



# THE *Pornanino* OLIVE OIL NEWSLETTER

No. 15, January 2010

**Happy new year, dear olive oil loving friends!** Did you welcome in 2010 partying like mad to dispel the gloominess of the last twelve months? We most definitely did. And guess what we toasted with on the stroke of midnight? Sorry to disappoint, but no – it wasn't our own green gold. We went for the traditional bubbly stuff (Italian spumante of course), but we chased it down with lots of delicious Pornanino olive oil-drenched bruschetta! You know how the saying goes, what you do on New Year's eve you'll keep doing all year long. That's one resolution we won't mind sticking to until next December! So here's to all of us, may the future be shimmering, golden and smooth like Pornanino extra virgin olive oil. What more could we ask for?

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Olive Oil

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## ----- Franco's olive grove diary

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## ----- A pressing business part 2



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Grab your bruschetta and get down to business! [Read more](#)

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## ----- All about YOU

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## ----- Grandma Lia's olive oil recipes



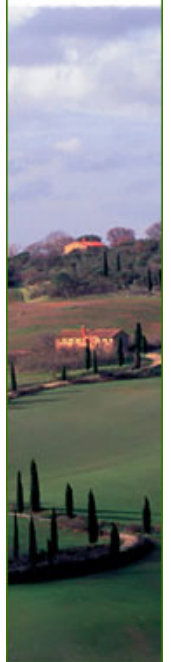
**F**orget the winter blues with a taste of Italian sunshine – treat yourself to a delicious pasta dish! And please steer clear of those nasty ready-made sauces (for shame!). Make your own in under ten minutes and *buon appetito!* We've chosen three all-time favourites for starters.

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**We'd love to hear from you!** Here's our email address [oliveoil@chiantionline.com](mailto:oliveoil@chiantionline.com)

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## Franco's olive grove diary

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**Oof. It feels great being able to relax at last, and enjoy the warm glow of satisfaction that comes from a job well done. Olive oil making is physically exhausting because everything comes to a head in a mad rush. It's tough, sure, but so rewarding! Franco and Matteo would never exchange it for anything else.**

At one point Matteo was heard to be muttering that he quite understood now why peasants seldom lived to a ripe old age. That was during a 10-minute pit stop at home to grab a sandwich for lunch, before dashing back to the olive groves where he'd been harvesting since 8 AM.

When it grew too dark to work the trees, operations just moved down the track to the pressing mill. Olives needed to be spread out in the airing boxes in thin layers, to keep them fresh and healthy until the time came to squeeze them. Equipment and machines must be checked and readied. Tools and supplies had to be laid out, in preparation for the mayhem to come.

When the pressing starts, time is of the essence – there must be no delay, because the olive paste oxidizes very quickly when exposed to the air. Since even the small amount that sticks inside the machines is just as likely to go rancid, they should not to be left standing idle during the day, and must be thoroughly cleaned every night using a strictly scent-free detergent, as olive oil is devilishly good at picking up odours and flavours (we use soda).

Having checked out the frantoio, Franco and Matteo could head home at last, but the chores were not finished yet. While Franco's wife Lia and daughter Francesca sorted through tags and labels, the men's evening was spent at the computer, processing orders and filling forms for the overdeveloped (and underperforming) Italian bureaucracy.

That was just preparation work. Over the following days things would pick up momentum until they reached critical mass.

As you know we try not to interfere too much with Mother Nature's business. We accept that the trees are entitled to a little rest and relaxation, from time to time; we don't even think of bullying them into yielding more than they feel comfortable with giving. Which is why we fully expected this

year's harvest to be well below last year's monster crop.

The quality of the olives is very good, though. We had yet another perfect growing season this year, and Autumn was simply glorious, warm and dry. Harvest started a full week earlier than usual, at the end of October, which was extra lucky since the weather turned just as we were finishing. Temperatures suddenly plummeted, and the golden hillsides were lashed with gale winds and pouring rain. In short, some of the worst harvesting conditions you can imagine!

But by that time our treasure was safely indoors and ready to be transformed into green gold, which Franco and Matteo proceeded to do at top speed. When everything comes together seamlessly, despite the crazy rush, you realize how important all that diligent prep work was.

What with the smaller quantity of olives to work with (including time consuming hand picking) and the seven-day advantage on harvesting, this year the new oil was ready ahead of time. And it looked like we would be free of the nightmare of looming shipping deadlines, too - hooray!

And since our olive oil is a natural, living and breathing thing, you can actually taste its story in it. Last year's crop stretched our resources really thin because it was huge, meaning that it was bottled within a few days of pressing – so fresh it actually tasted a little raw at first, almost too green. This year's new oil had a little more time to decant, so that the friskiness of extreme youth mellowed a little as it matured.

Of course the process will go on in the coming months, making it smoother and more nuanced just as the color subtly shifts from green to gold.

Taste it. Savour it. And now tell us: don't you agree that olive oil making is the most wonderful job there is?



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

## A pressing business part 2

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**It's a commonly held belief that all it takes to make olive oil is pressing the olives. Which is basically true, except that it's a little bit more complicated than that. Even without taking into account the "improvements" brought on by industrial technology.**

Olive oil in its pure, natural form is a highly complex mix of vitamins and a whole lot of other compounds, which all contribute in making it what it is: a wonderfully tasty panacea for a host of ills. To our forefathers it was indeed the answer to a prayer, since there was virtually no area of life where it didn't play a leading role. It reigned in the kitchen, at the baths and in ladies' boudoirs, it kept the body healthy and darkness at bay. No wonder it featured quite prominently in heathen temples, synagogues and Christian churches alike!

The ancients didn't know that olive oil's properties are fragile and can be snuffed out like candle flame by careless handling. Some of our present-day evils, such as chemicals or industrial processing, didn't exist yet. But there must have been a fair share of scams even then, judging by the fact that major producing cities (like Athens, for instance) had their own distinctively shaped amphorae and seals to guarantee oil provenance.

It was, after all, a huge business in antiquity as well, and never more so than in Roman times. In the first centuries of the present era the empire's olive groves stretched throughout Northern Africa and Spain, well cared for by an army of slaves. Olive oil and grain, the empire's major commodities, plied the Mediterranean and reached inland along navigable rivers, carried by several merchant fleets.

If you can imagine such a thing, by the 4<sup>th</sup> century the discarded amphorae dumped near Rome's river harbour had formed a 50-meter high hillock covering over 20,000 square meters, suggesting that at least 2 million gallons of olive oil were imported annually by the state alone. And in town there were more than 2,000 olive oil dispensers where citizens could get their supply – by comparison bread ovens, another staple, were a mere 250.

All that came to a grinding halt when the barbarians overran the ailing empire, and Europe sank in the twilight of the Middle Ages. Olive oil became so rare and precious that it was

sometimes used as currency, but seldom traded outside of monasteries.

Of course the tradition was kept alive in olive oil producing regions, although on a much smaller scale, and a few technical improvements were introduced along the way. But it was only in the second half of the last century that the real revolution began, fuelled by the massive hike in consumption of the post-war economic boom.

The focus was on increasing yield and efficiency, which was something the traditional techniques were not very successful at. Industrial processing was a breakthrough as it made goods widely available and affordable, to the joy of producers and consumers alike.

At its best it does indeed make sense. The "old way" of doing things had its own shortcomings, despite the rosy glow that surrounds it in hindsight. Just imagine – Tuscan peasants used to wait until the overripe olives dropped off the trees of their own accord before raking them in and eventually pressing them. And to increase yield they poured hot water on the olive paste, as had been the custom for centuries.

Industrial processing served to introduce quality standards, which was something that didn't really belong in our grandparents' world. But then it rather went over the top creating sanitized, standardized, bland copies of the real thing. Remember when artificial additives were the norm? A pity they were pretty harmful to the collective health.

The approach to olive oil production has changed dramatically over the past 15 years, as commercial producers strove to strike a balance between yield and quality, including preserving the fragile, uniquely beneficial chemistry of olive oil.

So what happens next? Sorry about that, but we seem to have run out of space again. To be continued ...

## Olive oil test – be prepared!

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**Since olive oil is a natural produce it's best kept in the fridge, well away from light and air**



Ouch. That would be a really serious mistake. While it's true that light and air, together with heat, are olive oil's worst enemies, cold comes a very close second. And the reason why is not that olive oil will turn solid as temperature drops, as most

fats do, because the process can be easily reversed. The problem is that cold actually "kills off" some of the most precious elements contained in olive oil. The ideal way to keep your olive oil is inside a dark-colored glass bottle, firmly corked, stored in a cool closet.

**If that is so, why do retailers display olive oil on the shelves?**

Obviously, they have to display their products in order to sell them! In the case of commercial brands that doesn't actually matter very much, since their olive oil is stabilized and processed to such an extent that it couldn't go "off" even if it tried to. If you are buying anything fancier from a speciality store, on the other hand, make sure that it's contained in dark-colored glass and do check the sell by date – even the best extra virgin olive oil (like Pornanino's) should be consumed within 2 years of production. Avoid any brand that uses clear glass and won't display a sell by date.

**Heavens, do you have to get rid of extra virgin olive oil after the sell by date?**

Not at all. What happens is that, being a natural produce, the health-inducing elements and vitamins it contains will have started to fade away, thus robbing it of its beneficial properties and depth of flavor. You can still safely use it for frying. In the worst-case scenario, if improperly stored or really very old it could have turned rancid, which doesn't make it poisonous in any way but extremely unpleasant to eat!

**Labels are so confusing. What should you look for?**

That's a problem, granted. For one thing, rules and regulations differ from one side of the ocean to the other - European ones are stricter, but also much more complicated. Forget about "first cold pressed", which doesn't mean anything as there's no such thing as a second pressing, and just go for "extra virgin olive oil", which is cold pressed by definition, although methods vary. Don't be fooled into buying anything else! Plain "olive oil" or "virgin olive oil" are lesser grades and imply processing with chemicals. Beware that a mock-Italian name doesn't guarantee that what you are buying was actually made in Italy, nor is the indication that the oil was bottled there. If the olives were both grown and pressed in Italy that should be clearly stated – we put a sticker on our bottles with the claim, the production date and a code number meaning we are in the local Siena authorities roster and regularly checked for authenticity. Failing that, there's no authenticity pledge. A further DOP certification was recently adopted for selected Italian olive oil producing areas, but because of fiendish red-tape it is not very popular with producers (we haven't joined in yet).

**Why is everything about olive oil so complicated?**

Because there is not, to date, a definitive scientific test to tell good olive oil from bad, and since it's a hugely profitable business world-wide there's an awful lot of bad out there. Simply put, there are many ways of doctoring bad oil to resemble good, and while some of the cruder scams are easily detected, others are much more difficult to foil. Hence all the red-tape and controls. Research has been trying to overcome this problem, and might come up with a solution very soon. Until then, it seems that human tasters are still the sharpest weapon there is against fraud, because there's no forging the distinctive bouquet of flavours of genuine olive oil.

## Ugly Beffy

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**Admittedly, Italy's very own answer to Santa Claus is not as glamorous as her jolly colleague. But despite her unappealing looks, Befana has been a beloved favorite of children for hundreds of years.**

Poor Befana, she's not much to look at. And being so old and rickety, it stands to reason that she arrives at the very tail-end of the festivities. You can almost imagine her panting to get there on time, to deliver her bagful of presents before the jolly season is wrapped up and shelved for another twelve months!



Let's have a closer look at her, since her fame rarely gets beyond Italy's borders. The Befana is an old lady (the term "hag" comes to mind, really) that goes around much like Santa delivering gifts to children on the Twelfth Night, which is known as Epifania in Italy. Being a poor old lady, she can't afford a smart fur-lined livery – tradition has her wearing patched up clothes, an apron, down-to-heel boots and a shapeless hat, which nicely complements a big hawk nose studded with warts. Oh, and she flies in through the chimney, riding on her magic broom.

Particularly in central Italy, where the tradition is strongest, kids either get a double dose of presents or only get them on January 6<sup>th</sup>, as a memento that Santa Claus is an import that doesn't really belong to the Italian tradition. Of course he's been the star of the Christmas show over the past few decades in Italy as elsewhere, but compared to the Befana he's an upstart.

Some researchers maintain that her origins go back to the Roman goddess Strina, a fertility deity that used to be connected to wintertime gift-giving (hence the Italian word *strenna*, meaning Christmas present). In that case, it's comforting to know that goddesses age over the millennia like mere mortals do ... Another instance that points to antiquity is the Befana's custom to bring coal to misbehaving children, which could be linked to the

ancient tradition of burning the puppet of an old lady on New Year's eve, to symbolize the old that must go to make place for the new.

Most would say that her name is derived from Epifania, the Italian version of Epiphany, through the corruptions *bifania* and *befania*. And here's the legend that explains it all.

Having lost their way while out looking for Baby Jesus, the three Wise Men knocked at the door of a poor farm deep in the countryside, to ask for directions. The lady of the house, all flustered and a little cross at having being interrupted while doing the chores, dismissed the Kings saying she didn't know anything about comets, portents and newborns. And she went back to sweeping around with her broom.

When she had finished, though, she was struck with remorse. She realized she should have helped the Wise Men, and even gone with them to find Baby Jesus, but by then it was too late. This is why every year she tries to make up for her betrayal by going the rounds of each and every child, leaving gifts to those who deserve them and lumps of coal to the other ones.

Until a few decades ago, when most of Italy was poor, it was the only occasion when kids could expect to get sweets, even though something as frugal as a few tangerines, home-made candy and nuts thrown in so as to nicely round up the regulation socks, left hanging above the hearth for the kind old lady to fill.

And the Befana would come, riding on her broom, punctually on the Twelfth Night. She would slip down the chimney with her bag of wonders, fill up the socks and whisk away to fulfill her mission. She has been doing it for centuries and still does, despite the disappearance of chimneys and woolen socks, and the abundance of sweets in our lives. Because Italian kids love her, warts and all.

## All about **you**

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**We do have some amazing friends in our olive oil-loving community! Come on in and get to know them.**



Meet **Marie Casciani** – hi there Marie! This savvy lady, who runs a family-owned gourmet and specialty shop in pretty Pittsford, got so totally hooked on our Pomarine olive oil that she insisted on having it on stock. Which makes hers pretty much the only retail outlet in the US where you can buy a bottle of our green nectar! So if you happen to pass by Rochester, NY, do stop in Pittsford and have a look round the charming, historic town crossed by the Erie Canal. In the very heart of the centuries-old village, along a scenic towpath lined with quaint shops and restored buildings, you'll find Marie's **Via Girasole gourmet store**. We are so thrilled about this, particularly since Marie reports that customers are coming back to buy more of our Pomarine olive oil!

Via Girasole - 3 Schoen Place Pittsford, NY 14534 - tel 585 218 0200 - email [girasolewines@gmail.com](mailto:girasolewines@gmail.com)



**Tania Kadokura** is another very special lady – and a dear friend of ours. As a professional cook, she fell in love with our olive oil and the whole concept of Franco's and Matteo's taking such pride in making it by hand, the traditional way. She came to see us in Chianti, she stayed with us on the Pomarine estate and was instantly part of the family. When she went back to Japan she left a little bit of her heart in Tuscany, and has since endeavored to introduce fine olive oil to the Japanese public. Although her specialty is German cuisine, and most particularly cakes, she is really succeeding in recruiting more kindred spirits for us to welcome into the community of our olive oil loving

friends – even in the faraway land of the Rising Sun. Thank you Tania, we'd never, ever imagined our beloved olive oil would one day land in Japan! To know more about the amazing Tania you'll need to speak Japanese, as her website has no English version. Try it anyway: [www.tania.jp](http://www.tania.jp), or read an article about her on <http://search.japantimes.co.jp/cgi-bin/fl20060715a1.html>.



Does **Terry Hart** need an introduction? Some of you may remember him has a long-standing supporter of ours, as his love affair with Chianti, and Pomarine, goes back quite a while. As a keen photographer, a few years ago he published a beautiful book about olive oil making in Pomarine; and took several groups of friends to Chianti to lend a hand with harvesting – we had so much fun! Well, Terry is back with another gorgeous picture book entirely devoted to Chianti through the seasons. Do have a look at it here <http://69.25.104.81/bookstore/detail/969263> and savor the timeless landscapes, the people, the villages, the moods and colors of a most wonderful little corner of Italy. You'll find us in there, as well! Good job Terry, as usual. If you want to find out more just follow this link <http://web.mac.com/terencehart>

## Grandma Lia's olive oil recipes

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**Forget the winter blues with a taste of Italian sunshine – treat yourself to a delicious pasta dish! And don't even think of reaching for one of those nasty ready-made sauces (for shame!). Make your own in under ten minutes and *buon appetito!* We've chosen three all-time favourites for starters.**

### Cooking pasta

Put plenty of water to the boil with a lid on. Exact quantity depends on how much pasta you are cooking – for 4 oz/100 gr (a generous serving by Italian standards) you'll need about 4 to 6 cups. When the water comes to a rolling boil season it with sea salt and add the pasta. Stir with a wooden spoon from time to time, to prevent it from sticking to the bottom. If you're cooking spaghetti or "long" pasta make sure the strands are completely submerged (they'll start to go limp after a couple of minutes, so don't panic and break them up!). As cooking times vary, refer to cooking instructions on the package. As a rule of thumb, spaghetti will be done in 10 minutes, while "short" pasta like rigatoni or penne usually take 15 minutes. Drain in a colander as soon as cooked, transfer to a large, shallow pan and toss together with the sauce and as much olive oil as necessary over a high heat for a couple of minutes.

### Amatriciana

Fry ½ cup of **diced bacon** and ½ cup of thinly sliced **onion** in a non-stick pan lightly brushed with extra virgin olive oil.

When they are both golden and crisp douse with **white wine** and let it evaporate.

Add 1 cup of **tomato sauce**, a little **chilli pepper** and a pinch of salt. Simmer for a few minutes, then turn off the heat and finish off with a generous drizzle of extra virgin olive oil. Serve with grated Pecorino cheese.

### Fake seafood pesto

In the blender process 2 tablespoons **black olives**, 2 tablespoons **capers**, 2 tablespoons **walnuts**, 2 tablespoons **pinenuts**, a handful each of flat-leaf **parsley** and **basil**, 1 **garlic** clove, 1 preserved **anchovy fillet**. Mind you don't process it too long, as a rather rough texture is what you're looking for. Add a teaspoon of grated **lemon peel**, a pinch of salt, freshly ground pepper and plenty of extra virgin olive oil.

### Carbonara

Fry ½ cup of **diced bacon** and ½ cup of thinly sliced **onion** in a non-stick pan together with 2 tablespoons extra virgin olive oil. In a large bowl lightly beat 2 **eggs** with 3 tablespoons of **cream** (or milk), a pinch of salt, freshly ground pepper and a pinch of grated nutmeg. Add the bacon and onion and stir to combine. Pour the cooked pasta into the bowl: the heat of the spaghetti will cook the egg to a creamy sauce. Finish off with some more olive oil and freshly grated Pecorino cheese.



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