



Chianti On The Rocks: Against all odds, reluctant winemakers capture a dream

Tony Rocca

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Two city dwellers share a familiar fantasy: to flee their frenzied routine and start a new life in some perfect foreign location, the vineyards of Italy. But when Tony and his wife, Mira, take the plunge and sink their life savings into a ruined farmhouse in Tuscany, they find they are dogged by every conceivable planning disaster, sclerotic bureaucracy, snakes in the grass and murky dealings with their medieval bank. All they want is to transform their 14th-century heap into holiday apartments fit for the 21st century. With no Italian and only a modest budget, their plans hinge on relentless optimism and finding some finance to support their business plan. But the 'good life' seems doomed to remain a dream. What they have is a parody, shivering through seven winters, living in the ruins with no heat, no hot water, and holes in the floor. The idea of making wine had never been a part of their plan, yet when debts of three-quarters of a million dollars, high corruption and sabotage put them on the verge of bankruptcy it appears they have no other choice. The directors of the crooked bank are finally led off in handcuffs - and the novices reluctantly decide to build a winery, falling further into debt. They pit themselves against professionals descended from generations of aristocratic families whose Chianti wine has been famous through the centuries. This true story of accidental winemakers facing seemingly insurmountable pitfalls and adversity is told with Tony's humorous style that brings to life the real Tuscany. He takes us behind the superficial tranquility of the countryside between Florence and Siena with its timeless beauty and into the nightmare of trying to run a business in Italy. He also introduces us to friendly neighbours who help them keep their sanity. We meet many of the characters who join them as guests in their vacation apartments and learn about winemaking, grapes, the harvest, olive picking and olive oil making. The story has a surprising end for a couple whose only previous agricultural experience had been cultivating geraniums in gritty London window-boxes. Their very first Chianti Classico vintage caused America's leading critic, Robert Parker, to award them 93 points out of 100 with the comment: 'A thrilling new discovery. Impressive!'

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