

Zisola

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La Befana

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Exploring the Vineyards of Noto Sicily

For the past 10 years, I've enjoyed introducing travelers to the wines of Southeastern Sicily. This is the land of origin of the *Nero d'Avola* vine and it is just steps from *Noto*, famous for its baroque buildings and UNESCO World Heritage Site. Much like the town, the grape of this area was once underappreciated and just used to blend into other wines. Now, the town of *Noto* has become world famous along with its grapes, giving travelers a reason to visit from all over the world.

When I decided to plant roots here, I was drawn to this corner of the island for one reason: the food and wine in the heart of the Mediterranean. I have



Nero d'Avola grapes

watched this region blossom over the years, but this past summer we experienced *un esplosione di turismo*, an explosion of tourism. Many travelers are drawn here to hunt for reds, since the island's signature red grape has been embraced by so many producers, resulting in this becoming one of Italy's most exciting wine regions.

The wines of this area are fresh and lively due to a few factors: Italy's rising-star wine producers, the climate, the earth, the intensity of the sun here, sea air and most important — the grapes! *Nero d'Avola* is Sicily's most widely planted red grape variety and has flavors of dark berry, spice

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Noto is famous for its limestone.

 In October 31st, lots of Americans will festoon front yards with witches, ghosts, beasts and other frightening figures in celebration of Halloween. Most people who do this have long forgotten the roots of and connections to these scary creations back in the countries we came from.

Not so at *Dream of Italy!* We've rounded up a bunch of spooky Italian characters by region and will share the folklore about their origins, as well as some places associated with them. Who knows, one day you may find yourself considering an Italian-themed Halloween party featuring a few of these terrifying tales.

LA BEFANA

Although *La Befana* looks a bit scary—she's an aged woman riding a broomstick—for many Italians she's known as The Christmas Witch and brings candy, toys, and other treats for children every year. Her legend (confused, like many) involves an old woman, the Magi and the Christ child.

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Spooky Tales *continued from page 1*

She loves to give good children *caramelle* (sweets) and bad children *carbone* (coal or sticks). No matter what, Befana's name probably comes from an Italian mispronunciation of Epiphania or Epiphany. She is associated with that 12th day of Christmas, and although the entire country knows about Befana, celebrations associated with her are particularly strong in the former Papal States where Epiphany is a grand feast day.

In *Lazio*, the most delightful feast featuring Befana is in *Rome's Piazza Navona*, at the final day of the large Christmas market there. The merchants make sure to have plenty of sugar charcoal on hand to sell, as the legend (and joke) says that Befana appears at midnight on January 6th, and if you see her, she leaves you *carbone*.

In the *Le Marche* town of *Urbania*, January 2nd through 6th is reserved for Befana. Citizens build her a house, and the post office has a special box for letters to the Epiphany witch (supposedly for children, but maybe a few adults sneak them in, too?).

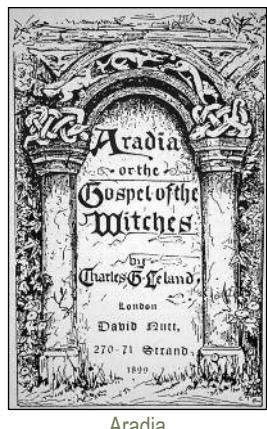
In *Emilia-Romagna*, near *Parma* a small town named *Fornovo di Taro* hosts an all-Italy Befana summit each January 5th and 6th. You will never see more kerchief-clad heads (on women and men!) in one place than those days on the town's *Via Francigena*.

ARADIA

The name *Aradia* actually derives from an early American novel by Charles Godfrey Leland called *Aradia, Or the Gospel of the Witches*. But Leland based his character on Tuscan mythology

about a figure alternately called Erodias, Herodias, and even the Romanian Irodiada.

Today, Aradia is commonly used to denote a great central witch in *Tuscany's* lore. The contemporary leader of *Stregheria* says that there



Aradia

really was an *Aradia di Toscano* who led a group of powerful witches there in the 14th century. Many medieval and Renaissance Italian bishops warned against witches who rode on the backs of animals in their travels to wreak havoc among villages.

In the Tuscan town *Volterra*, writer and Wicca practitioner Raven Grimassi maintains, *Aradia di Toscano* was born in 1313. (In 1508, an Italian Inquisitor noted

that "one hundred and fifty years earlier" a rapid expansion of witchcraft took place nearby, corresponding with "Aradia's second coming.")

In Milan, two significant witch trials took place around this time. *Sibilla*, in 1384, confessed to witchy gatherings including feasting, drinking, fortune-telling, and resurrecting animals. Pierina was tried in 1390 and confessed to taking part in "games of Erodiade."

DONNE DI FUORA

On the islands of *Sicily* and *Sardinia*, we find legends of the *donne di fuora* or "women from without," as the phrase is often translated. These "beautiful ladies" are able to leave their corporeal selves at home and let their souls fly at night. The purpose of these nocturnal sorties is to contact departed spirits and learn more about fates and futures.

In *Sicily*, many towns and villages once believed that there is a council of 33 women at any given time with these powers, and they are under the direction of their queen, the great mother, who lived in Messina. They made their "flights" on Tuesdays, Thursdays and Saturdays.

In *Sardinia*, there is a cult of the "dark mother," which some historians and anthropologists believe derives from African migrants. Some caves where early African migrants live were believed to be places where women with supernatural powers lived and practiced their craft.

SEVEN-HEADED DRAGON

Many of Italy's folklore sagas have connections to Christian seasons or Biblical stories. *Bergamo's* dragon has connections to the Book of Revelation, in which a "seven-headed beast" threatens Christendom. Connections between Revelation and Italian dragons of folklore are not immediate or clear, but villagers who could not read and heard sermons about the troubles of Revelation must have brought some symbols into their secular stories.

The tiny hamlet of *Oltre il Collo* was plagued by a seven-headed dragon

A female witch is a *strega*



Seven-headed dragon

who devoured its livestock

and slurped up its immortality-giving waters. Locals and an army of the best provincial soldiers tried in vain to slay the dragon, but the creature did slink away into the water—which is why the town's water is “muddy and undrinkable.”

In Umbria, a dragon (technically a “wyvern,” which is sort of a combo dragon/reptile) named *Thyrus* was a great trouble to the town of *Terni*. After a brave local knight slew him, the town included the dragon on its coat of arms under a motto loosely translated as “Thyrus and rivers define us.”

Nearby in *Fornole*, the 13th-century Pope *Sylvester I* freed the population from a dragon’s deeds. The citizens built a church dedicated to Sylvester (later a saint) on top of the mountain “near the dragon’s lair,” which features a fresco of St. Sylvester’s life, including his taming of the dragon.

BADALISC

The Alpine *badalisc* is surely one of the most viscerally frightening figures on this list: An unidentifiable creature

who has a large,



mountain-goat-like head, often represented



Badalisc

at festivals by a man wearing an enormous goatskin mask. It also has goat-like horns, a big mouth, and glowing eyes. Mythical, the badalisc or badalisk supposedly pillaged villages around *Cevo*, in the *Val Camonica* section of *Piedmont*.

Today in Val Camonica, the badalisc is dragged “out” of the Andrista woods by villagers during Epiphany. Tied with a rope, the creature is brought into the square by various masked characters (*il giovane, la vecchia*, etc.) and men with drums, ready to participate in a mock battle against a mock hunchback. The beast gives a rhyming speech about community gossip before everyone feasts on “Badalisc polenta,” a special curd sausage. On the second day, the Badalisc is freed and “allowed” to return to the woods.

WOLF OF GUBBIO

Umbria’s town of *Gubbio* was, according to legend, terrorized by a fearsome wolf—until it was tamed by St. Francis of Assisi. The wolf first attacked livestock, but soon began killing and maiming humans, until the famous saint had the idea to calm it. The animal rushed at St. Francis with arms outstretched and claws unsheathed, but as St. Francis prayed and made the sign of the cross, the wolf trotted up and put its head in the saint’s hands.

The prayer St. Francis made is famous, too, beginning “Brother Wolf,” and promising to make peace between the wolf and the townspeople if the animal ceased to pursue them, and promising that the wolf would be fed every day. According to the story, the wolf was fed every day for the next two years until its death.

Whether or not the story is real or apocryphal, at Gubbio’s Church of Saint Francis of Peace, in 1872 during renovations, the centuries-old skeleton



Wolf of Gubbio

of a large wolf was discovered outside near the



foundations. The people of Gubbio chose to give these remains a burial inside the church. As St. Francis wished, Brother Wolf of Gubbio rests in peace.

—Bethanne Patrick

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Sicily *continued from page 1*

and herb. It has been described as everything from jammy to elegant and fresh. This variety is one of structure, power and earthy strength.

The grapes in this province have attracted some of Sicily's most important wine producers to invest here, as well as local Sicilians, who own boutique organic vineyards, and foreigners. Here, foreigners refers to anyone who does not have Sicilian blood, so of course that even includes Tuscans (who have invested in wine production here) as well as people who

them, but I wanted to know just what made her wines different from other wines in this corner of Sicily.

According to Valeria, the white land (that is unique yet typical in this area), and the temperature combined with the windy, fresh air



Tenuta della Favola



Corrado and Valeria



Guest room

have no Italian heritage.

Driving along the scenic coastal roads of Southeastern Sicily, you will not want to miss the wine area in the province of Noto known as *Buonivini*, Italian for "good wines."

Tenuta della Favola

I first met *Valeria* and *Corrado*, owners of the boutique winery, Tenuta della Favola when I started bringing guests to taste their incredible organic wines. Since then Valeria and I have become friends, since we share an interest in writing. I met Valeria at a trendy bar in Noto to talk wine and ask her to tell me their story.

Valeria is a real *peperoncino*. She is a spit-fire, and her lively character matches the wines that she and her husband produce here. I have tasted all of their wines and am a big fan of all of

create the perfect conditions for wines with character. The earth is white because it contains limestone and this gives the wines of the area a nice acidity and intense aroma.

As we sip cocktails, Valeria leans over and tells me what her husband Corrado says about the wines they produce: "We do not want to make the best wine in the world, but a wine that contains inside this little piece of Sicily." I giggle, and think to myself: Well if the wines do contain this little piece of Sicily inside, then to me they are some of the best in the world.

This family of this small boutique producer has grown grapes since the early 1800s. Corrado's family sold grapes long before they became wine producers. As you may know, Sicily's grapes were once sold to France and Northern Italy to be blended into other wines and create structure and



strength.

At the turn of the 19th century, Corrado's great-grandfather *Giuseppe*



Guest room

moved from *Siracusa* to *Pachino* and bought a farm with a winery and olive oil press on a hill, planted in vines, olives and carob, that quickly became the summer residence of the family. When Corrado inherited the property in 1990, he began tending the vineyards respecting the typical ways of the zone, bought a small commercial olive press, and bought back some land that once belonged to the property. In addition, he set out to restore the structures and started producing his own power with solar panels. Most importantly, Corrado made the decision to use pure indigenous Nero d'Avola vines for their wine.

In 1997, the property officially became a certified organic farm. In 2002, the big turning point: as if it were a fairytale, in only three months, the first wine shaped up: the *DOC Eloro La Favola*. It was a decade of work and

Sicily has more vineyards than...

experimentation with organic, before it was introduced into the most important international markets.

La Favola wine is fresh on the nose with intense notes of peony and sweet spices and round on the palate and slightly tannic taste, with a finish of licorice and raspberry. This seductive Nero d'Avola pairs well with red meats, tuna or swordfish and sharp cheeses.

Wine tastings (15€ per person) can be booked for a minimum of four people and include a visit to the museum and a walk through the property.

There's a guest house on the property that sleeps four and can be booked for a three-night minimum. When you stay at the house, you wake up to the sight of rolling hills and olive trees outside your window. The landscape here has been described by Italians as *una piccola California* (a little California) because the area is surrounded by vineyards and there is a view of the sea in the distance. It is a rare landscape since there is so much green vegetation in a corner of Sicily which is usually known to be more arid.

Tenuta Della Favola

Viale Principe di Piemonte, 39

Noto

(39) 0931 839216

www.tenutalafavola.it

Rates: 231 to 243€ for a three-night stay at the house. The owners prefer bookings to be made via email at info@tenutalafavola.it

Planeta

Tenuto & Cantina Buonivini Planeta

Right across the road from Tenuta della Favola vineyard is the southeastern branch of one of Sicily's most important wine producers,

Planeta. The Planeta family has owned land in Sicily since the 17th century, and Planeta owns wineries all over the island, with offerings that cover local grape varieties and *terroirs*. The advantage of visiting Planeta for a wine tasting during your trip to Sicily, is that you have an opportunity to taste and explore a range of wines from all over the island in one place and in one sitting.

The Planeta family has invested not only in promoting their own brand of wines, but also in promoting Sicilian wines to the international market and educating journalists, consumers and travelers about the variety and quality of Sicilian wines within the international wine world. They have contributed a great deal to call attention to the importance of Sicilian wines.



Francesca Planeta



Tasting room



Tenuta and Cantina Buonivini



Vineyard

One of Planeta's first moves was into this land of Nero d'Avola, a real hot spot in Noto in Southeastern Sicily. Owner *Francesca Planeta* is one of the most important women in the Sicilian wine world. She has great style and finesse and has been a big supporter of my work. When I organized a cooking lesson and lunch to welcome celebrity Chef Lidia Bastianich to Catania, I called Francesca for her suggestions on pairing Planeta wines with each course we enjoyed for our menu. She travels to all of Planeta's locations and the vineyard is run by several cousins. I also had the pleasure of meeting mythical *Diego Planeta* and *Alessio Planeta*, who are two of Sicily's most famous wine personalities.

At Planeta's *Cantina Buonivini* vineyard, Nero d'Avola and *Moscato* grow together with almonds, carobs and olives. At this Mediterranean location, a white, a red and a Passito wine are produced from the grapes of *Moscato di Noto* and *Nero d'Avola*. Be sure to try *Santa Cecilia*, which is their 100% *Nero D'Avola* and is a very spicy, fruity wine with aroma of carob, bergamot and orange peel. You will not want to miss their *Moscato Bianco*, which is their *Moscato di Noto* wine — *perfetto* as an aperitif to begin your meal — with aromas of jasmine, rose petals, pink grapefruit.

In addition to the wines produced at
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Sicily *continued from page 5*

this location, you may enjoy tasting wines from the other Planeta vineyard locations on the island. Two of my favorites are *Cerasuolo di Vittoria Classico Dorilli* with its elegant blend of 70% Nero d'Avola, 30% Frappato, and *La Segreta Rosso*, which blends grapes from Menfi, Agrigento and Noto.

From May to October, travelers can enjoy a formal seated wine-tasting experience in the cantina. Planeta prefers if travelers book a few days in advance but they are also prepared to accommodate last-minute requests. It's always better to have a reservation.

The most basic wine-tasting experience Planeta offers includes a welcome to the vineyard, a visit to the cantina, time in the tasting room with two white wines and two red wines. The seated tasting lasts about 25 minutes and can be followed by a picnic or seated lunch. Tastings are available every day except Sunday (and holidays) and are scheduled at 11:30 a.m., 3:30 p.m. and 5:30 p.m.

For wine lovers, the 6 Vini Tasting (20€ per person) can be reserved. That gives you the chance to taste one wine from each of Planeta's regional cantinas on the island. Wines from the following areas of Sicily are enjoyed: *Menfi, Vittoria, Noto, Etna* and *Capo di Milazzo*.

Beyond wine tasting, Planeta offers something very special for individual travelers who want to spend more time at their location, *Cantina Buonivini Planeta*. Upon request, Planeta can prepare a wooden crate filled with their wines for you and also prepare a picnic basket filled with everything you would ever want to have the perfect Sicilian picnic with your friends or family. The picnic option costs only 15€ per person (added on to the price of your wine tasting) and includes the

following: 1/2 bottle of wine, traditional stuffed breads, Sicilian cheeses, olives, sun dried tomatoes and wine glasses. There are many places to sit, enjoy the view of the vineyards and savor your picnic as a moment of relaxation during your travels.

For those who want to sample more of Sicily's food, you can also stop for a light lunch or a complete lunch with all of the essential courses. The vineyard also has a couple of vacation homes on the property, and you can enjoy a relaxing extended stay there with a minimum of two nights.

Cantina Buonivini

Noto

(39) 0925 1955460

www.planeta.it

Rates: 150 to 270€ per night with two-night minimum for overnight stays.

Cantina Modica di San Giovanni

After enjoying the fresh air of the Sicilian countryside, a visit to the Southeastern corner of the island would not be complete without a trip to Sicily's most beautiful baroque town



Palazzo Modica

you may enjoy a visit to the family museum and a tasting of their local wines.

Cantina Modica di San Giovanni has more than 100 acres and 40 vines that are more than 60 years old. The vineyards are in the nearby countryside in *Contrada Bufalefi*. The land has belonged to the Modica di San Giovanni family for more than two centuries and seven generations. Today, the wine business is run by *Felice* and his son *Alessandro Modica*.

Alessandro Modica is a young mover and shaker who pours his heart and soul into educating others about his family's wines. I have enjoyed conversations with him while sipping his family's wines. The view of the elegant Palazzo Nicolaci seen from the important family Palazzo Modica is something one never forgets, and tasting these wines while enjoying the setting makes it even more memorable.

The family produces a variety of wines, including Nero d'Avola, a fresh white wine *Insolia, Dolce Nero*, which is a red *passito* wine, and my favorite (perhaps since I have a sweet tooth),



Wine bottles

of *Noto*. Stroll past the baroque churches, and right in the very center of town is *Via Nicolaci*. Up the stone street, you may admire some of the most elaborate carved baroque balconies of Sicily at the stunning *Palazzo Nicolaci*. Across from it is *Palazzo Modica* on *Via Nicolaci*, where

the *Dolce Noto*, which is a *DOC Moscato di Noto*, made with 100% white moscato grapes. The intense bouquet of this wine brings you right to the Sicilian countryside with acacia, orange blossom, peaches, sage and fresh harvested grapes.

Sicily produces more grapes

You may visit the museum in Palazzo Modica, which tells the story of the family history in Noto, and then after your tasting or along with the wines you select, you may enjoy a typical menu with fresh pasta dishes, eggplant and caponata. The museum and tasting room on Via Nicolaci are open every day from March through December. During the high season the museum is open for lunch and dinner.

Cantina Modica di San Giovanni

Via Nicolaci, 7
Noto
(39) 340 5307937
www.vinidinoto.it

You can stop in and pay for wine by the glass or bottle.

Zisola

Zisola is an example of how this region has attracted outside investors. *Filippo Mazzei*, from Tuscany, set up shop here in 2003 with the Zisola estate. Zisola's *Noto Doppiozeta 2011* caught the attention of *Wine Spectator* and is one of their highest-scoring red wines from Sicily. It's the most important wine of the estate, made with a selection of indigenous Nero d'Avola and a touch of Syrah. The name *Doppiozeta* highlights the "core" of the *Mazzei* name.

The estate is located at a height of 300 feet above sea level, with west/southwest exposure and slope of between 8% and 10%. It is characterized by medium mix soil with strong limestone content and rich structure.

The 56 acres of vineyards were planted with Nero d'Avola, and in lesser measure with *Syrah*, *Petit Verdot*, *Grillo* and *Catarratto*. The marine breeze coming from the nearby coast moderates the heat in the summer and mellowes the winters, creating

conditions that together with the unique soil characteristics of the land here, create the perfect conditions for ripening of the grapes and wines.

You can book a tour and tasting (15€ per person) at Zisola during your trip to the area. The property includes the three *bagli* of the estate, of which the main one enjoys a wonderful view over Noto and the surrounding landscape of this



Noto



Zisola

area that includes not only the vineyards, but also olive trees, citrus trees and Noto's famous almond trees. You may tour the winery and see its stainless steel vats, with temperature control for wine making, and its 350 oak barrels.

In addition to wine, production also includes extra-virgin olive oil produced from the *Moresca*, *Ogliarola Messinese* and *Nocellara Etnea* cultivars, citrus fruit, and almonds. The historic villa is a unique place to visit, and in addition to tasting the Zisola wines, you can taste the olive oil and other local products.

Zisola

Contrada Zisola
Noto
(39) 392 6865741
www.mazzei.it

Must reserve in advance for wine tasting/tour, which is available Monday through Saturday.

Driving around this lesser-known corner of Sicily, you can discover much more than wine, of course! The Vendicari Nature Reserve is just minutes away from these vineyards, as is the stunning baroque town of Noto and its pristine beaches at *Lido di Noto*.

Stopping to taste the wines of this territory while admiring the most pristine coasts of Italy, it is hard to believe that a half a century ago just about all of the

grapes grown here were sold to blend with wines from Northern Europe.

Things have changed, and now these four producers are just a sampling of the range of producers, wines and vineyards this area has to offer. You can find many of the wines in this article in wine stores and restaurants in the U.S. and other countries. The hot wine region of Noto will continue to grow more famous so go now for the most authentic experience!

—Renée Restivo

Renée Restivo is a culinary educator and writer who has devoted the past decade to studying and documenting Sicilian food traditions. She offers authentic cooking classes, tastings and market tours in the baroque town of Noto and is currently finishing her first book about Sicily. For more information, visit www.soulofsicily.com

1€ = \$1.09 at press time

than any other Italian region.

Dining With Italian Home Cooks

Though travelers have long flocked Italy to get a sense of its proud culinary history through courses of *antipasto*, *primo*, *secondo* and *dolce* in between glasses of wine, there has often been disconnect between kitchen and table. Patrons could order all of the Italian delicacies that they'd like in a restaurant, but without the tenement of Italian social life — the family — present at the table it left a sort of ache for those who didn't have an Italian friend to invite them home to a family meal.

Then in 2004, the non-profit **Home Food**, now called **Le Cesarine** (www.cesarine.it), aiming to preserve regional gastronomic heritage, changed all of that. (See the February 2012 issue of *Dream of Italy* for full details.) A network of guest cooks (*cesarini* — meaning “little Caesars”) welcome Italians and foreigners alike into their homes for lovingly prepared meals featuring traditional regional recipes (usually passed down through the families of the cesarini) and local ingredients. Most hosts speak English and dinner costs just a little more than it would in a restaurant. The cesarini are rigorously vetted to make sure the food and atmosphere are just right. In recent years, Le Cesarine has also added a selection of cooking classes and special events.

Now thanks the “shared economy” boom (for example, Airbnb) several new websites have come onto the scene to make it easier to connect travelers and local hosts willing to share meals and culinary traditions.

EatWith (www.eatwith.com) began in 2012 when Israeli co-founder Guy Michlin had the best food experience of his life after being invited into a

local's home in Greece. Michlin started small, he personally vetting every single host and their cooking and hosting abilities. But his two-man venture has now expanded into over 200 cities, with Italian hosts primarily in Venice, Milan and Bologna.



Today, interested chefs are accepted through a two-step process: an online application and, if they move past this initial stage, they throw a demo event that EatWith guests will review. Guests can go small (a private event with hosts) or large (dining in a group of 20). Prices average around \$50 per person.

New social eating network **Gnammo** (www.gnammo.com) has a slightly different style. Here cooks and Gnammers (as the diners are called) are both rated — the Gnammers rate the cooks and vice versa. Most events



are also open to a large number of diners, so you and your troupe may be sharing a table with many other groups at your host's table.

But just because you are in Italy, you might not be eating Italian cuisine. Gnammo hosts have international backgrounds, for example, current offerings in Milan include traditional

Vietnamese, Greek and Russian cuisine. Designed to promote the values of Italian hospitality and kinship, the site is best meant for travelers looking to connect with new people as well as to enjoy a slice of global heritage.

My Italian Friends

(www.myitalianfriends.com) offers the most options (throughout continental Italy and Sicily) of this new crop of online dining networks and its sole focus is to make sure foreigners experience a genuine Italian meal and



My Italian Friends

are able to walk away and call their host a friend. Because of its British roots, the site caters towards English-speaking travelers, as all of its hosts must be able to communicate with their guests in English.

Rated on atmosphere, food and cleanliness, diners have applauded their hosts in reviews most for the experiences that mix history with gastronomy — like hosts that take their guests on walks around town before and after dinner. Most hosts can accommodate up to eight people and cost about 40€ per person while the half day cooking classes hover around 120€ per person.

—Mary Zakheim

1€ = \$1.09 at press time

The average Italian eats 51 pounds of pasta each year.