



THE *Pornanino* OLIVE OIL NEWSLETTER

No. 4, April 2007

Ah, la primavera. Spring is upon us, dearest friends, and the Tuscan countryside is awash with it. Grass is growing so fast you can almost feel it pushing under your feet – shove off buster, let nature get on with its business, will you. And should you happen to doze off out in the open, you'd probably wake up with flowers blooming out of your ears! But it's so nice and energizing, and of course it's the start of a new oil-making season. Time to get back to work; our own special brand of magic takes time to develop. Want to know what goes into it? In this issue of our newsletter you'll find a few more clues ... enjoy!

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Franco's olive grove diary



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styling a top model's tresses (but a lot less gratifying, sighs Franco ...).

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All about YOU

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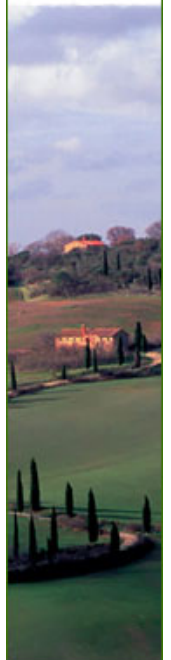
Here's the recipe, as requested by our friend Susan.

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Franco's olive grove diary

Springtime is when olive trees get their yearly haircut – something nearly as delicate as styling a top model's tresses (but a lot less gratifying, sighs Franco ...)



“*Aprile dolce dormire*”, as the Italian saying goes, meaning that the gentle warmth of spring makes you sleepy. This is certainly not the case with Franco, who just can't stand being idle. Not even in spring – and don't we all envy him!

So instead of snoring gently in the sunshine, (as we'd all do, given the slightest chance), he's already seen to the serious business of readying the olive trees for a new growing season.

Remember we said last autumn had been unusually mild? Well, winter was just as crazy; it was dry and warm most of the time, with no snow and barely a handful of seasonally cold days. Almost like St Tropez! Farmers hate it when the weather acts out of character, because it too easily swings from one extreme to the other.

Nature was lulled by high temperatures into thinking that spring had come a good two months ahead of time, and much too soon of course. Imagine what frost could have done to the tender buds that had mistakenly sprouted at the beginning of January.

Together with fellow Italian farmers, Franco worried all winter that the mild spell wouldn't last.

But it did. And forecasters say we could be in for the hottest summer on record ... yet again! Did you think that farming was a laid-back, relaxed occupation?

Pruning is sometimes referred to as a necessary evil, and it's a fact that neither of the interested parties relishes it. By some reckonings it accounts for 30% of production costs for olive growers, which goes to show how important it is. As for trees, they can't complain but it's not nice to be attacked by men armed with saws, secateurs and sundry sharp blades designed to remove parts of your body.

Yet a wise trimming is ultimately a good thing, because it keeps the tree healthy and evenly exposed to light and air. And the advantages for growers, says Franco, outweigh the cost and labor – unless you go about it the wrong way, that is, in which case the next couple of harvests might be at risk. Just like cutting a top model's hair, you see: one slip and you're out!

Of course the issue of how to go about it is hotly debated by everyone except the old *potini*, as olive tree pruners are called in Tuscany. A good *potino* knows by experience that each tree needs individual attention, and often follows his gut instinct to give each of his customers the right haircut. If the style is right, the tree will grow strong and healthy, it will bear more olives every year (instead of skipping one, as is often the case) and bear them on branches that are close enough to the ground to make hand-picking easier and quicker.

So this is how Franco welcomed back spring – with an eye to the weather forecasts and the other firmly trained on his beloved olive trees. To make sure that his own stars were getting a most flattering haircut.

All about YOU

A new column devoted to the community of our friends – all of you! Find out who your fellow oil-connoisseurs are and what they are up to.

We've even chosen a larger type to stress how important this is for us! **You are among friends here**, special people who share a love for some of the things that really matter in life – quality, friendship, truth. And **good food, travel and GREAT OLIVE OIL!** Some things are the same whether you happen to be born in Italy, in the US or elsewhere.

So **we've created this column for you**, because the whole point of friendship is sharing. We've been telling you all about us here at Pornanino, and now it's your turn to **tell us about you**. Because we care, we'd like to know. And so would others who receive this newsletter.

Harry, meet Sally

Think of this column as a party where you get to meet the LOOP (Lovers of Olive Oil from Pornanino) community. You know the kind of informal get-together where you unearth all kinds of interesting tidbits just by mingling and chatting up people. Are you just back from the most exciting trip to Tuscany? Let us know. Do you know a fabulous Italian restaurant, or food shop or whatever? Tell us. Is a big event coming up in your life you'd like to share with us? Are you launching a new venture? Experimenting with an olive oil recipe? Just drop us an e-mail. And keep an eye on this column, or you'll miss the interesting tidbits your fellow LOOPS are dying to share with you!

Food for thought

We're very proud to let you know that we have a number of book authors in our community. If you are a history buff, then check out Nelson Lankford's *Cry Havoc!* Here's what the New York Times had to say: "It unravels the events that led the North and the South to war in the weeks after Lincoln's inauguration in March 1861, disturbing the time-honored march of history with a series of provocative what-ifs. At every turn in a now familiar story, he suggests alternatives, missed opportunities and roads not taken. ... Mr Lankford's narrative is compact and engrossing". Congratulations Nelson! CRY HAVOC!
The Crooked Road to Civil War, 1861
By Nelson D. Lankford
Illustrated. 308 pages. Viking. \$27.95.

Would you help us grow?

Some of you sent us some very flattering comments about our Newsletter, and we are very grateful for their kind appreciation. So we thought that maybe you know someone who shares our love for olive oil, good food and all things Italian. Perhaps they would like to receive our Newsletter, and join the LOOP community. Well, if this is the case just let us have their name and e-mail address and we'll put them on the mailing-list. And since we know your time is precious, **we'll give you a thank-you bonus**. For every 25 e-mail addresses that you forward, you'll get 1 free bottle of olive oil out of your next 12-bottle order (you'll only pay for 11). How's that for a deal? And thank you for helping us grow – you're really part of the LOOP.

See you in the States

Join Franco for one of his olive oil seminars.

Here are the dates and places:

April 18th – Manchester, NH

For info call (603)629-4611

April 20th – Fitchburg, MA

For info call (978)665-3085

April 22nd – Colorado Springs, CO

For info call (719)527-9356

April 23rd – Colorado Springs, CO

For info call (719)630-0201

April 24th – Colorado Springs, CO

For info call (719)598-1088

April 25th – Briar Village Point, CO

For info call (719)475-8000

Do come and say hello!

Fat Facts

There's more to fats than the effect they have on our waistline. Some are friends, some are foes, and some are downright wolves in sheep's clothes.

In our health-conscious times fats have acquired a bad reputation, and rightly so, yet our body can't function without them. Lipids comprise one of the three large classes of foods and, with proteins and carbohydrates, are components of all living cells. Therefore we can't do without. Current recommendations generally agree that fats should cover about 30% of daily total calorie intake. This means that one third of the calories we consume every day should come from fats.

But fats come in different forms. The three main categories are saturated fats, monounsaturated fats and polyunsaturated fats.

Saturated fats generally come from animals and tend to be solid at room temperature, such as butter and lard. Tropical oils like palm and coconut are also rich in saturated fats. Since saturated fats are known to raise cholesterol, however, they should be consumed in moderation to prevent heart diseases.

Vegetable fats, which tend to be liquid at room temperature, can be either polyunsaturated or monounsaturated. Polyunsaturated oils were hailed as the healthy choice until it was discovered that they lower both kinds of cholesterol – the good, protective HDL as well as the bad LDL. Moreover, they need processing with chemicals of questionable safety, so they have rather fallen from grace with the scientific community. Dietary recommendations limit their consumption to no more than 7% of total daily intake of fats.

Sometimes vegetable fats undergo a chemical process that turns them from liquid to solid, as in vegetable margarine for instance. Unfortunately the hydrogenation process turns them into freak saturated fats, with dire results for our health. Dubbed trans-fats, and very widely used by the food industry, they are best avoided altogether.

Monounsaturated fatty acids are chiefly contained in olive oil and canola oil. Their impact on coronary heart disease. There is a substantial difference between olive oil and canola, though. Canola is made by high-temperature and chemical processing of genetically engineered rapeseed. After it proved highly toxic in the 70s, cholesterol, both good and bad, is limited and thought to be heart-friendly.

Both olive oil and canola have been authorized by the FDA to claim that consumption may decrease the risk of rapeseed oil was genetically redesigned to remove the poisonous compounds and rebranded Canola. It is a man-made product whose effects on human health after 15 years on the market are not yet fully understood.

Hold on: we're coming to olive oil. In addition to its 75% monounsaturated fatty acids content, olive oil is the only vegetable fat that is produced by pressing alone. It doesn't need chemicals or high temperatures, unlike sunflower oil, peanut or canola or all the other seed oils. It's absolutely natural. You press the fresh olives and the oil comes out. That's all. Why is that important? First, because there's no tampering with chemicals that may end up in the food you eat. Second, because industrial processing strips away most of the vitamins, nutrients and other compounds that would otherwise be naturally present and good for your health.

Olive oil is much more than a well-balanced combination of fatty acids. It is also rich in antioxidant compounds that promote cellular regeneration and combat free radicals. Research suggests that it may help prevent heart disease and some kinds of cancer, as acknowledged by both the American Heart Association and the American Institute for Cancer Research. By composition it is nearly identical to the fats contained in mothers' breast milk.



Oh ok, go make yourself a bruschetta with PORNANINO's heavenly olive oil. Of course it's not gluttony; it's good for you. Looks like it could be just about the only medicine you can safely enjoy

Weird and wicked – a short story of Tuscany continued

Why is Siena such a peculiar little town, and does it have anything to do with its being inhabited by Tuscans? Find out in the second part of our story.

With the Medicis at the helm, the might of Florence bloomed throughout the 15th century and most particularly under Lorenzo de' Medici (1449-1492), whose achievements earned him the well-deserved soubriquet of The Magnificent. Under his rule Florence grew to be one of the world's wealthiest and most influential cities, outshining London's 40,000 citizens with its own over 100,000.

A shrewd politician and diplomat, Lorenzo also had a taste for beauty and since cash was not an issue, he could afford to redesign his city according to Renaissance tastes and principles, calling to the task some of the most brilliant artists of the time – Filippo Brunelleschi, arguably the father of modern architecture, Donatello, Ghiberti, Masaccio, Botticelli, Piero della Francesca, that quirky genius Leonardo da Vinci and many others besides.

While Florence flourished, the other Tuscan cities lagged behind and could not avoid being swallowed one after the other. Siena fell in 1569 and, with it, all of Tuscany belonged to the Medicis (except for Lucca, who apparently bought its independence with quite a lot of gold).

At the height of their might, the Medicis gave two brides to the kings of France and to Christianity four popes. But not all the Medici rulers were as gifted as Lorenzo, and Tuscany was too small to compete with the great European kingdoms that were rising as the Renaissance bowed out of scene. The 17th century would favor Rome and, tellingly, it's there that Michelangelo died in 1564, the last of the Florentine greats.

From then on Tuscany dropped off the map as a world power, although it's still top of the list as far as art lovers are concerned. Nowhere else can you find such a concentration of masterpieces spanning such a range of different periods. Which brings us back to Siena.

Reflecting its golden age, most of Siena's architecture is medieval and remarkably well preserved. Actually, there are parts of it that seem almost frozen in time, although a good many centuries have passed since they were built, in

some instances 700 or 800 years ago. Doesn't that seem strange, in a world where most cities are changed beyond recognition in a matter of decades?

But it's not just the outward look of Siena that is still hooked to the Middle Ages; the past is eerily enmeshed in the very fabric of everyday life. Everyone has heard about the Contrade, the quarters that make up the city of Siena, and probably thought it quaint. Well, to the good people of Siena there's nothing quaint about it: allegiance to one's birth Contrada is dead serious.

Despite its diminutive size, Siena (55,000) is divided into 17 Contrade, or quarters. If you stroll around you'll see the markers at street crossings, telling you in which Contrada you happen to be. Local historians have traced back present-day Contrade's names to 1599, but they were probably already in use much earlier than that. And to this day they have administrative powers inside their territory acknowledged by the city council. To a Senese there is no greater power than the Contrada.

People belonging to the same Contrada all know each other and often take part in communal social activities, which extend to kids but are restricted to the *contradaiooli* – those who belong to the Contrada. Tradition further decrees that some contrade are enemies (have been for centuries), while others are allied. People from hostile Contrade happen to fall in love from time to time, but this is rather frowned upon and best avoided. In the past it gave rise to quite a few Romeo and Juliet-like dramas.

Each Contrada has its own council, its church and a museum where memorabilia dating back several centuries are stored, like the banners and historical costumes that are paraded during the Palio - yet another centuries-old tradition that still sets on fire the hearts and minds of *contradaiooli* of all ages.

Siena is such a fascinating town, and next time we'll focus on the Palio. Now that's something really weird and wicked - Tuscan-style!



Grandma Lia's olive oil recipes

A cornerstone of Tuscan culinary tradition, the ribollita soup is yet another masterpiece of simplicity. Here's the recipe, as requested by our friend Susan. Once upon a time it was customary for Italian women to spend hours cooking for the family, so please don't take simple to mean quick! Also, the recipe calls for three different kinds of cabbage – white cabbage (*cavolo bianco*), Savoy cabbage (*verza*) and black cabbage (*cavolo nero*), which is typical of Tuscany and made up of long, curly dark-green leaves growing like stiff plumes from a cabbage-like stalk. The name ribollita translates as “twice-boiled”, meaning that it is best reheated than eaten straight away.

Ribollita (serves 6)

Half a white cabbage

Half a Savoy cabbage

Black cabbage (6 leaves)

1 onion

2 spring onions

1 celery stalk

1 carrot

a handful of flat leaf parsley

a handful of basil

2 medium-sized tomatoes

1 can cannellini beans

8 slices of bread

extra virgin olive oil

Chop the onion and spring onions and cook them in a pan (earthenware is best) in 2 table spoons of olive oil, together with the sliced carrot and celery. When they are soft add the tomatoes, peeled, deseeded and chopped, the sliced cabbages and chopped parsley and basil. Season with salt and pepper and barely cover with water. Simmer over a very low heat for about one hour, adding more water if necessary.

Drain the canned beans, puré half of them and add to the simmering soup (you can use fresh or dried beans if you prefer – just boil them and use their own cooking liquid to make the ribollita soup). Add the reserved whole beans to the soup a few minutes before taking it off the heat.

Toast the bread slices. Arrange half of them at the bottom of a tureen and cover with half of the soup. Drizzle with a generous helping of olive oil, layer with the remaining bread slices and top with the soup and another drizzle of olive oil.

Leave overnight if possible, and reheat 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](#)