

washingtonpost.com

Prisoner Rehabilitation, Italian Style

Inmates Become Jailhouse Vintners, Poets and Actors

Featured
Advertisement **XEROX**
Advertisement

By Daniel Williams
Washington Post Foreign Service
Monday, March 14, 2005; Page A13

VELLETRI, Italy — The wine comes in a bottle labeled in elegant script on a gold background. Fuggiasco, it is called.

But this wine was not produced in an ocher Renaissance palazzo peopled by doddering aristocrats. This wine is made within the whitewashed walls

of Velletri prison, a few miles south of Rome, and is put out by thieves and murderers. *Fuggiasco* means fugitive. A sister vintage goes by the name Seven Turns of the Key, an Italian expression for the depressing finality of imprisonment.

The products are a curious sample of inmate rehabilitation efforts in Italian prisons. Training inmates for life on the outside is, in theory, nothing new, but this is a country that three decades ago ran Devil's Island-style penitentiaries and that still gets low marks for overcrowding and maltreatment in prisons. In a land where people believe in the curative powers of culture and a good diet, the rehab programs include theater groups, poetry clubs and, in the case of Velletri, the production of fruity country wines, the pressing of olives into oil and the cultivation of strawberries.

"The primary goal is to train inmates to do useful things. We also want to be part of the fabric of this country, so naturally, some things are very Italian," said Rodolfo Craia, an agronomist who shepherds the prisoners through the intricacies of winemaking.

"We are surrounded by vineyards," he said, gesturing to nearby fields in the Castelli Romani district, known for its whites. "What better than to make wine?"

Velletri is Italy's only winemaking prison. Its beginnings were novel but, in a peculiar way, logical. Five years ago, Craia took a job as an agricultural trainer at the prison. In prison records, he noticed the name of an inmate whose previous vocation was that of a vintner. The prisoner, Marcello Bizzoni, had run afoul of tax authorities, fled to Brazil and Africa, returned to surrender and received a five-year sentence.

Craia enlisted Bizzoni in the wine venture and got the Italian government to provide almost half a million dollars in equipment, including presses and big stainless steel fermentation vats. Soon, Velletri was turning out 45,000 bottles a year from grapes bought locally. The prison has entered into a partnership with a marketer to sell the annual output to the outside world. Profits go to the government.

Craia's agricultural mini-conglomerate has grown to include the production of honey, apples, hydroponic tomatoes and strawberries, much of it within the prison walls. Big cellblocks with barred windows are surrounded by plastic greenhouses, trees and grapevines. About one-tenth of the 350 inmates are employed, and some of those who are on good behavior work outside the walls. The produce is consumed within the prison.

"It's better than staying all day in a cell. I caress these strawberries and for a minute I feel I'm not really here," said a convicted killer who was replanting a strawberry plant inside an experimental greenhouse.

For all the elaborate farm technology and carefully tended plots, there is precious little information on whether this program or the other rehabilitation projects actually help former convicts go straight. Craia, for instance, did not know the fate of the dozens of inmates who have passed through his program. One problem, he said, is that half the prisoners in Italy are illegal immigrants who tend to disappear or go back to their homelands after their release. Moreover, there is no systematic program to track what happens to former inmates, he said.

Critics say it is window dressing. "The government puts up these programs but doesn't push them for results," said Alessandro Margara, a retired judge and former director of Italy's penal system. "Clearly, it's more productive to have prisoners out in the vineyard than to leave them in cells 20 hours a day. But that's all we know."

"The problem with these programs is the lack of follow-up," said Carlo Alberto Romano, a criminologist at the University of Brescia. "We need to know what happens to these people a year after they leave prison. But no one is paying for that."

Prison reform dating from 1975 required detention facilities to start work and recreation programs. Yet, Italian prisons receive low marks for the treatment of inmates. The prison population in Italy stands at about 56,000, one-third more than capacity, according to Justice Ministry figures.

"We've had serious concerns about Italy and the systematic abuse that goes on in its prisons," said Nerys Lee, a researcher for Amnesty International, the human rights monitoring organization. "Pretty regularly we see reports of ill treatment by prison guards that amounts to torture."

Against that backdrop, it is not unusual to hear prisoners say they participate in the rehabilitation programs for the simple relief of being outside their cells for a few hours a day. But some inmates also express an ardent wish to live a creative life, even if it is on a small scale.

At San Vittore prison in Milan, for instance, some inmates are organized into a poetry society. They publish their works on their own Web site as well as in a magazine called *Two*, after the prison's address, 2 Piazza Filangeli. Getting "sent to No. 2" is slang for ending up in San Vittore, one of the old-style Italian prisons with closet-size cells designed for two inmates but often holding three.

"Getting out of the cells is one reason to write poetry," said Francesco Ghelardini, a convicted bank robber. "It would be crazy to think that everyone is going to take us seriously. This is a way for us to pass the time."

Ghelardini, in a poem he titled "Mezzobusto," which means a head-and-shoulders portrait, expresses the frustration of seeing his girlfriend on visiting days only from the bust up, across a table and separated by a window:

Patrizia, my lady, for years became a body from the bust on up

And every time our visits ended I imagine her

In my mind, who le

Inmates at Volterra prison in Tuscany, home to a long-running prison theater group, take their activities seriously. "God knows there are plenty of unemployed actors outside of jail, so treating this as just vocational exercise is not enough. Also, if you just view it as therapy, you don't get theater," said Armando Punzo, the Neapolitan director of the Compagnia della Fortezza prison troupe.

Punzo regards his actors as heirs to the neorealist tradition of Italian film, in which amateur actors were used in gritty movies about Italian Street life. They have put on plays by Shakespeare, Brecht and Genet and adaptations of Virgil's "The Aeneid." The 45-member troupe performs in the annual theater festival at Volterra, a fortress built by the Medici family, the Renaissance-era rulers of Florence.

Santolo Matrone, who has served 11 years of a 17-year sentence for murder, is a veteran performer with the company. "We don't just want to be the objects of curiosity," he said in the prison's bright red rehearsal room. "This is not just a perversion meant to titillate."

Other inmates sitting in the room nodded. One was a Moroccan who also writes poetry. Another, from Gambia, said he wanted to be able to express himself better when he gets out of prison.

"We want to forget we are here and also to get the audience to forget we are prisoners," said Gaetano La Rosa, a convicted killer from Naples. "There would be no greater pleasure than being known as actors. Of course, then we return to our cells, but for a few minutes it would be magic."

© 2005 The Washington Post Company

• Advertissing Links

What's this? •

MyCashNow - \$100 - \$1,000 Overnight

| Payday Loan Cash goes in your account overnight. Very low fees. Fast decisions. Direct deposit is not required. No credit check. Confidential - secure.
www.mycashnow.com

Refinance Rates Hit Record Lows

| Get \$150,000 loan for \$625 per month. Refinance while rates are low.
www.lowermybills.com

Accredited Online Degree

| Earn an accredited AA, BS, MS, MBA or Doctoral degree 100% online.
: www.univofphoenixonline.com