

Feature Article:

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The Culinary Counselor

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The Witches of Benevento

The Story of Strega - A Witches Brew!

Many years ago, while eating at my favorite restaurant, App's Ristorante in West Haven, CT, I noticed on the bar a bottle of liquor that was yellow in color, I asked to examine it, and while it was somewhat innocuous, something caught my eye. A witch, on her broomstick, but as I perused the label further, my eyes focused on something dear to my heart . . . Naked women; not only naked but they appeared to be dancing or floating around or near a large tree. To a young, virile, vigorous and somewhat of a stud, it was casually arousing, as my fantasies pulled me into the label. Time marched on and recently while deciding to write this article; I remember that event, and now you are going to know the story that tells it all in the label. The liquor from many years ago is from a time gone by, so here is the tale of the "Witches of Benevento and its namesake, "Strega" an Italian Liquor!

Before I continue, I would like to take a moment to give you a backdrop about the author . . . Me! Who am I? Well, I am what you can refer to, as a legend in my mind! A lawyer by profession, who loves the culinary arts, has a thirst for knowledge, amidst his sarcasm and pissing people off. I am somewhat drawn to folklore, fantasies, sexual and otherwise, that when all tallied, illustrates the creative side of an imaginary mind, which I refer to as culinary erotica. So, if you were expecting Mario Batali, sorry, besides, I have more of a literary flair, not to mention cooking style as well! Only kidding, I have great respect for him; otherwise, I would have used someone else's name; although his sauce does not even come close to ours (Anna's Simply Gourmet). Not to mention, I did

catch a show once, where he used Strega in a chicken dish, although I top that one with the recipe at the end of this article.

“The Witches of Benevento” is a tale partly based on legend, folklore, and a perception of history as only the author could present! Of course, if I were related to Pinocchio, my nose (or another appendage), would appear to have grown much larger, as this story came to be; but wait, there is more!

The portrayal of events surrounding this witch’s brew expands my somewhat perverse mind to sexual activity and of course, my fascination with the legend that leads to this now popular Italian liquor known as “Strega.” The pagan practice itself involved the use of a “love potion”, that allowed the participants to connect somehow to the earth, the moon, and universe, while looking for that mortal connection known as the urge to merge! Nevertheless, this story is about the “elixir of the gods” is my creation and how I would like the story to evolve, maybe living vicariously through the rituals behind the legend.

Although Strega is somewhat unknown, the liquor itself; has some notoriety because of its use in such notable movies as the “Godfather.” Also, some authors, such as Ernest Hemingway, (who probably imbibed himself), has its main character sipping Strega in his book, “A Farwell To Arms”. Come to think about it, once this article begins to circulate, I should receive a royalty by the owners of this company. I know, that is somewhat conceited; analogous to a mosquito floating down the river on its back, with an erection, waiting for the drawbridge to open! Nevertheless, by writing this story, I am pushing a product, which by all accounts, will also increase its sales.

About the name Strega, it is derived from the word Stregoneria, a word that denotes the ritual or pagan belief in witchcraft. Ergo, we have the title of the article “The Witches of Benevento.” The one thing you should remember, though once you decide to try Strega, remember to propose a toast to the Pagans who practiced Stregoneria, and of course, the Witches of Benevento and your’s truly-Good luck!

Now I do want to mention a caveat at this point. I do not know if witches existed, or still do, but I believe they may be dancing around in my head along with the snakes; therefore want to be careful and not raise their ire, as they may still be dancing around that walnut tree in Benevento, Italy. I am just letting them know in advance, that this is all in fun because I don’t need any supernatural soccer’s or Wiccans trying to nip at the vain of my existence or placing pins into strategic areas of dolls, bearing a likeness to me.

The tale begins with the demise of the Roman Empire (476-AD) around the region of Italy known as Campagna and a little Town called Benevento- commonly referred to as “Southern Italy.”” It was here that the so-called Witches of Benevento practiced “Stregoneria and Stregheria,” as previously noted, meaning “witch”*. The words take on different historical meanings, which are not the purpose of this article; however, it was a practice modified, at least from historical accounts through the passage of time and some maintain it is an offshoot to the rise of the Catholic religion. In any

event, witchcraft dates back many centuries before Christ, but the folklore behind “Stregoneria” focuses in the little town of Benevento, Italy.

The barbarians that occupied many of the regions of Italy were tribal in nature, and their religious practices varied because paganism had no real structure; in other words it had not a specific deity, they just marched to their drummer. Each sect within the confines of paganism chose their Deity, while Christians had Christ. Therefore, they worshiped to whom the sect proclaimed as their Deity.

In this region, there was a Pagan group referred to by the author as the “Witches of Benevento”, who worshiped a Deity known as the “Goddess Diana.” It was told that she derived her power from “mother earth,” and through her kindness, (she was a good witch—that runs contrary to some historical accounts about them), as she kept watch over all of the creatures that inhabited the earth. Yes, she was an ecological-minded witch! Kind of like a “mother figure” for all of her followers to worship. Not the type of witch that you find in the Wizard of Oz or Snow White, or the one who wanted to be the first woman President. Different accounts lead to differences as to what she represented. Some stories say because the full moon is part of the ritual she was connected to woman’s menstrual cycles; other accounts connect her to virginity and nature. While others, and this is what I wrap my head around (metaphorically speaking), is it forays into sexual encounters, with the help of the drink I have referred to as the “elixir of the gods.” She was the pinnacle of the belief by the Witches of Benevento and that Stregoneria was about love and all that came with it. Therefore, allowing it to keep with what I perceived her image to be, and doing just what Mother Nature intended.

This ritual began when the moon was full; the followers would meet on the hillside where a Walnut tree stood. The walnut tree is a very important part of the ritual; some accounts relate it to the Roman Gods, and its Latin root that refers to it as the acorn of Jupiter. He was the big Kahuna of the Roman gods. Some accounts say the shell itself represent the lobes of the brain, but again my account is a little more practical and symbolic of something further down the anatomy, sometimes referred to as the other brain!

Therefore, the Witches of Benevento, are known to practice their beliefs around a walnut tree, but another component that makes it all come together is the timing of the event. The full moon. In some cultures, the moon is masculine, while in others feminine; in any event it was the focal point that got everything going. There are some accounts that think the walnut tree (walnut shells having the outline of the lobes of the brain), itself was a connection to the mind. Hence, the practice would reach the depths of the spirit and mind. As noted, the writer’s interpretation, of walnuts are symbolic of something; that is a little more obvious; regardless of my interpretation, the practitioners would gather on the hillside and get naked, to eat, and drink this blissful concoction. And what could that drink be? That’s right boys and girls, you guessed it, this is the pre-cursor to “Strega.” For them, however, it was a love potion. It was intended for the here and now with no future use. The juxtaposition of the walnut tree, the brain, and the love potion allowed the practitioners’ to put themselves into a trance that allowed them to float into the air; thus the women on the label of the bottle of Strega. Of course, the drink itself had nothing to

do with the enraptured state, of course not! The dance, the trance, the drink. Gee, I wonder what came next? If you said a hangover, you are not a fast learner, but if you said hmmm, then the hangover, very good!

The legend goes on to note that when the practitioners drank the potion it made both the men and woman somewhat euphoric (or just drunk), which led them to believe in the edicts put down through the ages that this practice would unite them in love forever. Forever bound in love, that being a politically correct way or euphemistic way of saying they got “laid,” however when you think about it, uniting-no problem; even for more than a couple of hours (good staying power), hmmm, okay, but forever, that could create problems. Being a lawyer, I know, even a few years usually leads to divorces, so I am not sure about forever. That could be a stretch, eternity, that’s a long time, I guess you could fake it to join in the ritual, kind of like when in church and you don’t know a prayer, you move your lips. As for the uptight ladies, faking an orgasm or for that matter a guy having to fake an erection! As long as you can achieve the end goal, that is what counts.

Then, of course, I thought about the act and the object of the exercise, or intended consequences, and of course the unforeseen occurrences . . . Little witches! That is, if the moon, the stars, and angle of the dangle were all correct! After all, they did take a ride on a broomstick, maybe not the kind that bad witches used, but their “magic carpet ride” was nonetheless a ride! Today a guy who is on a quest for the same kind of ride could be categorized as “you little devil,” which is just practicing the contemporary version of “Stregoneria.”

“If we shall meet again then we shall smile. If not then this parting was well made” (Shakespeare’s-Julius Cesar), and so like all good things, the smiles, the dances with witches, the inter-connective activity of the day were no more; the centuries had once again intervened and father time began to wane on this age old practice. Soon, Stregoneria became heresy, because it ran counter to religious thinking. The age and practice of guilt perpetrated by the Catholic Church began to take hold.

The Town of Benevento was no exception. The emissary or Bishop to the Pope in Rome was Bishop Barbato. He later became a Saint, but his claim to fame was the conversion of the last in a long line of Longobard Dukes (the original barbarians), to Christianity. Before his conversion, the Duke (Romualdo), himself practiced “Stregoneria.” Around the 600’s there was conflict brewing between the Longobards and the Greeks. He made a deal with the Bishop, to convert to Catholicism and renounce Stegonneria if he (the Bishop) could help spare the city. For whatever reason, the invasion never occurred, but the Duke told the Bishop to take a hike. *See politicians never change!*

While there are several accounts of what supposedly happened after he recanted, the most practical is that the Duke’s wife was working in conjunction with the Bishop, to convince him to convert to Catholicism; actually from my vantage point, she saw an opportunity and went for it. She had to be doing it for self-serving reasons, especially if the Duke was a practitioner of this cult, going off on the hillside every month, and letting

someone play with his broomstick! As that story goes, the Duke said he would recant the practice, but when it became evident, that he had not, his wife ratted him out to the Bishop. Here is the Duke, with a wife nipping at his backside, and the emissary of the Papal ruling class tugging at you from the other direction, the Longobard King probably just gave in. “Okay, okay, no more witches, wine or song, I will learn to practice guilt, instead of free love, as all Catholics must do!”

Whatever version you want to grasp onto, the remainder of the legend has the Bishop cutting down the walnut tree, while other stories have the Duke ordering its destruction. Nevertheless, the tree was gone, but the legend remained, and the folklore continued. Stories ruminate that the tree over time has regenerated itself and witches still go there to this day, in secret to worship - kind of like a contemporary sex club, underground, without the amenities. “Hey, baby you wanna go over to the walnut tree tonight and worship?”

Witchcraft began to vanish as Christianity began to become the major competitor to the Muslim religion. Also, the Renaissance period began to emerge as thinkers of the day beginning to question prior assumptions about man and his battle with understanding the universe. I often wonder if thinkers like Galileo or Copernicus would have embraced Witchcraft. After all, he, Galileo was into ladies, and he would have found a reason to support it; and he did defy Rome by agreeing with the theory of Copernicus and the universe. Maybe that is a stretch, but putting the moon into the context of the universe and the universal thinking that men are from Mars, and women from a different planet and what puts them together is Strega. I can only conclude that it might help.

Because men will always be men, humankind will also continue down the slippery slope of whose religion is right or wrong; I have a faint idea of what we need. Culinary intervention, Strega (oh that’s right Muslims don’t drink) . . . Well, how about recipes? It may be easier to teach Muslims how to make goat Parmagiana, and they can teach us the recipe for fried goat testicles! On second thought, let me revise that, it is a little too close to home, at least for me. Let’s go a little further up the food chain like goat tail! Now that I solved the problems surrounding religious strife back to the story.

Just think, Strega and the practices derived from this drink, started over two thousand years ago. Up to this point it must have piqued your interest to have read this far. Hah, I know why. That magical word “sex” is involved and your new found friend, Strega can become your assistant for the future quest, after all, it is the elixir or brew of the gods! Ask yourself, are witches just a figment of one’s fantasies or is there, an urge in most of us to dance around that walnut tree? Something in me would like to think that they existed then, and still gather on that hillside under the walnut tree, still, practicing what comes naturally in that search for endless pleasure and love. Better yet and a little more practicable, is the fact that it is a diversion from the toils of life. Oh well, no matter what your take on it is, it does make for great folklore, besides reality is for those who lack vision or imagination. And as you should note my imagination is non-stop.

I would conclude that the practice of Stregoneria was a ritualistic mating game, disguised as witchcraft. Okay, that is my perception, but think about it for a moment. If

you don't agree, take a look in the mirror. Hedonism today is a euphemism for going on a vacation to get it on! Go to an island resort filled with members of the opposite sex. But you are going to "unwind"; to dance; drink. Well back then, didn't this ritual involve the same principles? Dancing around a walnut tree and the all-important brew made from various herbs, hmmm probably Yohimbe, Maca root for example. Depending on the gender, some got a rise-others received the benefit!

Also, when you put all of this into historical significance, Italy was in social decline and disarray. There was no television or talk radio to occupy your time, so what else was there to do, at least in the area known as Benevento? Regardless of that analogy, today you have everything and still what outsells everything else. That's right boys and girls, that three letter word! In any event, back then you waited for the full moon; then got on your best dress and you went out; and if so inclined it was to practice witchcraft/hedonism, only to "unwind!"

As the Duke and Bishop, together with the followers who gathered under the walnut tree to practice Streggoneria became committed to the passage of time, the story does not end; rather it perpetuates itself in the mind of a man name Guiseppe Alberti. That yellow elixir of the gods was to re-emerge.

A few centuries later, this folklore became one man's idea to recreate a legend in conjunction with his entrepreneurial pursuits. My kind of guy! Guiseppe Alberti (circa 1850) knew of the legend of the "Witches of Benevento" and began a quest to uncover the recipe and duplicate it into a Liqueur that we know as "Strega." There are differing accounts as to how this product came to be. One would suppose that being a wine merchant gave him a sense of business, thus recognizing the value of the "witches brew," as a Liqueur.

He first tried to make the recipe from gathering information about the folklore and what legends said went into this concoction. Like so many ideas, the first one failed. His brew made from one herb, infused with alcohol and fermented in oak barrels was a failure. Surely, (like so many of us entrepreneurs), from that failure, it only emboldens him to try again. Only this time he got it right. He discovered the source of the original witches brew. Now this is where it gets sketchy. For Centuries the formula was kept by Monks at the local Monastery. From the accounts that I have read, you either have him stealing it, while other accounts are having him paying the keepers for the formula.

Another account evolved around him and his father Carmine, who were in the business of exporting wines to France. As that story goes, Guiseppe acquired the recipe from Monks, who lived in and around the Benevento area. They used the elixir as a healing potion and gave the formula to Guiseppe, which seems to be a little too altruistic on their part, giving it to him, Nah, that one I reject.

The theory that is in keeping with the Folklore and is more plausible on how he got the formula. Remember, he got the formula by some means, nefarious or otherwise. You can be the judge of how he got it, but I am writing this story, so I go with number three!

This story has the father and son one day walking in the woods near Benevento when they stumbled upon with witches performing a ritual. They were foraging the woods looking for spices for their brew when lightning struck a tree and hit one of the witches. They evidently saved her and out of gratitude, the witches gave them a gift, the recipe for this elixir. They did so with the strict understanding that the formula never was to be divulged to anyone, not even members of their family. Only when the keeper was close to death could that person pass on the formula to the closest heir, the one who would then take over its production.

Today (if one is to believe that story), those edicts are passed down from one generation to the next. The way I understand this, the one family member measures the ingredients and then gives it to the other family member, who then puts the formula together to make the Strega. They are the only two allowed to enter the room where the herbs and spices are stored. The ingredients are in cataloged drawers and get this; the drawers are encrypted. No one except the two family members entrusted with the secret formula knows how to decode them. They enter the room on a monthly basis to get the amounts needed for the production.¹

No matter what legend you want to believe, he did, in fact, obtain the recipes. Now that he had the original recipe to make the brew used by the witches of Benevento, he now began his new marketing campaign around the “Witches of Benevento”. As for the recipe, well it contains the original 70 herbs, along with saffron (which gives it the yellow color), the Strega that you are coming to know, love and thank.² This brilliant marketing strategy work as sales began to rise, along with other things!

When you look at the label, it contains the walnut tree and some silhouettes or outlines of shapely female bodies some in flight around a walnut tree. Today, the only people who have access to the original recipe are his descendants, who I am sure to have no intention of letting the secret out; unless there is substantial money involved. It has been a great marketing ploy, uniting in love forever, on a hill in the moonlight, around a walnut tree, hmmm mmm, rather has you thinking. Although I must take credit for that marketing idea.

In any event, you now know the magic behind that yellow elixir, perversely referred to by me, as just the mating game, with flair. Okay, it is time to ask a rhetorical question; “is my account historically accurate?” Is anyone’s account of history accurate or is it just the perception of the writer, with all his or her preconceived notions? If you understand anything about history and listen to those moronic anal sphincters known as politicians that try to give you revisionist history, well then you understand my point. If you did not know this before, you just learned something new. If you decide to believe in

¹ I do business with the Strega Company, and I recently sent a request as to the accuracy of that story; I got no reply. I guess they truly hold close to the vest the secrets of the Witches of Benevento. I purchase their candy line that can be found at www.italianfoodstore.com . . . excellent!

² There are conflicting stories as to how the recipe was acquired, nonetheless, let’s give the man a little credit, although stealing it, or making an offer they couldn’t refuse has more intrigue and salaciousness, the idea of the witches Sabbath probably more truly reflects how it was acquired.

the “Witches of Benevento” please do not quote me! In any event it has been fun writing about the “The Witches of Benevento”.

EPILOGUE

While Stregoneria was the ritual, it had to be performed when there was a full moon, in conjunction with a witch’s brew and the result of which was the ultimate objective. The “mating game”, in today’s world you don’t have to wait for a full moon; just put a poster of a full moon on your bedroom wall. That should suffice. You can then recite some of what you learned here. Historical accuracy is not important; add your version. That’s good, you are doing fine, keep your focus. You are on a mission, the walnut tree is in sight, keep standing next to the full moon poster, sip your Strega, while offering up a snifter to your future partner. Now with confidence, you recite the legend of the “witches of Benevento”. Extend your arms as you gesture the symbolic limbs of the walnut tree, the naked bodies floating by, as you continue with the power of suggestion, adding, of course, your hocus-pocus. And let me know what happens!

The connection to the liquor now known as Strega has its roots in this ceremony and now my recipes using this witch’s brew. Moreover, remember this is a “fairy tale” type of article and anything I have stated or drawn by way of inference direct or otherwise, is clearly erroneous; kind of like a priest giving advice on sexual positions! All, in all, it is an aberration of fantasies that are perverse and whimsical and can only be reconciled with my personality disorder! Maybe the Witches of Benevento once had a spell over me and played a role in my once enjoying the benefits of Strega and that those spells are a juxtaposition between the “Joy of Cooking with Strega and the Joy of Sex”³³.

As for a recipe, let me give you another history lesson, this one is factual of course. When I was thinking about developing a recipe for scallops and gorgonzola cream sauce, I was also thinking of what I could use to accent the flavor and from out of nowhere “Strega” came to mind. The bottle, the label with the naked women in and of itself, was an inspiration for the recipe. Also, that unique taste would be unidentifiable and yet pronounced. Strega by itself has a distinct, yet peculiar taste, and although smooth, you had to acquire a taste for it. The licorice flavor is said to be the result of either fennel or anise seeds, regardless, it also had a certain allure, indescribable and yet noticeable. Kind of like a woman who is not so (shall we refer to like), eye appealing and yet draws your attention to other attributes, like big boobs and a curvaceous body and great personality and tend to overcome the other deficiencies. See I can be politically correct at times! Regardless of that fact, after that dance around the walnut tree, she was, when all is said, and done, pretty good. Pretty good!

I know you guys are going to try this on for size. Therefore ladies beware, or be prepared! You are about to become part of a new dimension in mating game vocabulary,

³³ You can visit www.italianfoodstore.com to learn more about me, recipes, newsletter and future articles; now be patient this is a project in the works, after all I practice law which is very time consuming.

a new transitive verb; she got “Stregoneried!” Ladies, are you ready to make the transformation into that little witch? As your other half is shaking the recipe below and you are ready to pick the walnuts from the tree, as the connection between, booze, folklore, and seduction fall under a universal banner called mating. Of course, I am presumptuous thinking you might be that easy, after all, it is only a witch’s brew from folklore!

No matter what traverses your mind, when you think of it, this appears to have been a great cult; their idea of connection to the earth, the moon, and universe, was in actuality their line to convince the other half of the connection to each other. It is also obvious, at least to me that the original folklore was about heterosexual witches, which made me stop and think that it would not be politically correct in today’s environment, so let’s modify it to go the other way as well. At least in theory, so if you are of that persuasion, come on down, walnuts and all! There is room for all around the legend and its intentions, as you crack open a bottle of Strega!

On another note, I cannot proclaim to have danced around the walnut trees with witches (maybe danced with a few dogs), but after having a few Stregas’, by then, they all look good! Had I known the legend at that time, I would have been on a plane to Benevento, to see it for myself. Well, it is not too late, Air Italia here I come! In any event, the broomstick rides with my little witches, and my dances around the mulberry bush, instead of a walnut tree, were a lot of fun and for me, it now symbolizes those fun years, together with the fraternal and eternal connection to “The Witches of Benevento”!

Now for the recipes

This one I found and modified using Strega:

Caution this could make one or both frisky, you know buzz words for horny, so have all the necessary tools ready and if there is no walnut tree, again, pretend, improvise or just chase her around the floor plant on the side of the couch.

One jigger of crème de cacao

One jigger of cognac

One jigger of Strega-(two for faster results)

3 ounces of orange juice

3 ounces of heavy cream

Pinch of Nutmeg

Over ice add all ingredients together and shake and pour, sprinkle some nutmeg on top and get ready to fly United. Good Luck!

That was the warm up to the main course; after which comes the “witches” for dessert

1 pound linguine cooked, cooled and set aside.

2 Cups Sea Scallops

½ cup of shallots finely chopped

4 ounces extra virgin olive oil
One tablespoon fresh basil chopped coarsely
1-pint heavy cream
One whole egg (medium) beaten (beat the egg into the heavy cream)
Three tablespoons butter
1 Bag Fresh Spinach
1 Cup shredded carrots
½ cup of walnuts-chopped . . . ouch!
3 ounces of Strega

In a sauté pan heat the olive oil to a medium- heat and add the scallops. Watch it, they cook fast, once they are done (about 2 minutes), remove from the pan and them set-aside.

Place pan back on flame and let the water evaporate from the oil (when the bubbles subside) then add the shallots until they become translucent;
then add the walnuts for about two minutes; add the heavy cream and egg mixture bringing it to a low boil;
then add the butter;
when butter is incorporated into the mixture,
add the scallops;
then add the spinach and carrots, mixing into other ingredients;
add the stream;
Then mix in the linguine.
Boun Appetito!

Not only are you now a certifiable chef, but you are also a historian, and if all goes well, history will have repeated itself!

**If interested in witchcraft, one of the articles I used can be found at Stregheria.com, it is the official website for witches. It goes on to indicate that some of this are folklore or magic, while others contend it is an amalgam of Catholicism as well. Too deep for what I am trying to accomplish, you know just a little fork-lore, something to sit on the couch with as you give her a snifter of “Strega”, and waiting for the “broomstick to appear” slowly ...like a rising moon! See this and other articles to come at www.witchesofbenevento.com*

A note about the author.

As I continue with this fascination and love of the culinary arts, it has kept me from my rightful place as being a popular and well-respected attorney (if there is such a thing), maybe that’s why I keep pursuing this elusive dream of success in the culinary world. In some sick way, regardless of what the gods may have it store for me, it will remain entertaining and gratify Of course, I have suffered from the question one might as of his client’s “how much justice can you afford sir?” Get my drift? Notwithstanding the uncertainty of what lies beyond the river Styx, one thing is for sure, when your

compass has taken you off course, and you only have a spatula as a paddle, you just have to paddle harder! (That is my marine corps training coming out.) It has been said that “the road to somewhere leads you to the house of never (Cervantes).” Therefore, one might conclude that I have been homeless for years! On the other hand (in addition to sex), it has been a great distraction from everyday life, and I have discovered something important to me, who I am. That’s right, one great accomplishment, I have recognized the fact that I am “bi-professional,” it wasn’t easy to come out of the pantry and let the whole world know, it wasn’t easy even with don’t ask-don’t tell. I reconcile it as just being a symbiotic relationship between the law and the culture of food, ergo the “culinary counselor!



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