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A VERRAZZANO TRIBUTE

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Not long ago, Cavalier Luigi Cappellini and his wife, Silvia, gave a dinner party, at the Castello di Verrazzano, in Chianti, to mark the anniversary of the discovery of New York Bay, by Giovanni da Verrazzano, in 1524. Luigi, a springy, elegant Tuscan, is the owner of the castle that was the seat of the Verrazzano family for more than seven hundred years. In addition to making wine and olive oil and running the hunting parks, forests, and tenant farms of the original estate, Luigi has assumed the role of ambassador from Verrazzano to the City of New York, which keeps him in frequent transatlantic motion.

The castle is perched on a mountain spur high above the non-navigable River Greve. It is surrounded by vineyards and olive groves, and its crenellated medieval tower is just visible above a cluster of cypresses. The Verrazzano family was already ancient when Giovanni was born here, in 1485. When he embarked for the New World, in January of 1524, at the request of King Francis I of France, Europeans had explored Florida and Newfoundland, but the coastline in between was still terra incognita. After a subsequent voyage, Giovanni's brother Gerolamo drew the first good map of the Eastern Seaboard. Verrazzano was a true son of the Renaissance, a navigator, astronomer, mathematician, and humanist, whose main interest was geography, not gold. His observations on the natives of North America were sympathetic and anthropologically meticulous. (The only time he used the term "savage" was in describing the Indians of Maine who "made the most disparaging and dishonorable gestures that an uncouth person could possibly do, such as exposing their bare arses to us, all the while howling with laughter.") Giovanni da Verrazzano met a grisly end a few years later, when he was captured by natives on a Caribbean island; Gerolamo watched helplessly from a ship as the Indians on the beach killed his brother, cut him into pieces, and devoured him raw.

The last Verrazzano died in 1819; the property then passed through several other noble Florentine families before coming to the Cappellinis, who acquired, with the castle, the Verrazzano family portraits (including the only known life portrait of Giovanni) and the family archives, armor, furniture, art, and land.

In 1963, before the Verrazzano Narrows Bridge was completed, three building stones were chiselled out of the ancient wall of the castle and carried to New York, where they were cemented into the dedicatory monument on the Staten Island side of the bridge. Three smooth water stones were then taken from the site of the bridge, carried back to Chianti, and plastered into the castle wall. Above them a plaque was affixed, stating that Verrazzano's discovery

of New York Bay had made possible" a future nation in which his own people and many other races would be made brothers in freedom."

Luigi gives an anniversary dinner every year, in the castle's massive beamed dining room, which commands vertiginous views of the Valle della Greve and the Chiantigian hills. But this time, because of the terrorist attacks in the United States, the mood was different. Luigi ran in the New York City Marathon in November, and at the dinner he spoke about standing on the Verrazzano Narrows Bridge, among twenty-four thousand other runners, from all over the world, looking toward the hole in the skyline as they awaited the start of the race.



There was a moment of silence for the victims of September 11th. Then Dario Cecchini, who owns a butcher shop in the nearby town of Panzano, rose to speak. Dario has a powerful Tuscan voice and is renowned for spontaneous recitations of Dante to customers in his shop. The room became still as he read a letter that Verrazzano had written to the King of France:

Serenissimo Re,

After one hundred leagues, we came to a most beautiful spot where an immense river flowed to the sea between two little hills. . . . We sailed up the river with our ship and disembarked onto shore. The land was thickly populated. The Indians were of an aspect similar to the others we have met. They were dressed in bird feathers of many colors and they greeted us happily, with exclamations of great joy and wonder. We went up the river half a league, where we discovered a truly enchanting bay about three leagues in circumference. Moving about busily from one shore to another were some thirty boats overflowing with natives who were curious to see us. We christened the new land "Angoleme" after Your hereditary principality, and the bay enclosed by this land we called "Santa Margarita" after the name

of Your sister, who exceeds all other women in intelligence and decency. We left this splendid and hospitable new land with true regret.