



THE *Pornanino* OLIVE OIL NEWSLETTER

No. 11, January 2009

Happy New Year everybody and welcome to our harvest special issue! We had a wonderful harvest this year, just as we anticipated it might be. Our groves were positively groaning with fruit! And it was a real struggle to get everything done on time, with such a massive crop to pick, press and bottle. You know, in the thick of it we sometimes wonder why on earth did we chose this line of business! But when the green gold starts flowing we know there is no greater satisfaction than weaving this kind of heavenly magic. So here's a detailed account of the supercharged month when your favourite olive oil was lovingly brought to life on the Pornanino Estate.

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Franco's olive grove diary



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the one that bemoans the passing of the mid-seasons? Well, this year autumn was all it's ever been meant to be – golden and mellow just like the best olive oil.

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Netting the gold – a harvest diary

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Weaving the magic – a pressing diary

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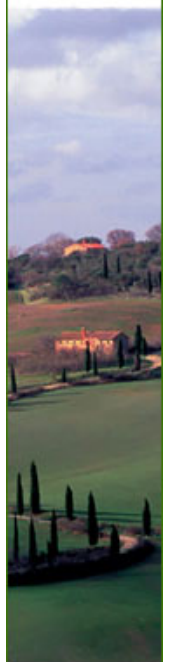
more calories when it's cold, right? Ok, just this once ...

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We'd love to hear from you! Here's our email address oliveoil@chiantionline.com

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Franco's olive grove diary

Sometimes clichés are spot on right, and sometimes they aren't. You know the one that bemoans the passing of the mid-seasons? Well, this year autumn was all it's ever been meant to be – golden and mellow just like the best olive oil.



“Non ci sono più le mezze stagioni”, meaning that the mid-seasons have gone, is one of the best loved clichés our side of the

Atlantic. It's the all-weather small talk cue good for all occasions, from elevator rides to supermarket check-out queues. This year it has proved wrong.

There's no denying that we all enjoy grumbling from time to time, heaven knows why - it's somehow more satisfying than conceding that everything is going just fine, or tolerably well or plain all-right. So last spring, as you might remember, we were complaining about the wet and cold and fretting that summer was late in coming.

She was actually perfectly on time, and clocked in on June 21st as per contract, treating us to the scorching hot and dry conditions that are her hallmark over here in Tuscany. And since poor berated spring had done her job of bringing lots of rain on her shift (that's her responsibility after all), this year's growing season was as near perfect as it could possibly be.

Summer looked a bit wan by the end of her quarter. September was a tad on the chilly side, but as soon as autumn took over you could feel it in the air that he meant business. And his mission was to disprove the absurd rumour about the demise of the mid-seasons.

October was a golden marvel, mild and sunny with clear skies and glowing autumn colors. You could imagine the olives soaking up the warmth and positively smiling, plump and contented. In more down-to-earth terms, the trees were groaning with big, fleshy fruit that didn't in the least look like being swollen from all the spring rain they'd had. It was the real thing, you know. Perfect olives just bound to produce perfect oil.

We were thrilled, and looked forward to starting to harvest on All Saints day, at the beginning of November. It would be earlier than usual, and often a not so good period because it tends to be quite wet (that's the mid-seasons for you!). But this year autumn was truly in a good mood and it stayed mild and sunny throughout.

It was a nice change to be able to harvest in our shirt sleeves instead of freezing in the chilly late autumn mist, and of course it's much better for the olives if it's dry as they will keep fresh a little longer. This was a double blessing as this year's crop was massive, which meant an even worse scramble than usual to keep up!

And you know what? The weather changed just as we brought in the last of the olives. Suddenly at the end of November the mild spell broke and it was snowing. Really! Just like that, from one day to the other. But by that time autumn had made his point – long live the mid-seasons! Olives love them and so do we.

Netting the gold – a harvest diary

Unassuming, tiny Tuscan olives really don't look the part, but we know they're more than worth their weight in gold! Yet, if their invaluable qualities are to be preserved they need to be handled with loving care.

This year we made a little reportage to show you how your favorite olive oil is made, from scratch. Unfortunately we can't publish more than a few photos in our Newsletter or it would be too "heavy" and slow to transfer (not to mention the fact that you wouldn't appreciate it if we jammed your email box with a jumbo issue!).

Therefore if you want to actually see the 2008 harvesting campaign you'll have to go to our website where you'll find more photos, besides a quite lavish reportage by our longtime friend Terry Hart, who came to attend (and lend a much appreciated hand) with a task force of friends from Madison, WI.

Just go to www.oliveoil.chiantionline.com and have a look round! You'll also find a link to Terry's photo book there.

Or use your imagination: picture the mildest autumn in years, the birds chirping in the trees and a benevolent sun gently warming not-quite-yellowing-yet woods. Sounds goods, doesn't it. That's what we thought as we enjoyed the pleasures of the mellow season, leisurely patrolling the groves just to reassure ourselves that our olives were in top form. Quite a lot of them, really. A truly outstanding harvest.

Franco and Matteo had an executive meeting in the boardroom (Matteo's kitchen over morning coffee) to set a date to start picking and both agreed that an extra couple of hands would be needed to cope with such a good crop. Finding seasonal help is not at all easy over here in Chiantishire – it's so posh nobody wants to dirty their hands anymore, even though salaries are much higher than elsewhere in Italy.

Harvesting started at the beginning of November, hitting the lone rainy spell in an otherwise cloudless month. And of course the

Tunisians who had been recruited to help defected at the end of the first miserable, sodden day and were never seen again.

That left Matteo alone with an awful lot of plump little beauties to pick and no time to lose; he was not a happy man even though it promptly stopped raining. You know how important it is to pick the olives at the right moment and press them within a few days. It did look like a mission impossible!

Tsk, nothing is impossible to the brave of heart. It must be said that technology is progressing by leaps and bounds, thank heaven. Until very recently harvesting machines were either monsters designed for commercial groves or brutal shakers of hapless trees. No longer – what Matteo and Franco hit upon is a hand-held contraption shaped like a big comb that vibrates gently, reproducing the action of the human hand. The difference is that it never tires and can reach higher than an arm!



Armed with that (and two new helpers conjured up in the nick of time) harvesting went on actually much quicker than usual and with no damage to the precious olives, which were coaxed by the vibrating comb to drop into nets suspended well above the ground, so as not to contaminate them with earth and debris. Even so, picking went on for an exhausting three weeks on and off, as pressing had to go on alongside as well.

So all is well that ends well. But is this the end of the story? Not at all. We're only just halfway through – can't see the light at the end of the tunnel yet ...

Weaving the magic – a pressing diary

Have you ever wondered how an unprepossessing little fruit that's mostly made up of a large wooden stone (the rest being a thin layer of bitter flesh and a thick skin) can produce such a heavenly nectar as olive oil? Here's your chance to find out!

Tucked away inside an anonymous-looking barn sits Franco's jewel of a *frantoio* – a state of the art workshop where olive oil is made the traditional way.



The *frantoio* is Franco's very own kingdom. He's been tinkering around it for years, adding and improving and sometimes coming up with clever hand-made solutions to running problems. Practical, uncluttered and spotlessly

clean are the first adjectives that come to mind. Anyone expecting a quaint or folksy ambience would be disappointed; it's not designed to impress. And considering how many hours we spend there, it's not particularly comfortable either! At least it's warm, though, since temperature is kept at precisely 21° C as required for perfect olive oil making.

Basically this is how it works (you'll find photos on our website if you want to see what we're talking about). First of all the olives have to be cleaned, which is done in two steps. An air-blower of the kind used in gardens is used to get rid of leaves and twigs, then the olives go through an automated washing machine to be thoroughly rinsed with water.

Wave the olives goodbye – as soon as they come through the shower, they drop into the grinding mill to be mashed to a pulp under two big rotating stone wheels, which are made of a local granite rock that's been used through the centuries for this purpose. No

wonder then that it's called *olearia*, from the Latin word for oil.

Every bit of the olives is mashed, including the pit and what leaves survived the double clearing act, because each part contributes its own bit to the complex interplay of flavor, color, vitamins and natural chemicals that earn olive oil its nickname of "green gold".

The olive paste is then spread onto round mats much like mustard on a bun, and the mats piled one on top of the other ready for the actual pressing. The stack is rolled into the hydraulic press and slowly subjected to an increasingly strong push upward. Initially about 1,5 meters high, it gets gradually compressed until it's reduced by two thirds. When the press reaches 420 atmospheres the process is nearly finished.

The liquid that comes out of the pressing collects in a tank, and if you saw it you'd be very disappointed indeed – it doesn't look like green gold at all! That's because the brownish, thin mess is actually a mix of the water that's naturally contained in the fruit and the oily part. In order to separate them it's necessary to put the thing in a simple centrifuge – lo and behold, in a matter of minutes a gush of golden, wonderfully smooth and fragrant olive oil comes through.

All it takes now is to store it in a stainless steel tank, well away from sunlight, air, excessive heat and cold. The new oil is ready, but don't think it's time to celebrate yet. There's quite a lot of work still to be done to make sure you all enjoy the benefits of the magic we've just wrought!

The finishing touches

We've toiled up and down the slopes, huffed and puffed in Franco's state-of-the-art *frantoio*, but the story's not over yet. There's still a lot of work to be done before we can sit back and pat ourselves on the back.

As your editor can testify, a typical day during the New Oil Campaign starts before 8 am and finishes around 8 pm and multitasking is definitely required, as family members and helpers are juggled from one crisis to the other. Of course picking and pressing go on alongside, as olives can't wait more than a few days before being turned into oil. But it's often the humbler jobs that require huge amounts of time and effort.

The double cleaning of the olives is a good instance (and that's why many producers skip it altogether). Another irksome chore is washing every bit of equipment in the *frantoio* at least once a day, or more at the peak of the season! Consider that what we're battling is basically *grease* and no cleaning material can be used except for soda, since any smell or perfume would transfer to the next batch of oil, ruining the flavor.

So what else is there once the new oil has been made? Well, it has to be bottled and of course we don't have anything like those shiny automated bottling lines you see on TV; we're too small an outfit to be able to afford that. We have a small machine that fills up one bottle at a time, and poor Lia (Franco's wife) is the one that traditionally has to wipe each bottle clean with alcohol (we don't want any oily smears, do we?), stick the label on and finish off with the little birdy card. Then the bottles have to be put in the cases and stored, ready for shipping.

It's actually sort of fun if you only do it for a couple of hours. But can you imagine whisking off something like 4,000 bottles in one go, knowing you have to rush because time is running faster than you?

It's no wonder then that there are not many olive oil producers left that still painstakingly do things by hand like we do. And the big problem, strange as it sounds, is that if we hired more people to help us we would have to charge even more for our wonderful olive oil. Prices would really go through the roof! Therefore we keep it small and family-run, even if it means so much work in the crucial month of November.

There are actually so few traditional-minded producers around that the big glass company that used to market the bottles we have always used has stopped making them as of this year, claiming they no longer sell. Apparently olive oil people nowadays want screw-tops instead of corks, because they're both cheaper and quicker to assemble.

We really liked the old-fashioned cork much better on sentimental and aesthetic grounds. But you have to move with the times, so that's why Pornanino Olive Oil bottles this year are a little different. *Force majeure*, you know. As a matter of fact, the new caps are actually an improvement over corks since they are both tamper-proof and easier to use. And since Lia confirms that they're also less of a pain to put together, it's been for the best after all!

Grandma Lia's olive oil recipes

Hard-working people deserve a treat when it's time to unwind. Moreover, you need to eat more calories when it's cold, right? Ok, just this once ...

Cantucci (makes about 20)

1 cup all purpose flour
½ cup granulated sugar
2 oz almonds
1 egg
¼ teaspoon baking powder

1 tablespoon Pornanino Extra Virgin Olive Oil
1 teaspoon grated orange peel
pinch of salt
vanilla essence

Set the oven to moderate, about 350° F. Roast the almonds in the oven for a few minutes, with the skin on. Combine the flour with the sugar, pinch of salt, grated orange peel, baking powder, olive oil, egg and a few drops of vanilla essence. Knead until smooth. Incorporate the almonds and roll out to form two thick sausages. Put them on non-stick paper and bake for about 15 minutes, or until they feel firm enough to cut. Take them out of the oven, slice at a slightly slanting angle in 1-inch wide slices and bake for a further 10 minutes on each side until they are biscuit-colored and toasted through. These typical Tuscan cookies are usually served at the end of the meal with a glass of *vin santo* (fortified wine) to dip them into. They are meant to be quite hard. Stored in an air-tight container they will keep for a long time.



Carnival fritters (makes about 20)

½ cup flour
¼ cup butter
2 eggs
5 oz water
a pinch of salt
Pornanino Extra Virgin Olive Oil for frying

Bring the water, pinch of salt and butter to the boil. Tip in the flour and remove the pan from the heat, beating vigorously until the mixture comes away from the sides of the pan. Leave to cool, then add the eggs one at a time, beating all the time until the mixture gets soft and shiny. Heat the olive oil in a large, deep pan. Test the temperature by dropping in a little of the batter: it should float right back to the surface, sizzling. When the temperature is right, drop in spoonfuls of the mixture, tapping gently with a spoon to puff them up. Fry a few at a time until deep golden all over. Drain on kitchen paper and let cool before rolling in sugar. For an even richer result fill with cream as you would a choux. Known as *tortelli*, these fritters are typical of carnival time.

Tell us if you like our recipes! Is there a recipe you'd like Grandma Lia to work out for you? [Let us know](#)