



The Decameron: 100 Wines for Quarantine

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As the Black Death ravaged Europe in the 14th century, Giovanni Boccaccio penned *The Decameron*. In the book, seven young ladies and three young men escape plague-ridden Florence to find safety and shelter in the Tuscan countryside. They remain quarantined for two weeks, but with two days dedicated to chores and personal hygiene and two holy days for prayer, the group is left with ten days of doldrums to fill.

Decameron means “ten days” in ancient Greek. To whittle away the time, the group decides to tell stories: ten stories are exchanged over the course of ten days. Boccaccio’s Decameron is a collection of 100 novellas, mostly borrowed from popular folklore and myth. Most are imbued with sexual euphemism that must have been quite risqué for the time, so much so, the characters are given false names to protect their true identities. The tales are organized by theme, such as fortune, human will, love and virtue.

This vast literary playlist of 100 stories composes *l’umana commedia*, or “the human comedy,” as the entire work is commonly known.

The preface of the book is set in Florence to scenes of prophetic devastation. Because of the rapidly infectious disease, bodies were left outside doorsteps each morning. Unqualified caretakers replaced the trained physicians who had perished. Graves filled quickly to capacity. Overwhelmed by the number of dead, priests skipped standard burials to get the bodies “under a thin layer of soil” as quickly as possible. Mothers and fathers refused to care for their own children. The unsick stuffed fragrant herbs into their nostrils to mask the stench of the rotting corpses.

Boccaccio writes: “I say, then, that the sum of thirteen hundred and forty-eight years had elapsed since the fruitful Incarnation of the Son of God, when the noble city of Florence, which for its great beauty excels all others in Italy, was visited by the deadly pestilence. Some say that it descended upon the human race through the influence of the heavenly bodies, others that it was a punishment signifying God’s righteous anger at our iniquitous way of life. But whatever its cause, it had originated some years earlier in the East, where it had claimed countless lives before it unhappily spread westward, growing in strength as it swept relentlessly on from one place to the next.”

The seven young ladies, with the fake names Pampinea, Fiammetta, Filomena, Emilia, Lauretta, Neifile and Elissa, meet to mourn the dead (and gossip, as you do) at the Santa Maria Novella church. The eldest, Pampinea, suggests that they leave the city behind and escape to the countryside, “There we shall hear the birds singing, we shall see fresh green hills and plains, fields of corn undulating like the sea, and trees of at least a thousand different species; and we shall have a clearer view of the heavens, which, troubled though they are, do not however deny us their eternal beauties, so much fairer to look upon than the desolate walls of our city.”

Three young men, Panfilo, Filostrato and Dioneo—who all nurture some level of amorous regard for the aforementioned ladies—walk into the church. They readily volunteer to join the women for a period of idyllic internment.

The group heads to the Tuscan countryside, in Fiesole, to a fabulous villa perched on the summit of a hill with loggias, halls and courtyards. The sleeping apartments all have clean linens, the house is adorned with freshly cut flowers, the wells are filled with cool, refreshing water, and the cellars are stocked with precious wines, “more suited to the palates of connoisseurs than to sedate and respectable ladies,” Boccaccio writes.

With this dazzling perfection as their background, the group ascends to a heightened 10-day frenzy of saucy storytelling. Their metaphoric transition from hell to heaven is complete: They have pivoted away from the gritty realism of a decaying Florence thanks to the creativity of their idle minds.

The Decameron, above anything else, is a story of the human ability to overcome. It tells us that we can escape any bad situation thanks to the power of our imaginations.

Il Decreto Cura Italia (the Decree to Cure Italy)

My adopted home Italy has been on a national lockdown due to the Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19) for about 10 days now, as per government decree. I watch events unfold from afar because I was unable to return to Rome before the flights were canceled. As the COVID-19 pandemic casts its dark shadow across the globe, we look to Italy for bittersweet consolation and inspiration. Our hearts are profoundly touched by the resilience and creativity of the Italian spirit.

The lessons of *The Decameron* seem aptly appropriate today. Instead of novellas, we have witty WhatsApp memes, Twitter hashtags (#iorestoacasa, or “I’m staying home”), Instagram and Facebook shares. Storytelling through social media has filled some of the sad empty space imposed upon us by social distancing. *I social*, as they are called in Italian, make us feel intimately closer, despite being physically removed.

Since the COVID-19 lockdown went into effect, my most active WhatsApp chat is with my former classmates at the American Overseas School of Rome (AOSR). I haven’t seen these people since I was an awkward 14-year-old girl in a Wham! t-shirt and acid-washed jeans. We furiously exchange dozens of uplifting messages each day, all rigorously written in our own special language that we used as kids, *mixato*, in which a sentence starts off in Italian and inexplicably switches over to English in one slippery stream of syntax. I thrive on that proverbial dopamine squirt that hits with each ding of an incoming WhatsApp message from my AOSR chat.

I’m sure we’ve all been gleefully distracted, even if just for a few brief moments, by the funny viral videos from around the globe: There’s the one of a guy paying for coffee with carefully counted squares of toilet paper instead of money; the lonely guy cin-cining a wine glass to his own reflection in a bathroom mirror; mixology recipes for the so-called “quarantini” cocktail; and a delightfully random video of someone taking out the trash in an inflatable T-Rex costume instead of a hazmat suit.

We’ve all seen videos of the spontaneous balcony sing-alongs performed by apartment inhabitants under lockdown throughout Italian cities. The fierce regional messaging of those songs does not go unnoticed to the expert ear of the Italophile. Roman apartment dwellers belt out Antonello Venditti songs like *Grazie Roma*, Neapolitans are partial to a strictly Pino Daniele repertoire, in Siena they sing Contrada songs, and the Sicilians offer folk tunes complete with hand tambourines and mouth harps. Territorial identity is a magnificent source of solace, I suppose, just like reconnecting with long-lost middle school friends is.

As we hunker down and shelter in place, I am reminded of the plentiful wine cellars in the beautiful Fiesole villa. As Giovanni Boccaccio teaches us, storytelling with a glass of wine, or two, will help us pass the time during this terrible crisis.

The following is my own Decameron of Italian wine. This list of 100 wines—10 wines for 10 days—is not a classification or a ranking. Rather, it is a compilation of some of the bottles that moved me or otherwise inspired me over the course of the past year or so. And, to pass the time, I will post them to social media as we count by the days. You can follow me on Instagram at @monicalarner and our company feed @wine_advocate, or the hashtags #robertparker, #larnelist and #decameronwines.

The Tenth and Last Day

The Second Wine,

[Feudo Montoni 2015 Sicilia Nero d’Avola Vrucara](#) - 94 points