



# THE *Pornanino* OLIVE OIL NEWSLETTER

No. 17, July 2010

**What's going on over there in Pornanino, I wonder!** Well, all right. We do apologize for being late again. To think that we prided ourselves on being punctual to the day - Mother Nature could have set her clock right by our seasonal Olive Oil Newsletters! As a matter of fact we've been little busy bees buzzing across the ocean to promote our favorite obsession at a number of trade events. We made a splash! So flattering, but time consuming as well. Can't wait to tell you all about it. Happy summer, dear olive oil friends who were discerning enough to recognize real quality when you stumbled upon our Pornanino extra virgin delight!

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## Franco's olive grove diary



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## Forging ahead

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## White pests



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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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**What a strange spring we've had this year. One day the air felt warm and reassuringly spring-like, and the next it was pouring down in a very un-Tuscan way. Why, on summer solstice day it was as cold and drab as Halloween!**

**M**other Nature is supposed to be capricious. She likes to keep lowly mortals alert with her unpredictability and is careful not to repeat herself from one year to the next. Those in our line of work (farmers everywhere unite!) have long given up any hope of ever making sense of her moods.

This year she had us torn between hope and despair as seasons mixed without rhyme or reason, sending out crazy signals – an unseasonably mild spell in March was followed by chilly rains for days on end; after an exceptionally warm Easter week came more rain, which lasted right into May.

The weather seemed to have mended by the beginning of June, but it was one of Nature's jokes. Barely a couple of sunny weeks later Italy celebrated the Summer solstice with freezing temperatures, tropical downpours and a sprinkling of snow – all at one go. Then, quite as suddenly, temperatures shot up to muggy heat.

Thanks to wildly see-sawing temperatures, Italy sneezed and coughed its way through spring, never quite knowing what to wear in the morning. Will this be a coat-and-scarf day, or a shorts-and-sandals one? Mm, looks sunny, but can we trust the weather to hold for more than a few hours? It's been a bet!

One thing we can be sure of is that draught is not going to be a threat this year! We've had so much rain it's bound to last until Christmas time, at the very least.

As far as our olive trees are concerned, the vagaries of spring didn't seem to concern them much. Short of a severe frost (which thankfully

Mother Nature spared us), it takes more than a spell of glum weather to ruffle their leaves.

Now it will be crucial that we have a true-blue Tuscan summer of the hot and dry variety that olive trees like so much. If the weather starts to behave, we can get rid of the excess water that would otherwise unnecessarily bloat the fruit, making it jumbo-sized but not any richer in oil content.

What with the dismal weather that didn't encourage outdoor activities beyond the strictly necessary, and the cool temperatures that curbed the over-exuberant spring growth we have to battle on milder seasons, this year we had more time on our hands.

Therefore, after clearing out the accumulated clutter as we mentioned in the last issue of the Newsletter, we decided it was high time we did a spot of travelling around to freshen up our perspective and keep in touch with the wide world that stretches beyond the peaceful confines of our olive groves.

Whoever said you are entitled to rest on your laurels just because you make wonderful olive oil. Also the fact that none of us are getting any younger as time goes by (not even Franco, can you imagine!) is no excuse to get complacent or too cozy.

So off we went to a few trade events, to sniff the wind and gather new knowledge and see whether we can find new ways to move the boundaries of excellence a little further. Because there's no limit to what you can achieve if you really set yourself to the task. And you can bet we will!



## Forging ahead

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**He who stands still is lost, as the old adage says. That is why Franco and family went to the Summer Fancy Food Show to parade their extra virgin olive oil, and see what the new trends are in the glitzy world of natural and specialty food.**

If you'll excuse us quoting directly from the organizer's website, "since 1955 the Fancy Food Shows have been North America's largest specialty food and beverage marketplace. Between the Winter Show in San Francisco and the Summer Show in New York City, they bring in more than 40,000 attendees from more than 80 countries to see 260,000 innovative specialty food products, such as confections, cheese, coffee, snacks, spices, ethnic, natural, organic and more.



Only members can exhibit at the Shows, where retailers, restaurateurs, distributors and others discover innovative, new food and beverage products. The Shows are attended by every major food buying channel, influential members of the trade and consumer press and other related businesses."

Well, as you have no doubt guessed, the Fancy Food Show is just THE place to be to get in touch with the shakers and movers in the specialty food business!

To be quite honest, we had a few qualms when the idea of attending first came up – somebody actually invited us. Goodness, we thought, are we up to it? I mean, talk about family business. We're way too small for something like that!

But they insisted that there's a bit of everything at the Fancy Food Show, and everybody get to showcase their products, which is what makes it so interesting. Specialty and excellence is what buyers come to experience and that's exactly what they get, at the huge annual gourmet food fair.

It sounded convincing, so off we went to New York City like the ersatz Italian family – with Franco leading the delegation, son-in-law Matteo

as second in command and Franco's daughter Francesca to cheer the troops to battle.

When the doors opened, on 28 June, it was like entering an Aladdin's cave of wonders. This year's edition boasted 2,500 exhibitors coming from over 40 countries, so you can imagine the wonderful palette of colors and inviting smells that fairly caused the air to shimmer and tingle with delight.

The only downside to the whole thing was that we had to man our own little desk round the clock, which was a pleasure in itself, of course, since it gave us a rare opportunity to indulge in our favourite obsession (talking about olive oil) to an informed and genuinely appreciative audience.

But still, it would have been fun to lose ourselves in this paradise of the connoisseur – what we call *buongustaio* in Italian, meaning somebody who can distinguish, and appreciate, good food.

By all accounts it seems that this year's edition of the Summer Fancy Food Show was unexpectedly well-attended despite the crisis. And Italian food was paramount (250 exhibitors, the largest group by country).

Some old hands remarked that the downturn actually served to highlight quality, as so-so products were pushed out of the market and producers had to make an effort to upgrade or perish. Complacency is definitely out, as buyers are no longer prepared to settle for less than the best. Good news for all of us, by the way.

So here's the bottom line – our humble family business where quality comes first and foremost turns out to be cutting edge! And we really made a splash with our tiny production and love for nature's pure and simple ways. And for the duration of the Show we had the thrill of feeling trendy. Gosh, so cool!

Don't you worry, though. The intoxication vanished in a flash as soon as we were back home, on our good old PORNANINO estate, put-putting around in the rusty red tractor wearing very unglamorous overalls. Not for us the glitz of city life. Our roots are here, in the stony, dry soil of Chianti.

## White pests

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**One reason why we don't have to keep an eye on our olive groves all the time is that we are blessedly free of the tiny flies that make life miserable for most other olive oil producers, besides forcing them to spray pesticides to protect their harvests.**

As the old saying goes, the smaller, the nastier.



Olive trees can withstand the passing of time and prosper for centuries; they will grow on the stoniest of sun-baked

slopes; they fear neither the dry heat of summer nor the chilly winter rains. You can picture them as gnarled warriors standing guard over a Mediterranean tradition going back over the millennia.

Yet their worst enemy is a tiny white fly – a midget all of 5 mm long when fully grown.

Actually the white pest is olive oil lovers' nemesis, since it targets the fruit rather than the tree, but to all purposes and intents it's deemed the number one danger of the olive grove.

The bug, whose scientific name is *Bactrocera oleae* Gmelin, haunts all of the Mediterranean basin and South Africa, made landfall in California at the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and has likely spread farther afield by now to the countries where olive cultivation was recently started.

The white fly does have a preference for warm climates, just as the olive tree, but it's a shade less hardy. It can't stand excessive heat and won't thrive in dry weather as much as in cooler, wetter ones. A cold winter won't kill it, either, as the pupae can hibernate inside leftover olives for as long as four months.

And this is exactly the root of the problem. There are three stages in a white fly's life and they are all centred on the olive.

Females deposit their eggs in tiny holes they bore into the skin of olives, after testing them to make sure they have reached the correct stage of ripeness. This is because the larvae that develop from the eggs will dig deeper into the flesh as they mature, eating into it down to the pit. When the time comes for them to mutate, they will head back to the surface, burst the olive's skin and fly out as adult bugs.

All this pricking, boring and digging does great harm to the olive, as can be expected, and in time causes it to fall off ahead of time. An unchecked infestation of the white fly can wreak havoc in an olive grove, causing the loss of up to 80% of the harvest. Tainted olives must be discarded since any oil made from them would be high in acidity (which is not good) as well as often tasting rancid and/or musty.

Since the white flies multiply very quickly and will only die out in the event of an extremely cold winter, olive growers have no choice but to fight them.

The most effective weapon, alas, is also the most invasive – pesticides. Alongside those, in recent years there have been some interesting experiments such as biological traps using female fly pheromones to lure the bugs in, antagonistic insects and other low-impact, environmentally-friendly techniques. None of them has proved a satisfactory substitute for chemicals as yet.

If all else fails we can always go back to our grandfathers' ways. They used biological warfare too – a plastic bottle with a mix of sugar and wine lees inside. They hung it from a tree and bore a cigarette hole near the top, so that the bugs would smell the sweetness coming out and fly right inside, where the alcoholic vapours would have the better of them. Exit the white fly. Well, in our case let's hope we'll never have to kick it out. Please don't spread the word around too loud that our olives are so good. They might get ideas...

## Heavenly eating guide: prosciutto

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Welcome to a new column that is sure to interest our gourmet friends. Italian food is a favorite around the world, but are you sure you really know what your number one choice is all about?



Try asking an Italian shopkeeper for *prosciutto* and all you'll get is a blank stare, because the term by itself is vague to the point of uselessness – there are so many kinds, you see.

The most basic distinction is between *cotto* (cooked) and *crudo* (uncooked) and it's a very major one, despite the fact that they both come from the same cut of pork.

Cold cuts, or *salumi* in Italian, are one of the corner-stones of Italian cuisine. They come in a huge range of types, as a thoroughly delectable proof of the famed creativity that permeates our extraordinary Boot. Basically, they were all invented as a way of preserving pork meat, which was paramount since pigs were traditionally slaughtered only once a year, in the autumn.

Country folk used to say that every single bit of a pig can be used. The fact that nothing is ever wasted explains the vast array of sausages, which the English word once again can't even begin to express. You wouldn't think that there could be so many variations to the simple act of putting ground meat, salt and spices into a tube of intestines! In Italy there are.

Out of the most prized cuts – the thighs and shoulders – comes *prosciutto*.

To make the *cotto* variety, the meat is cured with salt first, then it's washed, deboned and boiled or steamed inside metal moulds. Pale pink in color, it has a delicate, inviting flavor and should be served thinly sliced, when consumed by itself. It's

also commonly used as an ingredient in countless preparations. It goes without saying that there are several variations to the classic recipe – it can be roasted instead of steamed, and there are herb-flavored and smoked varieties.

*Prosciutto crudo* is much more difficult to make, and as such is often considered the king of *salumi*. Abroad it's often called Parma ham, but the two are not synonymous. Parma is a major producer, and a PDO holder, but less-well known San Daniele is quite its match, and there are several smaller producing areas as well.

Air is so important to the process that the *prosciutti* develop quite distinctive features depending on where they come from. And the conditions must be exactly right to provide durability, tenderness and the subtle bouquet of flavors that are their trade-marks. Hence, you can't make *prosciutto crudo* just anywhere.

This is how it works. Pork thighs are covered with salt, pressed and stored for a time in a cool, moist location where the drying process is off to a gentle start. Then the meat is washed and stored at temperatures that get gradually warmer as humidity subsides. After 4 to 5 months, the thighs are moved to airy, well ventilated halls where the drying process continues for several months, during which lard is rubbed on the outer skin, together with salt, pepper and spices, to keep them supple and moist. Parma and San Daniele, both PDOs, are cured for at least 13 months.

Farmers have been making them since before Roman times. They still do, for that matter, although country hams tend to be rougher than their sophisticated PDO counterparts. Tuscany's tasty, full-flavored *prosciutto* is such a staple that it's said to be the reason why they don't put salt in their bread.

*Prosciutto crudo* is very high in proteins (and salt) and low in fat; it should contain neither artificial additives nor preservatives. It's best served on its own, very thinly sliced, and is set off to perfection by sweet melon and figs.

## Grandma Lia's olive oil recipes

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It's summer time again. So hot that you fairly long for healthy, light meals packed with vegetables and as low in calories as they are high in flavour. Trust Italians to know just what it takes to brave the heat without giving up on flavour.

### Country tart (serves 4)

1 courgette, approx. 7 oz  
Green beans (cooked), approx. 6 oz.  
1 sweet red pepper, approx. 4 oz.  
Ricotta or cottage cheese, 3 oz.  
8 eggs

8 slices of Tuscan bread  
Grated Parmesan cheese, 3 tablespoons  
fresh parsley, thyme, basil, marjoram  
Extra virgin olive oil

Thoroughly oil a baking tin, line with wet baking parchment and arrange on top of it the bread slices, generously brushed with olive oil. Toast in a hot oven (400° F) for about 10 minutes. Meanwhile thinly slice the courgette, slice the pepper and halve the green beans. Sauté the courgettes and peppers for a few minutes over a high heat, with a little olive oil. Add the cooked green beans, toss quickly, season with salt and pepper. Lightly beat the eggs, season with salt and pepper and the fresh herbs, chopped. Mix in the ricotta or cottage cheese and a tablespoon of grated Parmesan cheese. Pour the mix onto the bread slices and let stand for a few minutes, until it has soaked into the bread. Top with the vegetables, sprinkle with some more grated Parmesan cheese and bake for about 20 minutes. Remove from the baking tin, let cool and serve warm, cut into wedges, with a side of fresh salad.

### Zucchini meat loaf (serves 4)

½ lb ground meat (beef or any other kind)  
1 lb zucchini  
1 onion, small

1 sprig fresh mint  
2 tablespoons dried breadcrumbs  
3 tablespoons extra virgin olive oil

Sauté the diced zucchini and sliced onion with 2 tablespoons of extra virgin olive oil for about 5 minutes, until they are browned and still crisp – mind you don't overcook them to a mash. Season with salt and a pinch of sugar, mix in the chopped fresh mint and set aside to cool. Put the ground meat in a bowl, add 1 tablespoonful of dried breadcrumbs and the egg, season with salt and freshly ground pepper and combine. Add the warm zucchini and mix to combine. Brush a roasting tin with a little olive oil, dust with dried breadcrumbs and spoon in the meat and zucchini mix. Level, scatter the remaining dried breadcrumbs on top and drizzle with olive oil. Bake in the pre-heated oven for about 35 minutes, on until the top looks brown and crispy. Serve warm or cold, garnished with grilled zucchini strips. It actually improves if left to rest for a few hours or overnight before serving.



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