and blackberry and a rustic intensity that nicely complemented our pasta.

Other writers have found less to praise. Sampling the Blues Brothers' blended red in 1997, Debbie Scoblionkov, the *Inquirer's* wine critic, noted its "telltale made-in-the-basement fermentation smell" and labeled its flavor "a cross between chewing on jelly beans and sucking on a licorice root." ("I tried to find that broad and tell her off," Big Al told me.)

But in its way, the Philly winemaking subculture resembles the professional wine world. Each is roiled with feuds and schisms, rival factions and dueling philosophies. Among professional winemakers, for instance, there is a rift between Old World and New World approaches. The Old World, the Europe of Bordeaux and Burgundy and the Rhine, believes that great wine is a product of *terroir*, an almost mystical confluence of native soil, climate and weather; the winemaker's role is simply to facilitate the expression of that singular *terroir* through the wine. The New World—New Zealand, Chile, most famously California—relies on technology, replacing oak barrels with stainless steel tanks and otherwise manipulating the winemaking process to create a standardized product.

The home winemakers of Philly are no less diverse. Some, like the Blues Brothers, are continuing an unbroken South Philly tradition learned at the knees of fathers and Italian-speaking grandfathers. Others, like Dr. Vernose and the Spezzano-Barranco group, are reclaiming an abandoned family ritual lost in the shuffle of upward mobility and suburban exodus.

At last year's Vendemmia, Spezzano and Barranco stood out like pineapple on a pizza. Barranco was sporting a lime-green windbreaker, a fedora and large tortoise-shell glasses, while Spezzano wore a floppy-red beret and cross-trainers. Their winemaking crew, which includes a Jewish dentist, was embroiled in an eggheaded debate about natural versus cultured yeasts. "We're not going to win," said Spezzano, a slight, nervous, enthusiastic man who puts one in mind of Woody Allen. The prospect of defeat seemed not to bother him, though, and I got the sense the Blues Brothers might have something to do with that. "When we won last year," Spezzano said, "I thought those guys were going to fucking kill us. They were pissed. We're just here for a good time. They take it really seriously."

There is also a split between those guided by tradition and those led by science. The Blues Brothers operate largely as their forefathers did. They're just looking to make a decent table wine to drink with their spaghetti at night. A Mt. Laurel winemaker named Dino Garistina, by contrast, is known as "The Chemist." He buys esoteric varieties of grapes like ruby cabernet and French columbard, uses sulfites to control the fermentation process, and employs a stainless-steel filter to remove sediment.

And then there is a generational divide. Greg Paone, 34, is a Rittenhouse Square graphic designer who grew up near 12th and Mifflin, where he still makes wine with his ex-cop father using the press his grandfather brought from Italy in the early 1900s. But while Paone and his brother would emulate the boutique winemakers of California, he says, "my father has a different perspective. He doesn't like expensive wines."

Big Al, 63, and Frankie Blues, 64, grew up together. As a child in the 1940s, Frank, who got his nickname because he "was always crying the blues," made wine with his Abruzzi-born grandfather at 8th and Federal. The family had survived the Depression by selling its homebrew for a dollar a bottle. Frank's grandfather would send him to the basement to fetch wine, ordering him to whistle all the way to ensure he wasn't sneaking nips. Frank has been Al's best man at two weddings, the second of which was to Frank's wife's sister. They started making wine together more than two decades ago, but only got really competitive about it the past three years.

Al didn't grow up making wine, but he brings a certain native ingenuity to the partnership. Once, when his car ran out of oil on the way to New York, he took a bottle of olive oil out of his trunk and emptied it into the engine. "It smelled like a salad when I came back," he recalls.

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On a September afternoon, there's a sign propped against a chain-link fence at the corner of Lawrence Street and Pattison Avenue, near the food distribution center in South Philly:

*Procacci Bros. Sales Corp.  
Wine Grapes and Juice  
Uva e Mosto per Vino  
Sold Here*

Outside a nearby warehouse, a middle-aged man and his father, both wearing baseball caps, are piling wooden crates of grapes and white buckets of Regina California Grape Juice onto a trailer hitched to their car. On the loading dock, scattered groups of men in jeans and t-shirts stand around talking, some in Italian. Procacci's is one of the main distributors of wine grapes in Philadelphia, and the floor is stacked with winemaking equipment for sale: oak barrels and stainless steel fermentation tanks, plastic funnels and glass demijohns and electric crusher-destemmers. When Big Al arrives, he throws his arms around Lenny Procacci and announces, "We got three pizzas coming." Big Al is wearing a short-sleeved denim shirt that says INQUIRER GOLF PAGE SUNDAY on the back, and a gold necklace with a lionhead pendant.

"I didn't think I was going to drink this morning," Big Al says, glancing at a nearby table. "But that bottle of wine's looking good. What time is it?"

It's eleven a.m. Lenny uncorks the bottle and pours Al a cup of the stuff, which Lenny's son-in-law made from the merlot grape. A half hour later, Frankie Blues arrives with the pizza. He's big, too, but with a trimmer, more muscular build than Al. A cursive FRANKIE is tattooed on his left bicep, and a box of Marlboro 100s rests in the pocket of his black T-shirt. As the boys lay waste to the pizza, sipping wine from paper cups, Procacci uncorks a bottle of 1997 Valerio Estate zinfandel from California. "You opening that sissy wine?" Al says with a snort.

Getting down to business, Blues walks over to a stack of grape crates just outside the entrance to the cooler. A forklift disappears through the plastic flaps into the 100-foot-long room, which is kept at a frosty 30 degrees. A few minutes later, the vehicle emerges bearing a cargo of stacked wooden crates marked UVA DI COLLINA. Each crate contains 36 pounds of juice grapes, which tend to be smaller, rounder, sweeter and more concentrated than table grapes.

"Winemaking's getting progressively worse," opines Bruno, a diminutive Blues Brothers pal who grew up in Rome, "cause they're giving us more the crap than the good stuff." California growers only ship grapes here after they've fulfilled their contracts with mega-customers like Mondavi and Beringer, so Philly winemakers end up with the leftovers. Still, every August for the past 10 years, Lenny Procacci has spent a week in California, driving from vineyard to vineyard, checking the sugar content of grapes and recording the information, so he can at least claim the best of the leftovers.

Procacci, who's 55 and has been making wine since he was 12, has witnessed a growing sophistication among home vintners. "It used to be the old Dago red," he says. "Muscat. Alicante. But now people are going into cabernet, merlot. It's less strong. You can drink more glasses." In the next six weeks he'll sell 38,000 boxes of grapes and 25,000 buckets of juice.

In the warehouse, Blues moves from crate to crate, assessing berries. He used to do it the old way, using just his taste buds, but now he squeezes the juice from a merlot grape onto the lens of a refractometer, a device that allows him to check the berry's brix, or sugar content. The boys buy 51 crates of merlot and 11 of grenache, for about \$1,000.

The Blues Brothers club has seven members, but only Big Al, Frankie Blues, and his son, Blues Jr., are here today. Blues Jr., a 39-year-old paralegal supervisor with the public defender's office, leans on a cane, smoking a cheroot; tendinitis will limit him to serving as "supervisor" of the winemaking process this year. As Frank and Al reel off

the the names of the other club members—Buck, Toshie, Gabe, and Joe Malone—Bruno, the sidekick who is standing nearby, takes on the dejected expression of a child excluded from a game of hide-and-seek. “You can be in the club,” Al tells him.

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A few days later, on a tiny street near 18th and Ritner, a sweet, alcoholic aroma wafts up from one particular rowhouse. It’s a warm, humid Indian summer day. Inside, the house is sparsely furnished, with a Prayer to the Sacred Heart of Jesus on top of the refrigerator. This is the Blues Brothers clubhouse, generously provided for the last 11 years by T.J. the absentee owner, an entrepreneur who receives a 60-gallon barrel of wine as rent. The Blues Brothers previously worked out of a dirt-floored clubhouse on Fernon Street that was owned by T.J.’s brother. They were evicted after Al passed out with the spigot open on a barrel of the brother’s muscatel.

Downstairs, in a front room with a radio softly playing Sinatra, the phone rings. “Fuck,” says Frankie Blues. “It’s my wife.”

A ball of provolone is strung from the ceiling, and branches of dried red and green peppers hang on the wall along with a poster of Henny Youngman’s Best One-Liners. There’s a fridge full of Busch and Rolling Rock (a cold counterpoint to all the room-temperature red wine), a table and some chairs, and a doorless bathroom revealing a toilet with the seat up. “This is the No Wives Club,” Blues says after hanging up.

A tiny back room, a gutted space lit by a naked bulb and a few fluorescent tubes, serves as the winery. There are jars of pickled onions, eggplants, and tomatoes on a shelf. Funnels, pitchers and clear plastic tubes hang from the ceiling joists. Yesterday, the boys worked 12 hours here, crushing and pressing cabernet grapes. Two tall blue tubs contain the result—gallons of inky grape juice beneath a cake of skins and seeds kept afloat by carbon dioxide released during fermentation. The Blues Brothers allow four days for this first fermentation. “The less days you do it,” Blues explains, “the lighter the color will be. These guys who do it seven, eight days get mud.” On a bench against another wall, there’s a demijohn full of fizzing indigo liquid—juice from an earlier crushing. It is undergoing a second fermentation, to be saved for later use. Frank puts an air lock on it, to allow carbon dioxide to escape while keeping oxygen out. Along two walls stand several barrels in which the wine of various club members will mature.

Though bug strips hang from the ceiling, a few errant fruit flies gyre in a holding pattern above the press. Al, who’s struggling to shake a hangover, unscrews its metal cap, and he and Blues start pulling out clumps of pressed purple skins and brown seeds, depositing them in a brown plastic garbage bag. They’ll give this to friends, who use it as fertilizer in their gardens. The men work quietly and efficiently. They use a wooden stick to help pry the gunk loose, then pull the sides of the press off to get at the last of it. Then they wash their purple hands in a bucket of water. (It will take a full month of daily scrubblings with bleach and lemon juice to rid their hands of the last traces of red.)

After putting the press back together, they refill it with fresh seeds and skins, using cooking pots to ladle the pomace from the blue tubs into the press. Al leaves the room and reaches behind the fridge to turn on a water valve. The press creaks to life as water fills a bladder, which squeezes the pomace against the wood walls of the press, yielding a trickle of purple extract. “This is what gives the wine its softness,” Frank says. “The body of the wine.”

A haze of cigarette smoke hovers below the ceiling. Frank and Al siphon off juice from the tubs into more glass demijohns. Frank, who’s starting to sweat, pours a glass of the juice, takes a sip, then passes it to me. “It’s delicious, isn’t it?” he says. It is, like fresh-squeezed Welch’s. Then, a half-smoked cigarette dangling from his mouth, Frank takes a third of a bucket of juice, puts a white powdered cultured yeast in it, and adds hot water. He stirs the concoction, which he’ll use to kick-start the second fermentation.

Suddenly, wine starts spraying out of a hole in the side of the press. “We got a pisser!” Al yells. Frank rushes to turn down the water pressure, and the spraying subsides. Frank and Al, their white sneakers now spattered with purple, mop up the floor. They also bleach the floor and wash the outsides of their barrels with sulphites. The Blues Brothers are rigorous about cleanliness, to deter insects and microorganisms that could spoil the wine.

At this point, around noon, club member Bucky arrives, wearing blue work pants, with a cluster of keys hanging off his belt. Eight years ago, he came to the clubhouse to install a refrigeration unit. The boys, recognizing a useful skill for winemaking (they keep the wine room at 64 to 66 degrees all summer), tapped him for membership. With his arrival, the crushing can begin.

“Aw,” Al says, “I want to have a glass of wine.”

“Afterwards,” says Frank, disciplined as ever.

Al and Bucky will do the crushing. Upstairs, out back, is a tiny yard with a fig tree in the middle. The steeple of St. Monica’s is visible over the low cinder-block wall. Beneath white plastic tarps are five crates of merlot grapes and 11 of grenache. When Al and Frank lift the tarps, a cloud of fruit flies rises. They fold the tarps neatly. Blues Jr., “supervising” from his seat on an empty crate in the corner, crushes a bee with the tip of his cane.

Frank pops a couple of the small black merlot berries in his mouth, spitting the seeds into the dirt at the base of the fig tree. Bucky snakes a thick transparent hose, which is attached to an electric crusher-destemmer and looks like a huge flexible straw, through a small window into the downstairs wine room.

“Wait till you see this baby in action,” Al says. The machine, imported from Italy, comes alive with the grinding, gravelly, rhythmic sound of a giant motorized screw turning in an open metal bin. Al starts feeding bunches of grapes into the screw, which separates the stems from the fruit and spits them backward into a garbage bag while pumping the crushed berries into the hose. His cigarette is sprouting a precariously long ash directly over the crusher, but just when it seems about to drop and infuse the vintage with a note of stale ashtray, Al jerks his head expertly to the side, and the ash drops a safe distance from the fruit. A pink slurry courses through the tube into the basement, where Frank aims the hose into one of the blue tubs. When it’s full, he whistles sharply.

I’m impressed by how clean, well-oiled, and almost professional the whole operation is. There’s minimal clowning, and each man seems to intuit exactly where he’s needed at a particular moment. Years of working together and incrementally improving their wine by trial and error have produced a crack winemaking team. If anything’s missing, it’s the textbook knowledge that might take their wine to the next level—a level Blues Jr. is determined to reach.

Though for now he is limited to his grape-crate supervisor’s seat, Blues Jr., a Knight of Columbus who lives with his wife and children in Jersey, has been reading books on winemaking and trying to get the older guys to modernize. “I try to instill in them—times change,” Junior tells me when his father and Big Al are out of earshot. “Not the recipe, but you have to get a little bit cultivated with the times. I will not use sulfites.” (The Blues Brothers put sulfite powder in their wine to stop it from fermenting into vinegar.) “I want to get into learning the chemical part of wine, how the grapes metabolize into wine.”

“You look that word up last night?” says Bucky, who’s been listening in.

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In a garage in Fishtown, a block off Delaware Avenue, a mild-mannered dentist in jeans, blue Polo oxford, and German-style wire-frame specs is moving along a row of tubs of fermenting juice and using a two-by-four to punch down the surface caps of seeds and skins. The garage is directly beneath the offices of Frank Spezzano’s insurance firm, and the tubs contain juice from premium grape varieties: barbera, pinot noir and merlot. They belong to the winemaking club of Spezzano and Ed Barranco, of which the dentist, Ed Landau, is a member.

“This year we’re going to have our wine analyzed professionally,” says Landau, who is convinced his team will prevail at the coming Vendemmia. Spezzano contorts his face into an exaggerated sneer. “We’re not going to do that shit,” he says. “We’ll see,” Landau responds, grinning. “It’s stupid,” says Spezzano.

While their Southern Italian surnames would fit right into the Blues Brothers’ neighborhood, neither Spezzano nor Barranco has any connection to South Philly. Sicilian-American Barranco moved here from Boston; Calabrian-

American Spezzano, from Trenton. The son of a musician, Spezzano studied math in college, then did actuarial work for a benefits consulting firm before launching his own company. He met Barranco through his wife, who shops at Barranco's Chef's Market. Their group is defined more by shared interests than common origins. Barranco, Landau (another Chef's Market customer) and Peter Klenke, a lawyer who lives at 22nd and Delancey, are all fine-wine aficionados.

Barranco has higher aspirations for his wine than mere plonk. "Most of the people in South Philly, they want wine to take to the table," he says. "If grapes are \$22 a crate, they'll buy them. We'll pay \$42 a crate for better grapes. Quite frankly, I don't care about the extra cost." Barranco believes the average South Philly home vintner makes "sugar-water wine. If I poured a '94 Reserve BV into my label, they'd think it was lousy, too strong." As I left, Spezzano pressed a bottle of their zinfandel into my hands, saying, "Here. This is better than that shit the Blues Brothers gave you."

When the club started, in 1993, it had just three members: Spezzano, Barranco, and a man named Michael Silverman. "Two Italians and a Jew," Spezzano says. "We figured we had production and wholesale covered." Both Barranco and Spezzano grew up watching their grandfathers make wine. But while winemaking seems an integral, almost unconscious part of the Blues Brothers' lives, for the Barranco/Spezzano crew, it seems merely romantic. When Spezzano talks trash about Landau's desire to use cultured yeasts or have the wine professionally analyzed, he's clearly enjoying a role. He takes an ironic, knowing glee in the *idea* of feuding partners.

After Landau drives away (in his BMW), Spezzano explains that in the next few weeks, they'll rack the wine—siphon it out of each barrel in order to remove the sediment at the bottom, then wash the inside of the barrel, return the wine to it, and add more wine to replace the lost volume. When I mention that the Blues Brothers follow Abbruzzese tradition in waiting until the first full moon in November to rack ("Atmospheric pressure," Big Al explained to me), Spezzano rolls his eyes. "It's old Guinea folklore," he says dismissively. "That's okay. If they do it, we don't want to do it."

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The full moon arrives on November 23rd. That afternoon, in their clubhouse basement, Al and Frank direct a hose from a barrel into an empty plastic tub, then turn on an electric pump. The blue tub fills with purple juice, its surface veined with pink foam. "See how the pump's aerating it?" Al says. "That's what you want. It oxygenates the wine, gets the bubbles out."

He and Blues Jr. note that a bit of sediment has been pumped out along with the juice; troubleshooting, they discover that they put the pump hose too far into the barrel, and resolve not to do so next year. Junior pumps a few ounces of the very young wine into a glass, holds it up to the light, and takes a sip. It's been in the barrel for about two months now, and his face expresses approval. "It's got a nice color," he says. "You can usually judge around now what kind of wine it's gonna be. I think it's gonna be real good."

Al sucks in a mouthful and swallows. "It's young," he pronounces, "but it's good." At next year's Vendemmia, perhaps, the Blues Brothers will finally be recognized as the best winemakers in town.

Over the next few months, as the barrels impart oak flavor to the wine, Blues will top them off regularly with wine from the demijohns. But today's labor is done. It's time to party.

Blues goes to the table in the main room and starts laying out a spread of food: homemade pickled green tomato slices (from his garden), slices of greasy "supersod" (sopressata the Blues Brothers make at the clubhouse) and the sharp provolone that's been hanging from the ceiling, freshly baked Italian bread, black olives, jalapeños. While he's doing this, Bruno and Carmen the Cousin arrive. "We're here to taste-test," says Bruno, who lives a block away. The Blues Brothers' popularity tends to rise whenever they have a new year's vintage coming out. If they gave bottles to everybody who angled for them, they'd have no wine left for themselves, so they're strategic about their allocation. A fair-weather friend who "happened to be in the neighborhood" drops in at the clubhouse? "Aw, sorry, we ran out." But a neighbor who complains about the wine smell seeping through her walls is bought off with a bottle or two.

Bruno pours himself a glass of the inky merlot and takes a dainty sip. “It’s like the beaujolais nouveau,” he says. “It’s got that frizz. I love the little sparkle that the fresh wine has.”

“I like it ’cause it’s exuberant,” Blues says. “It has a nice bouquet.”

I pour myself a glass. The wine, which consists of 12 parts merlot to one part cabernet, has an intense grapey flavor, the telltale tartness of youth, and a slight suggestion of bourbon, from the old whiskey barrels in which it matured.

The conversation soon tails away from the subject of wine. There are more important things to discuss. A recent article in the *Daily News* prompts a colloquy on contemporary sexual mores. “You ever fuck a 70-year-old?” asks Bruno, who’s 59.

“Not yet,” I reply.

“You don’t want to,” he says. “It’s like wine. There’s a peak.”

Gabe, another club member, stops in just long enough to make himself a sandwich. He’s on his way to the Shore. “Don’t talk about me,” he says in parting.

“I will, you fucking cocksucker,” Al says. “It’s winter, and you’re wearing goddamn Bermuda shorts.”

“Gabe’s always about the wine,” Blues says. “‘Why’s it this way? Why’s it that way?’ What the fuck is that?”

Blues uncorks a bottle of grenache from a barrel he and Al went halves on. They each take sips. “Nice,” Al says.

“It’s lighter,” Blues adds.

Al’s been scarfing jalapeños, and suddenly he says, “My lips are actually burning. Even my false teeth are burning.”

Blues, who is now over by the food table, claims the peppers aren’t hot.

“Then why are you cutting that in half,” Al asks.

“Cause I ain’t greedy,” Blues says.

It’s dark when I leave, and South Philly looks magical. In the windows of the tiny tin-awned rowhouses, strings of electric candles illuminate porcelain figurines of the Virgin Mary. As I zigzag from one narrow street to the next, buzzed on Blues Brothers merlot and laughter and conversation, I’m convinced the wine I’ve just been drinking is as great an expression of its *terroir*—South Philly—as the best vintages of first-growth Bordeaux are of theirs.

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For the next nine months, as they barrel-age their wine, the Blue Brothers turn their attention elsewhere. In July, Big Al, accompanied by Frankie Blues Jr., drives to Harrison, New Jersey, to audition at an open casting call for the HBO mob show *The Sopranos*. About 13,000 other people have the same idea, and Al never gets face-to-face with the producers. He does, however, make it onto the Channel 11 News in New York City. “Did you ever whack anyone?” the reporter asks. Al pauses a beat, then removes his shades. “No,” Al says, “I never whacked anyone.”

At last, on a weekday afternoon in early September, it’s time to celebrate the opening of the new wine. Every club member comes, as well as a bunch of friends. There’s a spread of food, including sausages and peppers brought by Frankie Blues and a colander heaped with plump green-and-mauve figs just picked from the backyard. Blues Jr., who’s had an operation, arrives caneless.



The event is less raucous than usual, as Big Al can't drink. He just spent three days in the hospital, passing a stone, and he can't touch booze for the foreseeable future. "I got 225 ccs of Demerol," he says, wincing at the memory, "and it was still torture."

"We'll have a lot of fucking extra wine this year," someone jokes.

Bottles are emptied and refilled with the new cab-merlot blend and the new grenache. The grenache, in particular, has good body and fruit.

The Vendemmia is less than a month away, and talk turns to the cost of a table this year: \$500. "For a table?" someone says. "Get the fuck out of here. What are they, jerkoffs?"

I ask Blues if he thinks he'll place this year. "I couldn't care less," Blues says, and for a moment, I almost believe him.