



THE *Pornanino* OLIVE OIL NEWSLETTER

No. 13, July 2009

Welcome back, dear olive oil friends! And yes, it's time to cheer on another season. Admittedly there's not much to celebrate, the world situation being what it is, but hey, it's summer! Isn't that reason enough to lighten up? Of course it is. A positive side-effect of the crisis is that we're all rediscovering the subtle charm of sobriety. Did we really need (or enjoy) all the things we could afford when the economy was flying? Was each and every one of them really worth wasting our time and money on? Or did the media sirens' lure us to buy and buy, forgetting all about needing and choosing, quality and standards? Well, it looks like we'll have a lot of room to practice being selective over the coming months. It's lucky we have such a powerful ally in olive oil, isn't it? There's so much you can squeeze out of it, and it will never let you down. Not ours, anyway ...

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Franco's olive grove diary

One of the advantages of living in the country is that most big-city upheavals pass you by. You get the feeling that as long as you have nature on your side, things can't go too badly wrong. You get philosophic. Well, in the worst-case scenario you can turn vegetarian and grow all the bio greens city dwellers pay through the nose to get. [Read more](#)

Oil over troubled waters



Olive oil has been with us for more than 6,000 years. In ancient times it was such a valuable commodity it was known as "liquid gold". That it's still very much center-stage just goes to show that it was no passing fad. There's real value and huge potential in there, and we're not saying so just because we're in love with the magical stuff. [Read more](#)

Back to basics

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were core-values that served to build empires. Perhaps there is still wisdom to be found in the lessons our grandmothers had to learn in order to make ends meet. And it could even be fun, going back to basics! [Read more](#)

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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

One of the advantages of living in the country is that most big-city upheavals pass you by. You get the feeling that as long as you have nature on your side, things can't go too badly wrong. You get philosophic. Well, in the worst-case scenario you can turn vegetarian and grow all the bio greens city dwellers pay through the nose to get.

Hopefully, this will not come to pass. For one, Chianti is a wonderful place in many ways, but not at all suitable for vegetable growing. The climate is all wrong, being far too dry in summer. And the soil is thin and rocky, as Matteo knows only too well.

One of the first assignments Franco gave him when he joined the team (to test his mettle?), years ago, was removing stones as big as boulders from Lia's prospective vegetable plot. A truckful of rich garden soil had to be purchased to mix in, and every evening somebody would climb the slope to water the hapless seedlings, and coax them to grow.

Do you know what happened next? As soon as they were big enough to be appetizing, wild boars came out of the woods at night and snacked on them. Franco and Matteo spent days putting up barriers so that animals could no longer sneak through. It worked, oh yeah, almost too well - they were overwhelmed by their own success!

Have you ever grown zucchini? They are good-natured, generous fellows which are better planted in moderation. And the same goes for tomatoes and green beans, if only Lia had known.

In the end the survivors yielded such huge crops that the whole family had to eat zucchini and green beans twice a day for a couple of months. Until they rebelled, including Franco and Matteo, swearing they would never again be caught dead within one mile of the fiendish zucchini plants (or green bean, tomato and anything of the kind).

But you can't live in the countryside and get your greens from the supermarket, can you. Of course not. Even if the kids complain that store-bought vegetables are better than those you lovingly grow yourself. Which is true, in a way. They're all the same size, huge and brightly colored, and so oddly stubborn they sometimes will keep for a couple of weeks, whereas yours are usually

smaller, misshapen and pockmarked, and often have a very short shelf-life.

Why is that, one might well wonder. Of course commercial growers avail themselves of all the advantages science and technology provide, from fertilizers to pesticides, from hormones to specially bred varieties. Which is not inherently bad, unless they push themselves too far (we could discuss how far is too far). The problem is we are losing touch with the reality of things – homegrown fruit doesn't have to look good to taste good, and our idea of what tastes good is often shaped by artificial flavorings. Does a real strawberry taste like, say, strawberry yogurt, strawberry toothpaste or strawberry Jell-O? Which would a kid choose between phony and natural?

Thus we muse as we stroll through the groves, patting the trunk of our motley crew of olive trees – some are old, others are just beginning to bear fruit. They are a mixed bunch of varieties, as it's always been in the Chianti area. Not a good place for vegetables (unless you foolishly molly-cuddle them) but paradise on earth for olive groves.

This looks like being another excellent season, by the way, which doesn't mean we're going to have a mountain of even-sized, huge and brightly-colored fruit. Ours are the real thing. Just as nature meant them to be, with just the gentlest prod on our part to make sure they develop in top shape.

Can you believe that commercial operations world-wide are only growing a handful of selected varieties, specially chosen and bred for maximum yield, resistance and, most of all, to make it easier, quicker and cheaper to machine harvest? Consistency of taste is what consumers want anyway, they say.

Can you believe that? We can't. This is not what olive oil is all about, at all. Not the real thing, that is. Like the one we make, stubbornly and proudly. With love.



**Don't stop buying Italian,
it will help us to keep buying American!**

Oil over troubled waters

Olive oil has been with us for more than 6,000 years. In ancient times it was such a valuable commodity it was known as “liquid gold”. That it’s still very much center-stage just goes to show that it’s no passing fad. There’s real value and huge potential in there, and we’re not saying so just because we’re in love with the magical stuff.

As a matter of fact, olives have been known to man in Asia Minor for something like 10,000 years, although actual cultivation was probably



introduced only around 4,000 b.C. Olive oil production was definitely on by 3500 b.C., as evidenced by the discovery on the Greek island of Crete of oil

amphorae dating back to that time, but it might have been started even earlier – some say a thousand years before in present-day Israel.

Whatever the origins, olive oil was obviously of paramount importance to peoples across the eastern shore of the Mediterranean – it was Greek poet Homer who dubbed it “liquid gold”, and with good reason. By his time (around 850 b.C.) the oil trade was established as one of the richest in the Mediterranean; the Egyptian pharaohs themselves had been faithful patrons of Crete, Aleppo and Canaan for more than a thousand years!

Olive tree cultivation spread across the Mediterranean in Roman times, reaching Italy, France and Spain. If we can believe Pliny (a Roman himself), Italian olives made “excellent oil at reasonable prices, the best in the Mediterranean”. He might have been somewhat biased, but it’s a fact that under Rome’s aegis business was brisk as never before in the past.

The reason for such a huge success? It was, quite literally, a godsend. There was seemingly no end to its virtues and uses: it was eaten, of course, it was thought to cure a vast array of ailments, it was good for the skin, could be made into soap,

and according to some bestowed a long life. Last, but not at all least, it was used as fuel to light lamps. It’s no wonder, then, that it also featured quite prominently in the rites of each and every religion rooted in the Mediterranean area. It’s still very much part of Jewish and Christian observance.

To put it in a nutshell, you truly couldn’t do without it. And if you happened to be a merchant captain caught out in rough seas, a small quantity of oil poured into the water would make the waves magically come to heel – it’s scientific truth (just don’t try it in a storm!).

Science and technology have given us so many advantages over our forebears that it’s easy for us, today, to sneer at the gift of some long-forgotten deity. And yet, supposing we had to give up something (not so unlikely, actually, until the tides turn again) should we choose to do without olive oil?

Mmm. Barring the storm placating effect (not so useful, these weather-forecasting days) and the lamp lighting thing, which doesn’t hold a candle to electricity (sorry, couldn’t resist the pun), all the other virtues have more than withstood the test of time.

Modern research has confirmed that olive oil is indeed good for our health, both inside and out, in a thousand ways. Have we mentioned before that it’s about the only instance of a medicine that it’s an absolute pleasure to take? Good for you AND tasting good!

Take it, just as the doctor ordered. You won’t regret going for the liquid gold.

Back to basics

Give up, cut back, pare down, down-size – save up. Such an unappealing set of expressions. Yet there was a time when sobriety, thriftiness and prudence were core-values that served to build empires. Perhaps there is still wisdom to be found in the lessons our grandmothers had to learn in order to make ends meet. And it could even be fun, going back to basics!



There are folks who are always looking back to the good old days. Everything was better, in that mythical past. I beg leave to differ.

Everything might have been better, but for sure it was harder and very likely to kill you off at a younger age. Also there was a vastly smaller range of

“everything” to be had.

I confess to sending up a silent prayer every time I operate a washing machine, food processor or vacuum cleaner. Our grandmothers used to fill their days seeing to chores machines now do for us in minutes! Do we really miss that bygone era?

Not much, considering that most of us are lucky enough to have all our grandparents could wish for, including freedom and improved health, and lots more.

Nostalgics do have a point, though. When things are too easily achieved we run the risk of becoming complacent, and “soft”. Practicing self-reliance from time to time might be a good, and fun, way of building up some inner muscle (character, they used to call it). Also, there’s nothing like making things to really appreciate them! Who knows, we could come to value things we’d always given for granted. Or discard others that didn’t matter as much as we thought.

Admittedly, our grandparents lived life at a more leisurely pace. They could afford to spend time making things; we don’t. Besides, if we all stopped buying things to embrace the joys of self-sufficiency, the whole economy would grind to a halt – and we wouldn’t enjoy that the least little bit.

Oh well. Balance is everything, they say. Perhaps we could set aside a rainy weekend? Let’s start off by making our own bread. It’s not such a big deal, you know. All it takes is flour (plain or a mix of different kinds), yeast, water, salt and a little

olive oil. Working the dough in a food-processor you won’t even dirty your hands. Just give it two hours to rise, plus 30 minutes to bake and that’s all. You can slice your loaf and freeze it, ready for use whenever you need it (if you want the recipe we’ll be glad to provide it – just ask us; or look it up on the internet).

Our grandmothers’ golden rule was never throw anything away that you can reuse, and never, ever, waste food. In Tuscany there are dozens of recipes based on stale bread – you’ll find two well-known ones in this issue’s Granma Lia’s column. Which just goes to say that you don’t have to have a long list of fancy ingredients and state-of-the-art kitchen equipment in order to cook a memorable meal. Simplicity is the key, and using the very best of ingredients. There was a celebrated chef in Milano who moved gourmets to tears with his signature tomato velouté.

Next time you go shopping resist the temptation to buy ready-made pasta sauce. Make your own! Or better still, cook it in quantity on that famous rainy day, then either sterilize in sealed jars or freeze. It will keep for months, save you money and you’ll know exactly what’s in it – nothing but the very best ingredients.

The same goes for a host of other stuff – edible or otherwise. If you could make it just as well (or better) for less, why buy it? Give it a try. Take the time, savor it and be proud of whatever it is you are creating. It will be much more satisfying than just passing money around ...

We’ve said it a hundred times before and we’re repeating it once more – our grandmothers would heartily agree. Cut out the frills but don’t penny-pinch on quality. A little of it goes a long way. Just like exquisite extra virgin olive oil.

Want more hands-down tips on how to cook healthy, inexpensive, quick and easy Italian fare with the unique flair of extra virgin olive oil? Have a look at our [Pornanino Olive Oil Cookbook on Blurb!](#)

Italian dream holidays – light!

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No kidding, it can be done! And you only have to be the tiniest little bit adventurous. The Italian railway network is quite extensive, as well as being dirty cheap by European standards. You can check the timetables online (www.trenitalia.com), purchase your own e-ticket and charge it to your credit card, if you don't trust your Italian with ticket counter staff.

Self-catering accommodation can be anything from a lowly studio apartment to a palatial villa, depending on your budget. It doesn't have to be wildly expensive unless you feel like splurging on luxury! [Fine Italian Rentals](#) can help you there.

Of course cooking your own meals is both fun and cheaper than going out all the time. Like everywhere else in the world, you'll save substantially by buying groceries and staples in a supermarket. Street markets are great for fresh produce, although you'll have to catch them as they're usually held once a week. Quaint specialty stores are great to try local delicacies, but expect them to charge considerably more.

Italy's tourist vocation goes back 2,000 years, which is both good and bad. In places such as Rome, Venice and Florence, where catering to tourists has been a major business since the 18th century, sometimes tourists are seen as gullible moneyboxes to be fleeced without mercy. Be on the lookout, always shop around before buying, and don't be afraid to speak up if you suspect you're being ripped off.

When dining out (you deserve a treat from time to time!) avoid restaurants that won't post out their menus, and always check prices beforehand, most particularly in the hottest tourist places. This goes double with pavement cafés in such prime locations as St Mark's Square in Venice (just an example), or risk forking out tens of euros just for the privilege of sitting there!

Also check the change, as waiters have been known sometimes to shortchange tourists

assuming they won't notice or want to make a fuss. If challenged they will pretend they thought you were tipping them ... Bear in mind that a service charge will always be added to your bill, so whether to leave a tip or not is entirely up to you.

This doesn't mean that everyone in Italy is out to get you, by any means. The vast majority of the people you meet will be helpful, honest and professional. Yet you know the saying "forewarned is forearmed" – speaking for the silent majority of Italians, we don't want your dream holiday to be spoiled by *furbi* (smart alecks).

Choose the place where you're going to stay wisely. Hot tourist spots are likely to be very expensive, but sometimes all it takes is moving a few miles away to see rates magically come down to earth. Besides, you might uncover some real gems. There are lots of charming, sleepy little towns obscured by the big names, and it might actually be more pleasant to stay away from the tourist stampede. Just check you can move around by train or bus from there.

Still adding up to more than you were planning to spend? Here's plan B. Run a quick check of your family roots - be thorough, and you're sure to come up with some Italian connection. Don't worry if it's remote, as Italians love family and will welcome you as a matter of course. They'll enjoy showing you around and, if anything, could be embarrassingly hospitable, particularly if they hail from the South. So don't be shy! Just look up their place of residence on a map first (you might not want to end up on a mountain top in the middle of nowhere).

All you need now is to spruce up your Italian. Fear not – just go back to the [Ultimate Italian phrasebook](#) we published in issues 8 and 9 of our Newsletter; you'll find the right words to charm long-lost cousins and bring waiters to task. So pack up now, and enjoy!

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Panzanella / Stale bread salad (serves 4)

1 lb stale bread – any kind
1 lb tomatoes (2 large ones)
11 oz red onions (2 medium ones)
1/2 lb cucumber

1 bunch of basil
Pornanino Extra Virgin Olive Oil
freshly ground pepper
vinegar

For best results the bread you use should be stale, i.e. hard. If it's not, leave it to dry out completely, then soak it in water for a few minutes. When it's soft and mushy, squeeze it thoroughly between your fingers, then rub it to form little dry crumbs. Drop the crumbs into a salad bowl together with the tomatoes, onions and cucumber, all sliced. Add some shredded basil leaves, season with salt, freshly ground pepper and a generous drizzle of olive oil and set aside for an hour or so, well covered, for the flavors to blend. Add a dash of vinegar just before serving.

Pappa col pomodoro / Tomato soup (serves 4)

1 1/2 lb ripe tomatoes
4 garlic cloves
1 large bunch of basil
5 cups vegetable stock ...

... or water and 1 1/2 stock cube
9 oz bread, sliced and toasted (or stale)
4 tablespoons extra virgin olive oil
freshly ground pepper

Cook the chopped garlic cloves and basil leaves in the extra virgin olive oil, then add the peeled, deseeded and chopped tomatoes and cook for about 20 minutes. Season with salt and a pinch of sugar, then add the bread slices, either toasted or stale. Cover with the vegetable stock (or water and stock cubes) and simmer for a further 15 minutes. Turn off the heat, let stand for about an hour and stir vigorously to mash the bread. Serve either warm or cold, adding freshly ground pepper and a generous drizzle of extra virgin olive oil. The pappa col pomodoro is actually best enjoyed the following day, reheated.



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



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