

Barolo

MATTHEW GAVIN FRANK



BAROLO

AT TABLE

Barolo



Matthew Gavin Frank

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Set in Bulmer by Kim Essman.
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*For L.L., Marilyn and Noel
(my mother and father),
and Jeff, Jodi, and Keiter*

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“Italian Butcher Shop Blues,” *Best Food Writing 2006*, ed. Holly Hughes (Avalon Publishing Group, 2007), 63–68.

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“Dessert,” reprinted in *Creative Nonfiction*, “The Best of *Brevity*,” no. 27 (2005): 91–92.

BAROLO



The Fewest Idiots

My heart jumps like a toad in a potato sack when the arriving passengers pour into the gate. My neck rockets backward, and the airport ceiling shadows fly like Raffaella's hair. The loudspeaker crackles — Italian first, then English — to placate the delayed. The crew will clean the plane, and then we will board. I watch the yawning arrivals shuffle past my chair, decide which are Italian and which are American by the way they hold their mouths. Some mouths simply look as if they've been exposed to better tastes than others.

I throw my arm around my backpack, resist the temptation to whisper sweet nothings to its zippers, and lean forward. In my lean, between my shoes, I see Barolo, Italy, and Il Gioco dell'Oca, Raffaella's farmhouse bed-and-breakfast. I see Pongo the Great Pyrenees sprinting over Il Gioco's driveway stones; Michele, Raffaella's father, pointing at me, roaring, "Chicago! Chicago!"; Adriana, her mother, shaking tomato-wet hands over her head at the outdoor grill; Raffaella touching my shoulders; her son, Niccolo, throwing a rock at the dog.

My chest swells right here in O'Hare as I remember Raffaella's words when, during my first trip to Barolo, I departed the region via a Satti bus after a mere four days. Though I certainly didn't earn the designation, I felt like a member of the family, and, kicking my backpack against the bus stop sign, Raffaella had said to me, "If you ever want to come back and work the wine harvest, I will talk to some people for you."

These words stained my brain like iodine. I went back to Chicago, then moved to Alaska. Three years passed like a hiccup while I

scrambled eggs and fried sausages at Juneau's Channel Bowl Café. It was when Al, a seventy-seven-year-old ex-goldpanner, after a yolkful of over-mediums, espoused his philosophy — *In a world full of idiots, you have to go to the place with the fewest idiots* — that Raffaella's offer rang itself over my frontal lobe. Then Al looked up, took a sip of his coffee, ran a hand down the length of his gray beard, scowled, and spit his drink back into his "Alaska Ship Chandlers" mug.

"Terrible!" he bellowed. "No taste!"

That night, from a pay phone on the wharf, I called Raffaella. When she picked up with her classic "Pronto," I nearly lost my lines: my pleading (but not too pleading) speech about staying with her indefinitely — maybe the entire six months spanning Barolo's fall and winter, more reverently known as truffle season and the grape harvest. I'm hesitant to admit it, but I think I even said something about cleansing the soul.

When I was growing up, food was the thing that emerged from the microwave, steaming and soggy. A rubbery omelet. A desiccated matzo ball in watery broth. A steak going green. A corpse of broccoli. But my mother treated our crap with ceremony. It was with bad food that we dealt with tragedy or comedy or mediocrity. For my birthday, microwaved hamburgers with iceberg lettuce; for my father's, microwaved lamb shanks. It was always something that once had a bone or an entire skeleton. We loved meat. In my family, to die young and full was expected. We gracefully upheld the pillars of heart disease and diabetes. Saturated fat and clogged arteries kept us warm through the winter. In my family, enjoying food meant overeating. I became a fat teenager.

The winter of 1986 I tried so hard to be cool. This was my first year in high school, Bon Jovi's *Slippery when Wet* had just come out, and the December temperatures in suburban Chicago were way above average. You could see the sidewalks through the ice. Girls would come to class in shorts or skirts, and teachers would scold them for their weatherly indiscretion. I tried so hard, but Bon Jovi

was this foreign thing — this upsweep of mislabeled heavy metal, rooted in Aqua Net hair spray.

My father had brought me up on classic rock — Chicago’s 105.9 WCKG and the rough sexy DJ voices of Patty Hays and Kitty Lowie. The way they talked about Led Zeppelin and Jethro Tull, their voices gruff and throaty, carrying the mysteries of age and cigarette, was enough to make a male high school freshman dismiss Bon Jovi and, in turn, his coolness as sonically trivial.

When driving together, my father and I would pick up McDonald’s (he would remove the buns from his two Big Macs and press the four patties into his mouth, one hand twisting the steering wheel) and listen to Simon and Garfunkel and the Eagles. We dissected “I Am a Rock” for its metaphor and contexts and “Witchy Woman,” tying the allure of the invisible Patty and Kitty to the windblown black of Stevie Nicks.

But this wasn’t cool. Not in 1986. I knew damned well that if I couldn’t quote Bon Jovi with some study-hall regularity, I’d never make it to the upper echelon of Adlai E. Stevenson High. The song that year was “You Give Love a Bad Name” — *Shot through the heart!* — and I soon would be, by a rosemary sprig. But I hadn’t yet found food, my hopeful catalyst into coolness, and at the time I had to rest with Zeppelin, my thirteen-year-old feelings uncontrived and implacable, hidden in the folds of those short winter skirts.

Given his Big Mac habits, my father was an Adkins advocate before Adkins was Adkins — before it was good for you, then bad for you, then really bad for you. My mother catered to this. Our dinners were spent at the table, the kitchen television always on, politely watching my father struggle through troughs of chicken wings, rib tips. He drank his water from a plastic bottle, one of those with an extended strawlike appendage. (In the refrigerator he distinguished his water bottle from my mother’s by putting a rubber band around its middle.) He would stuff his mouth full of meat, swallow, put his hands flat on the tabletop, and regain his breath. *Whooo-whooo-whooo*. Then he would bow his head to the water bottle’s straw, not exerting the effort to lift it to his lips, sip a few, then return to

the troughs. *Whooo-whooo-whooo*. This, I thought, was eating. As a child I equated fullness with discomfort. If I wasn't uncomfortable, I wasn't full.

As I grew older and my own breathing shortened with each Friday football game in the neighborhood park and my grandfather died at sixty-six, I began to wonder: what was the matter with fruits and vegetables? Somehow I didn't anymore want to be part of a familial food culture that made of the tomato the devil's candy. If I couldn't get into Bon Jovi, perhaps I could get into the four food groups and a little exercise.

I began running, slowly, around the block twice a week. Though barely five feet tall and quite round, I had my eye on a slot on my high school's high-jump team. That over-the-bar descent onto that giant sponge of a mat just looked like too much fun.

I read cookbooks and food magazines, revising my approach to edibles and their role in my survival. In the bathroom I would thumb through the back of *Chicago* magazine's dining guide, circling the interesting places in red pen — the ethnic haunts, the then-nebulous four-star establishments granted the clandestine designation of *fine dining*. I began to check them off.

When the Food Network was launched, I watched it voraciously, taking notes. When I left for college, I left my most expensive graduation gift behind — the microwave. I began cooking — fucking up, almost succeeding, fucking up. I got serious, reading Chef Thomas Keller's treatise on trussing a chicken, Charlie Trotter's manifesto on the potato.

After moving to Alaska, I waited for Ferran Adrià's *elBulli* cookbook to drop below a hundred bucks on amazon.com. When it never did, I read all the free articles about it.

My friends got into cooking. My male friends grew their hair long, my female friends shaved their heads. We told ourselves we were these rebel chefs, self-important culinary militants who were mediocre line cooks at best. At worst, we were overseasoners. A handful of salt. A liter of cumin. We made up jailhouse stories for each other, though none of us had seen the interior of a cell. We drew prison tattoos on each other's forearms with Paper Mate pens.

We called ourselves a catering company and got a few gigs — small Alaskan New Year's parties, aunts' birthdays. We tried to make our own stocks, prepped feverishly. We discussed for thirty minutes how the onion was supposed to be chopped, how each piece was to be a uniform arc. We read articles on the importance of proper seasoning, then seasoned our food improperly. So meticulously, we served our flawed food, received our polite compliments.

I took restaurant jobs — dishwasher, prep cook, server, garde-manger, grill, stock boy for the wine. Watching the other chefs work the line, I realized my militancy was an illusion. These people were for real. In the restaurant kitchen the hierarchy trumped the collegial. I was tired of being yelled at. I would never really be a chef — didn't have the calloused tear ducts for it — and began to wonder: could tasting be a talent?

So I tasted. A lot. Eventually, I shed my excess fat, uncovered the elusive concept of moderation. A concept that was about to be deconstructed, rearranged, and rebuilt by Italy.

As the airport loudspeaker crackles, the entire gate stands as one, all of us travelers on the same ark, ready for an ocean of wine and for boarding. The indefinite status of my stay prohibits me from taking a room at Il Gioco (financially speaking, of course), and I look at my backpack and envision the olive green tent coiled tightly inside. Per Raffaella's suggestion, I am to set up my lodging in her garden, just around the corner from the luscious animal-fat aromatics of Adriana's hallowed outdoor grill. She is allowing me to camp on her property for free.

I watch as the elderly and the children-riddled families approach, then disappear into the Jetway. I think of steel beasts and their bellies and of Jonah and Pinocchio. He was Italian, wasn't he? When they call my row, I stand even before the English translation. I don't need it anymore. I am dumping the crutches. I am starting to heal. My chest opens like a Pentecostal hymnal, a bottle of wine. Against the gray sky the plane shines like a bullet. It is September.

2

Dialing for Raffaella

When I land in Milano, exhausted, it is *septembre*. When I arrive in Alba, Italy, having taken a train from Milano to Asti, then a diesel train to Alba, it is September still. Struggling with the urge to call Il Gioco and tell Raffaella where and how I am, I also struggle with piecing together a vision of her.

I close my eyes, reddened from the all-night flight, Alba's late-morning winds carrying smells never to be found in America: a mesh of rotten grape, mushroom, olive, and stone. Eyes shut tight, an image of Raffaella comes like a Picasso. I can see portions of her overlapped in threes: her blonde hair, her skin, her eyes fanned like abstract postcards. I can't quite make her gel.

My eyes open to a contained assault of people on foot, on bikes, in cars, cascading over orange-roofed shopfronts, pastel facades, white shutters. A medieval dream. Alba rests in the Langhe territory, in the Piedmont's southern corner, sandwiched between the beautiful breads of Liguria (the Italian Riviera) and France. When coupled with the neighboring Roero territory, the countryside is dappled with over one hundred tiny villages, all accessible by car or the less reliable bus systems. The throngs of people brush against me as they pass. They smell good. It must be in their blood.

The first settlers came to the area during the Neolithic period, anywhere from the sixth millennium to the third millennium of pre-history. Alba's "freewheeling" lifestyle of the Neolithic gave way to the obvious Roman conquest in AD 173. The Romans originally named the hamlet Alba Pompeia. The "great" (depending on who you ask—the conquerors or the conquered) Roman emperor Pub-

lius Elvius Pertinax was born in Alba Pompeia. When the Roman Empire began its famed decline, Alba Pompeia fell victim to numerous barbarian invasions but began to assert its own stable environment in 1100. When the fascist seduction attempted to bed most of Italy during World War II, Alba remained a rebellious and partisan village, seduced instead by the poetic words of its native son, author Beppe Fenoglio.

The neighboring hamlet of Barolo, equally rebellious, is home to a towering orange castle, forever spewing its narrative. Hovering at 301 meters and housing 676 residents, Barolo has been inhabited since prehistory, later serving as residence to Celts, Ligurian tribes, Romans, and the famed Falletti banking family. The name Barolo comes from the Celtic *bas reul*, or “low place,” due to its position in the Langhe.

In order to finally defend itself from century-long barbaric raids, Barolo erected its castle in the year 1000. In 1250 the entire town of Barolo was purchased by the Falletti family, who quickly converted the castle, once an imposing defensive fortress, into their country villa.

The castle-turned-villa housed the last direct members of the family, Marchese Carlo Tancredi Falletti and his wife, Juliette Colbert, until 1864. During this time Colbert, taken with the region, devoted herself to studying its fruits and, with the help of French oenologist Louis Oudart, invented the refined techniques to produce Barolo wine.

Today the region is a strange mesh of the rustic and the cosmopolitan. Shops selling fresh pasta, decades-old wines, and wild boar salami are juxtaposed with display windows boasting designer shoes, purses, and sunglasses. Through the window of one such store I watch a woman in black stretch pants check herself out in a mirror, flipping the edges of her blouse collar skyward. Behind me a string of minicars speeds by, inches from my legs.

While my backpack adjusts itself, impatient on my shoulders, moaning to be put down and unpacked, I notice an orange pay phone at the north end of the train station. The sun throws its light

from the black receiver. Soon I am dialing for Raffaella. The phone rings only once.

“Pronto?”

Yes, I think, my blood going warm as coffee. “Raffaella, it’s me.”

Even louder than the mosaic of car horns, her throaty, extended cry is the catalyst I need: my body rocks in transubstantiation, my blood loping up the evolutionary ladder from coffee to wine. In that sound, for better or for worse, Italy snaps into focus, jetlag takes a backseat.

She says, “You are in Alba.”

“Yes,” I say. My hands shake a little, but I continue, “Should I take the Satti bus to you?”

“No. No, I will send a boy to pick you up.”

“A boy?” I ask.

“Si. Yes. His name is Francesco. Look for a blue car. A, uh, a very dark blue.”

“Okay,” I accept. “I can’t wait to see you . . .” I stop. “And everybody?”

“Yes,” Raffaella says. “It is good you are here. You work for Sandrone tomorrow.”

“What?” I say and close my mouth. The jetlag reasserts itself, drones away like a lawnmower.

“Yes,” Raffaella continues. “I tell you about it when you are here.”

“Okay,” I manage. “Ciao.”

“Ciao-ciao.”

I take the receiver from my ear and stare at it. Luciano Sandrone. Super Sandrone. Tomorrow already. I am going to pick grapes for the man, nay, the master. I wonder what he looks like. *Huge*, I think, *round, planetary. Jupiter with feet. A grounded comet.* I breathe. Alba rushes into my chest. My backpack stares at me from its slumber. I wonder if it knows. I wonder if it dreams of being stuffed with bottles of Sandrone’s wine.

Across the street an old man sets up a vegetable table on the sidewalk in front of his shop. Mushrooms. Cardoons. Garlic. No one

stops to peruse. In the cafés well-dressed businesspeople take their espressos standing up at the counter. Mopeds subvert the pedestrian walkways, find their way along the orange cobblestones. Beautiful boys walk arm in arm with beautiful girls.

Cracking my knuckles, I watch a navy blue Subaru tear from the street into the train station's parking lot, nearly splitting a brown-suited pedestrian in two. But the brown suit stumbles on with barely a glance. This sort of recklessness is expected here. The Subaru stops at the parking curb nearest me and shuts off like a clatter of dishes. This must be "the boy" Raffaella mentioned.

The car door opens, and a lanky forty-something man pushes his graying hair into Alba's morning. A distant church clock rings its bells for twelve. This man — this "boy" — must be the god of afternoon. His overcoat matches the color of the car, and he is caped, good-looking, and as well treated as a retired racehorse. His eyes find me. He holds a thin hand over his head as if demonstrating his ability to finger the clouds. I nod and return the wave, my hand no higher than my chest.

"Raffaella?" the man calls, his voice light, dusty, strung in the air like crepe paper.

"Uh," I say.

"Raffaella?" he repeats. "Il Gioco dell'Oca?"

"Sì," I say. "Uh . . ." and I tap my chest frantically, trying to remember the phrase for "That's me" — "Uh, esso io."

"Aaaah," he stretches his sigh like a cat, "italiano."

I laugh.

"Tutto bene?" he asks. "Everything good?"

"Sì," I say and launch my backpack over my shoulders.

"I will bring you," he says and reaches to brace the bottom of my pack, helps me slide it from my shoulders into the car's trunk. He is nearly a foot taller than me. I've never felt my five feet seven inches more. I think of my high school career as a fourth-string high jumper.

"Um, do you work for Raffaella?" I ask.

"Sorry?"

“Um, do you, uh, lavoro, uh, work for, for Raffaella?”

“Work for?” he asks. “Oh, no, no. I, uh, work for, uh, the bank. In Torino. Sixty kilometers, uh, far from Alba. I am, uh, the friend of Raffaella . . . Francesco. In English, uh, Francis. Raffaella say you are americano.”

“Yes,” I say, walking to the passenger side. “From Chicago.”

“Aaaah, Chicago,” he says triumphantly. He phonetically pronounces the *ch*.

The Subaru leaps to life, and Francesco rockets us into traffic with a seeming disregard for the other cars. My backpack rolls in the trunk, and I fumble with the seatbelt. He turns to me.

“Only, uh, ten kilometres.”

“Sounds good, Francesco.”

“You are tired?” he asks.

At the mere sound of the word, fatigue trickles into my legs a drop at a time. I become aware of my joints. My head rotates against the headrest.

“A little, I suppose. Un po.”

Francesco turns to the windshield, then back to me. A white motorbike shoots in front of him and, without looking forward, he taps the brake. I yawn and Francesco wrestles the stick shift. My eyes roll back. I decide to trust him.

“Aaaah,” he says.

3

The Boy Brings Me

My eyes, exhausted, teeter on the brink. I don't know whether . . .

Upward slopes and rounds of green and is that a window? Oh, the car window. I'm moving on a road and I'm looking out the window and roofs are whipping past in orange stripes and doors and there's a man with a rake standing still and now he's smeared into the roofs and gone and who is that? It's Francesco at the wheel. His eyes are ahead and does he know I'm still here? Is this a car seat or a bed pressing my back? What's holding me up? Am I in Chicago? Or Alaska? I think Alaska. I have to be at work soon. Chop onions. I need a blanket. A lamb shank. My hands aren't moving. They don't want to. Oh, well. Leave them alone. I see grapes. And darkness. A cave. A cave with too many windows. Green and heavy light. My eyes are open now, right? Did we hit a bump? A castle to the right. The top of it. Squares of brick with blanks in between. I can see the sky in between the squares of brick. It's red. The brick. The cave. No brick here. No yellow here. I'm in Italy. In a car . . . not . . . done . . .

Crunch and crunch and rolling crunch, Francesco spins us onto the white stones of Raffaella's driveway. I sit up straight at the sound, my mouth wet, spine cold, eyes dry but open. I stretch and stare out the window at the black wrought iron gate sandwiched by two orange brick pillars. The stones maze themselves under the gate, spread into a wide courtyard. I touch my head. My hair is a mess.

Pongo, Il Gioco's Great Pyrenees, stands to one side of the iron gate, fur matted, tail sweeping circular, barking.

"Ciao, Pongo! Tutto bene?" Francesco nods to the dog.

"Pongo!" I muster, and the dog's tail backflips.

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