



Herbs, Spices & Magic. Strega Bewitches New York after 150 Years

Marina Melchionda (April 13, 2010)



Here is the story of the Strega Alberti S.p.A. recounted by a representative of the Alberti family, who founded the company in Benevento in 1860, the year of the Unification of Italy. The Strega Liqueur will be celebrating the 150th Anniversary from its creation at Testaccio Ristorante in Long Island City, NY. Join them, blow out the candles, and enjoy a huge buffet of Strega-based cocktails and desserts!

A big lunch, friends, coffee, and a digestivo.

It's been 150 years since the time Italy was unified, and the Sundays of most of the Italian families



are characterized by these 4 elements. It's 150 years that the digestive in question is [Strega](#) [2]. In its century and a half of history, the popularity of this liqueur has spread well beyond the hundreds of thousands of households located throughout the Peninsula, having been brought by Italian immigrants all over the world, to the United States first of all.

So what better city to celebrate this important anniversary from its creation than New York? It's the place where we can not only find one of the largest Italian-American communities in the US, but also where Italian culture and food is more appreciated than anywhere else in the country!

On April 28, the newly opened Roman [Testaccio Ristorante](#) [3] located in Long Island City will host a huge "Strega Party" where all those passionate and curious about this Italian "elixir" will have a chance to taste a Strega-based buffet of cocktails and desserts for only 15\$. The delightful experience will feature coffee "corretto" with Strega liqueur, Strega on the Rocks, Strega-flavored chocolates, and other delicacies of the kind. Strega will also enrich classic Italian desserts such as tiramisu, sponge cake with cream, the almond and chocolate-based Caprese Cake, and other popular cocktails like the Valentino made of Orange Juice, Sparkling Wine and Strega.

A bit of jazz music and a table shared with good friends will perfectly match the unique flavor of this full-Italian product, an experience that will be crowned by the homage of tasteful goody bags to all the guests attending.

On this important milestone in its centenary history, we could not miss the occasion to interview one of the heirs of the Alberti family, [Carmine Savarese](#) [4], a young creative designer and photographer who has been living in New York for about two years.

Six generations after Giuseppe Alberti founded this family-run company based in Benevento, Campania, Carmine guided us through the legends, the stories, and myths that have shaped not only the destiny of his family, but also the one of the local community of Benevento, transformed by the company in one of the main centers for the production of distillates in Italy.

In which circumstances your ancestor Giuseppe Alberti founded Strega?

In 1860 Giuseppe was a wine merchant living in the province of Caserta that at that time was part of the Kingdom of the Two Sicilies. He moved to Benevento, a territory submitted to the Papal administration, when his father Carmine Vincenzo Alberti, a revolutionary spice man very much disliked by the Borboni Regal Family, was jailed in the Monte Sacro prison, located in the surrounding area.

The city was an important railway center, so he decided to rent a deposit and start selling and exporting to France wine produced in the Apulia Region. This gave him enough money to open two bars in the heart of the city, one in the main square, the other in the station.

When his father was released from prison, they worked together on what then became the Strega Liqueur, a mixture of about 70 different spices and herbs distilled in three phases and colored with saffron.

Those who stopped by at the bar of the station before taking their trip to buy the "lunch basket" were offered a complimentary small bottle of the liqueur...

The Strega soon became so famous among the commuters that all of those who stopped in Benevento ran to the bar to buy a bottle to bring home, a success that soon induced my progenitors to stop selling wines and transform the deposit they had rented for that purpose into a manufacturing center for the production of the liqueur.

Why did they name it "Strega"?

First of all, let's remember that Benevento has been known as the "city of the witches" since the time of the Longobards: when the center was invaded by the barbarians, the local peasants thought that they had magical powers, and thus they became, in their eyes, sort of witches. From that period on, the territory was said to be inhabited by witches that, hidden by the surrounding mountains, performed magical rites such as the Sabba. This might be a reason why the river that crosses Benevento is called "Sabato".



What I recounted to you before was the official story of the product, but there are many legends surrounding its creation. The most famous, the one handed down from a generation to the other of the family, tells about the encounter of Carmine and Giuseppe with a group of witches who were doing the Sabba in the woods near Benevento. The two were walking around searching for spices for their elixirs, when all of the sudden thunder and lightening started, and a branch fell from a tree hitting one of the witches. Since they saved her, the others decided to give the two men a gift: the recipe of a special elixir that could not be divulged, nor to the other members of the family, nor to anybody else: only when its keeper would be close to death, could he give it to his closest heir, the one who would take over its production.

Today we still follow this "dictate" as only the head of the labourers (whose father and grandfather also worked with us), and only one member of our family knows the exact composition of the liqueur. Only the two of them are authorized to enter the "room of the herbs", where all the spices and herbs that compose the Strega liqueur are kept in encrypted draws that only they are able to decode. They go there once a month to get the different doses of herbs to prepare our distillate.

What other alcoholic beverages does the Alberti family produce?

We make limoncello, grappa, sambuca... And, some time ago, also another product named SG1945. Its story traces back to World War II, when the Americans bombed the factory by mistake and killed my great-grandma. When the US became allies, my great-grandpa started making gin for the American troops, as they helped him rebuild the factory. They soon came out with the SG1945, a mixture of Strega and Gin sold in bottles and labelled with this kind of a army number. The soldiers liked it so much that by 1947 the factory was running again.

Who buys the Strega liqueur today?

We have a hard core of customers who love and buy the distillate, and have been doing so for decades. In Italy, 93% of people know our label and have tried our products.

However, although about 80% of the bottles produced every year are sold in Italy, we still have a consistent market abroad. We sell in over 50 countries, especially in those with big Italian communities, such as Argentina, Mexico, the United States, and Canada... In the United States, in particular, you can find bottles of Strega in wine shops and speciality stores in almost every state, together with our chocolates and torroni.

Among those who buy Strega more frequently, we find the housewives who use it to prepare cakes, cookies and pies. Some of them also make pasta with it, and when the recipe turns out particularly good, it becomes a family tradition. Some time ago we received a letter from a woman who had made pasta with large shrimps sauteed in Strega. She loved it.

Personally, I love pouring a few spoons of the liqueur over my ice cream; or, in the wintertime, I enjoy a full cup of Strega-flavored Hot Chocolate... sublime.

Your family has a true passion for chocolate, doesn't it?

Actually we recently found out that Giuseppe Alberti started a modest production of chocolate already at the end of the 19th century. In particular, he made torroni, a typical sweet of the province of Benevento that he flavored with Strega liqueur. Although he soon gave that up, the business was carried on by his four children that, after completing their studies in Switzerland, each emigrated to different areas of the world. One of them landed in the United States, where he sold the Strega torroni already in the 1910s.

In Italy, only when the factory re-opened in 1947, did we start a large production of torroni, goccioni, chocolate candies filled with Strega, magie, chocolate truffles filled with chocolate cream and liqueur, and finally Easter Eggs.

Chocolate, in other words, has the merit to have boosted the internationalization of the brand...

Yes, from the beginning of the 20th century on we became a stable presence in many countries, America first and foremost. This is in spite of Prohibition, which we survived thanks to the creation of a non-alcoholic Strega-flavored syrup.

Although we were expanding enormously, however, we remained a family-run company and maintained our largest production in Benevento, even if the area was isolated from the industrial center of Italy and the infrastructure was poor. This is what charms me the most of the story of my



family: we competed with very large brands, such as [Martini](#) [5] and [Campari](#) [6] that had all the advantages of being settled in industrial areas such as Milan; and we also won international medals and prizes counting only on our inner strength and the quality of our products. Our label, indeed, is shaped as a medal, and is dedicated to this international, almost unexpected success.

The launch of the company corresponded also to a re-wakening of the cultural life of Benevento, where Strega founded its museum, visited today by tourists and school children from the surrounding areas and behind. How is it structured?

The museum has a particular meaning for me, since it was the first task I was assigned in the family business. At that time I was 24 and I took the job very seriously. I researched our archives of pictures, video, ads, and commercials and put together a multimedia exhibit, that still today is its main focus. Visitors can admire advertisement campaigns and posters signed by renowned graphics such as [Marcello Dudovich](#) [7] and [Fortunato Depero](#) [8], or watch excerpts from movies like "La Ciociara" and "Ieri, Oggi, e Domani" by Vittorio de Sica, "Ossessione" by Luchino Visconti, or "Pane e Tulipani" by Silvio Soldini where the Strega liqueur appears as part of the every-day costumes of the Italians.

From movies to books, the "Premio Strega" is one of the most prestigious Italian awards in the field of literature. Have you ever thought about organizing an American edition of it?

This is actually one of my personal dreams. Given that New York is and has been a true crossroad of authors from every corner of the world, an American edition of the Award could help contemporary Italian authors conquer a new public of passionate readers on this side of the ocean. Just as with our liqueur and chocolates, there is a very charming story behind the Premio Strega. Guido Alberti, my grandma's uncle, was an important actor in the 20th century.

Among his friends there were Maria and Goffredo Bellonci, Alberto Moravia, and Paolo Pasolini, that with another 150 people or so all together constituted the group of the "[Amici della Domenica](#) [9]" (Sunday Friends). When the war was over in 1946, they decided to found a literary prize as a new cultural initiative for the country destroyed by the war. As Guido contributed to the project with a million lire, a great sum for those time, the Association decided to name it "[Premio Strega](#) [10]", as the company and the family Alberti had always been very active in the country's cultural life.

The first winner, in 1947, was Ennio Flaiano with his "Il tempo di uccidere", a book that has now become part of the history of Italian literature. After him, also renowned authors such as Alberto Moravia, Umberto Eco, Elsa Morante, Cesare Pavese, Carlo Emilio Gadda, Aldo Palazzeschi, Ignazio Silone, Giuseppe Tomasi di Lampedusa, all won the award, and with it the favors of a very large public of readers.

As we could understand from Carmine's words, the Strega label does not only represent the story of a family originating from the small province of Benevento; is also the fruit of an infinite number of legends and anecdotes that has accompanied the story of Italy since its very unification in 1860.

What else can we say but... HAPPY 150th BIRTHDAY Strega!

Of course, we will be blowing out the candles with Carmine at Testaccio Ristorante on April 28. We hope you can make it too!

Strega

The 150th Anniversary

April 28 2010, 5-10 pm

[Testaccio Ristorante](#) [11]

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window.fbAsyncInit = function() { FB.init({ appId: "49300103791", xfbml: true }); }; (function() { var e = document.createElement('script'); e.async = true; e.src = document.location.protocol + '//connect.facebook.net/en_US/all.js'; document.getElementById('fb-root').appendChild(e); }());
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