



# THE *Pornanino* OLIVE OIL NEWSLETTER

No. 6, October 2007

My goodness, look at the calendar! Can it be Autumn again? It must be, musn't it. Here's the October issue of the Pornanino Olive Oil Newsletter and you know we're always on time. Besides, this is the time we have been working towards all year long – it will soon be time to reap the rewards for all the loving care we lavished on our olive groves. And hopefully this year we will have the joy of presenting you with an olive oil that's even better than its usual outstanding standard. We are always pushing the limits of perfection because you deserve the best. And we want to make sure you get it! So get ready to taste a really remarkable new oil this year. **Just remember: you have to order it now if you want to receive it in time for Christmas.** And since our production is tiny, **if you don't order now you risk having to wait until the 2008 harvest!** That would be a real shame. We know you'd hate it, so don't forget to order your yearly supply right now! And be generous to your family and friends: give them some Pornanino nectar for Christmas.

## Franco's olive grove diary



The alarm clock is going to ring any day now. With a near-perfect season so far, Franco has high hopes for

this year's harvest. Everything plays out over the next few weeks, though, and the stakes are high. [Read more](#)

## Ordering Pornanino Extra Virgin Olive Oil how it works

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## Grandma Lia's olive oil recipes



As requested by Jan, here's the recipe for a hearty favourite bound to put just anybody

in a festive mood. Put on your apron and come learn how to make the most wonderful lasagne! [Read more](#)

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## Franco's olive grove diary

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**The alarm clock is going to ring any day now. With a near-perfect season so far, Franco has high hopes for this year's harvest. Everything plays out over the next few weeks, though, and the stakes are high.**

Weather forecasters have been trying to scare us all year, with dire predictions of drought and unprecedented summer heat more befitting of our African neighbours. We rather believed them, having enjoyed a blissfully mild winter and a stubbornly cloudless spring that made the usually foggy northern regions feel like Saint Tropez. Nature all over Italy refused to go to sleep as if they were afraid of missing some of the action – there were reports of wild animals that couldn't hibernate because of the warmth, and of deciduous plants that sprouted new leaves even before the old ones had been shed. And flowers bloomed a good couple of months ahead of time! Nothing good would come of such an unnatural state of things, that's for sure.

You know how sometimes things seem too good to be true. Wouldn't you wish all winters were balmy and ice-free? Well, in the end the doom-sayers were proved wrong. We enjoyed a very pleasant, although admittedly dry, spring followed by a rather fresh May and June. And, barring a few days of truly African heat, this past summer won't go down in the records for any particular reason. It was the usual mixed bag of sunshine and thunderstorms, long lazy afternoons and freshly laundered dawns.

Weatherwise this wasn't a very challenging year for Franco, although this is something that's easy to say in retrospect but not as obvious when everyone around is talking of coming disasters.

It must be said that Franco's philosophy of letting nature follow its course is wise in several ways, not the least of them being that it's soothing to the

nerves (particularly when everything is going well after all). But in some dark corner of every farmer's mind lurks the ghost of the ancestral fear that disaster sooner or later is going to strike.

You know that olive trees are hardy, as plants born in the rocky, dry soils of the Mediterranean shores are bound to be. They don't mind drought too much and the only thing they really fear is a sharp frost – that would be fatal. At this time of year the real enemy is autumn, should it come shrouded in rain and damp. The olives Franco has been cosseting all year long need gentle sunshine to ripen slowly to just the perfect stage, neither too soft and oily nor still bitter-tasting and raw. Too much rain would spoil everything at this time, as Franco would have to make a difficult decision: harvest sooner to avoid mould, or risk waiting until the perfect degree of ripeness (or under-ripeness) is achieved.

Is that really so important, you might well ask. You bet it is. We want your new oil to be just as good as it could possibly be. Even better than last year's. We want it to be the best you can have. So keep your fingers crossed, as Franco is doing while he patrols his olive groves. Picture him reciting his favourite maxim "perfect oil comes from perfect olives" as he delicately prods the plump fruit to gauge their quality.

Picture Franco among his beloved trees, looking up at the sky. It's been such a good season so far, why should it act up now? You'll have the best olive oil you've ever had. Trust Franco. You'll have the best.



## Ordering Pornanino Extra Virgin Olive Oil: how it works

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**You've never ordered our wonderful olive oil before and you'd like to know how it works? Then read on, and hopefully we'll have the pleasure of welcoming you into the selected ranks of our Pornanino friends. If you are an old hand have a look anyway: you might discover something new!**

In the unlikely event that you came by this newsletter by chance and have never ordered (or tasted) our top grade first-cold-pressed extra virgin olive oil, then take our advice: it's time for you to take the leap and experience some of the best olive oil you can hope to find. And the time is right now.

Let us explain. In an ideal world olive oil should be the golden fluid that comes out of the crushed fruit of the olive tree. These days, with world demand hitting the ceiling, most of the stuff that's marketed as "first cold pressed extra virgin olive oil" is either inferior grade or not exactly what it claims to be. Which doesn't necessarily mean it will make you ill, unless you've come across a downright scam – and there are quite a few around. Quite simply, most commercial olive oil has been processed and refined to the point that it's no longer the precious gift from nature it's supposed to be. Imagine the difference between a canned orange drink and a freshly squeezed juice. It's not really the same, is it? And the taste is not the same, either.

Tradition teaches us that olive oil, the genuine article, is beneficial to our health in several ways, and modern science has confirmed it. Of course it won't do your waistline any good if you are not careful, like any other fat, but taken in moderation it will make your body happy. And your taste buds too! But it needs to be the genuine article, because the heat and chemicals used for industrial processing will spoil both the flavor and vitamins, even assuming that the quality of the olives it was made from was adequate.

Perfect oil comes from perfect olives. Franco started making oil as a hobby, having retired to a neglected estate in the heart of the Chianti region of Tuscany. And he soon vowed he would do things by the book, even if it cost more in terms of hard work and expenses. He doesn't use any chemicals and tends to his groves himself, with the help of his family. And when autumn comes, they harvest by hand and cold-press the olives themselves and bottle the oil within a few days, working non-stop to make sure that neither the

olives nor the new oil are left lying around too long to oxidise – which is a nicer way of saying "spoil".

In Tuscany olives are usually harvested sometime in November and the "new oil" is greeted with much the same enthusiasm as a newborn. The proud possessors of a few olive trees (most of the population) take their crops to communal mills to crush and then discuss the merits of the vintage of the year against past years, as if it were wine. Unless it's been tampered with, natural olive oil will change over time. It starts peppery and sharp and stronger and then mellows as it matures. Just like vintage wine. If you pay attention, you'll see it changes colour slightly as the chlorophyll slowly subsides.

This is why we ship it out as soon as it's bottled. We like all of our friends to enjoy the thrill of the new oil as Italians have been doing for countless generations, savouring the green, earthy flavour of a juice so freshly squeezed that you can still faintly taste the sap. And we want you to be able to appreciate the subtle changes as it matures and mellows. Just treat it right: don't leave it exposed to air, sunlight and heat. Keep the bottle well corked up in a cool, dark place and use it up within 2 years. If you have some left don't throw it away, though, as all it will have lost is flavor and vitamins. Use it for frying instead.

Now you know why we usually ship our olive oil once a year, at the beginning of December – in time for Christmas. But this means you only have this one chance to order your yearly supply, as by January it might well be sold out! We have a tiny production since everything is done by hand, and we are very proud that the community of Pornanino olive oil lovers is growing all the time.

So please order your olive oil now, as we would really hate it if you couldn't get it later on. We've been working hard to give you some truly amazing olive oil this year. Don't you dare miss it!

[Click here to order](#)

## I want olive oil for Christmas!

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**Good kids are supposed to ask politely, but can you blame them for going straight to the point? So make them happy. Just pop into the kitchen with our easy-as-pea olive oil recipes and give Santa a hand. Success is guaranteed!**



You've had the good fortune (forgive us for saying so ourselves) of crossing the path of the PORNANINO Extra Virgin Olive Oil, and you were lucky indeed since our production is really tiny and we only sell to friends through word of mouth. It would be in the spirit of Christmas if you were to share your secret with your nearest and dearest, don't you agree.

We'd love to welcome

them to our community of olive oil-loving gourmets!

Of course you could give them a bottle or six, but wouldn't it be more fun to surprise them with something truly unique – a delicious treat that will delight everybody. And will take you only minutes to make.

Perhaps you already knew that olive oil is great at sucking in flavours, as most other oils, which is why the ancients used to make oil-based perfumes. Most specialty stores will be very glad to sell you several kinds of flavoured olive oils, but why should you buy the ready-made version when you can easily make your own? And you'll be using top quality PORNANINO Cold Pressed Extra Virgin Olive Oil (the real thing) and fresh ingredients – no artificial flavourings, colorants, preservatives and the likes.

All you have to do you is get some nice glass bottles; smallish ones perhaps would be better as you'll only use small quantities at a time, but do make sure the necks are wide enough to push the herbs in. And now comes the fun bit. Just fill the bottle with PORNANINO Cold Pressed Extra Virgin Olive Oil and choose your flavouring:

- a sprig of rosemary
- mixed juniper berries, white peppercorns and a few cloves
- 2 or 3 fresh chillies, depending on how hot you want your oil to be
- a few garlic cloves
- peel from an organic lemon, well rinsed, white part removed or it will turn bitter
- peel from an organic orange, well rinsed, white part removed or it will turn bitter
- a sprig of lemon grass
- any other herb you like, or a mix of your own devising

Once you have added your preferred flavouring to the oil, seal the bottle and let stand in a cool, dark place for about 10 days before using. You'll just have to gauge the right amount of herbs, spices or whatever you are using against the quantity of oil or it might come out either too strong or too weak. Experiment a bit and have fun!

Once you've mastered the technique (it won't take long) you'll have the perfect gift: a little loving care, a lot of wonderful taste that's great for the health and the senses, and a striking look. In fact, nature at its best.

Merry Christmas, and take care your PORNANINO Cold Pressed Extra Virgin Olive Oil gifts end up in the right hands – Santa might break all his rules and keep some for his own personal use ...

Oh, and don't forget to order some of our divinely mild Extra Virgin Olive Oil soap for cranky Aunt Kate. It might just soften up the old hide! And then, since you have been kind to her through gritted teeth all year, get some for yourself as a reward. It'll make sure you never turn into an old pain in the neck like her!

[Click here to order](#)

## The ancient charm of the nativity scene

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**As Christmas approaches, Italian families the world over are getting ready to unwrap the tiny, exquisite pieces that will be lovingly arranged around the Holy Family. Sounds easy? Ah, but it could take days to assemble a respectable nativity scene. And the result, many Italians claim, would put the most lavish Christmas tree to shame.**



Once upon a time, some three millennia ago, the Romans believed that the souls of

their ancestors stuck around to lend their help in case of need. To make sure the dear departed were willing to cooperate, the Romans made little figurines and put them in domestic shrines as if to say “see, we remember you so please don’t you forget us!”

Once a year, on the festival day of the *Sigillaria* in December, they celebrated the departed. Relatives exchanged little figurines representing family members who had passed away during the year, and kids had the task of cleaning the family collection of tiny ancestor images, rearranging them inside a small pen reproducing a countryside scene. Then the family would pray and leave offerings for the ancestors, and the following morning they would be gone, replaced by sweets and toys for the children.

This sounds familiar, doesn’t it? The theory goes on to say that when the Romans converted to Christianity some of their pagan festivals were adapted to the new faith. And the *Sigillaria* was turned over to the celebration of the birth of Baby Jesus.

Some say this is where the tradition of the crèche came from; others maintain it was introduced by St Francis of Assisi, who was the first to have a live re-enactment of the nativity staged for the Christmas Mass of 1223. Be it as it may, it’s a fact that at a time when illiteracy was the norm the Church often resorted to visual means to explain and teach, which is why Medieval churches were often lavishly decorated with frescoes where Biblical scenes and the life of Christ were displayed in pictures, like colourful children books. Nativity scenes were often featured, and even played out by live actors in the so-called Mystery plays of the Middle Ages.

By the 15<sup>th</sup> century it had become common practice to have large sculpted nativity pieces year-round in the major churches and monasteries (many are still around today), but it was the Protestant reform that brought about the major shift leading to present-day *presepio*. As coaxing the errant sheep back to the Catholic fold became a priority, the nativity scenes acquired a realistic, homely feel simple folk could identify with - the holy family was steeped in the hustle and bustle of an Italian peasant setting.

In some instances the rustic look was a little contrived. In Naples, where the *presepio* was the rave of the beau monde during the whole of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, the aristocracy hired real architects, light designers and artists to stage elaborate nativity scenes that could take up several rooms. Dummies dressed in meticulously detailed costumes, made with the finest fabrics and real jewels, reproduced the country life of the time, the crafts, and a rich cast of characters down to the lame beggar and gypsy woman.

Such lavish productions couldn’t survive the golden age of Naples, but the tradition trickled down to the alleyways and courts to be returned to the humble folk, who promptly embraced it and haven’t let it go ever since.

The streets around the church of St Gregory of the Armenians in Naples are still packed with tiny workshops turning out hundreds of exquisite figurines, miniature houses, treadmills, tiny animals and craftsmen of all kinds, drunks and fighting children, pouting belles and fisherwomen and all the colourful society of a Neapolitan country village around 1750. It’s a magical sight around Christmas!

Not all Italian children have the good fortune to pick their crèches in the Naples wonderland. But even those who have to make do with plastic ones spend hours blissfully arranging them around the mirror lake, up cardboard hillsides lined with musk. And when the time comes to light up the fairy lights, they feel they have the most wonderful *presepio* in the world.

## Grandma Lia's olive oil recipes

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In her e-mail, our friend Jan Collins says she would like the recipe for “authentic” lasagne. Unfortunately Italians are an individualistic lot, and a deeply food-loving people to boot, which means that there are almost as many different versions of the best-loved dishes as there are cooks in Italy. I once made lasagne for some Roman friends, and they couldn't believe it was lasagne! In the south of Italy they make it all different, often layering the pasta sheets with small meatballs and hard-boiled eggs – which is something a Northern Italian cook would *never* do.

By almost universal consent, though, lasagne belong to the traditional cuisine of Emilia-Romagna, a northern Italian region famous all over the world for such delicacies as Parma ham, Parmesan cheese, meat-filled *tortellini* and a host of other wickedly rich and luscious dishes. Of course since Emilia is a gourmet's



paradise, everyone used to have their own idea of how perfect lasagne should be and their own secret recipe for the most important part of the dish – the meat sauce Italians call *ragù*. It's basically a mix of veal and pork, with some sausage thrown in for extra flavor and to pile on calories (lasagne are supposed to be rich and definitely NOT low-fat). Some recipes call for a little tomato purée, some douse it with red wine or milk instead of the more common white wine. Most lasagne are finished off with creamy white sauce, although the traditional recipe from Emilia wouldn't actually call for it.

Here's my personal recipe for lasagne – I hope you'll enjoy it!

**Lasagne** (serves 6)

**6-9 ready-made egg pasta squares (lasagne)**  
depending on size

**1 ¼ pint milk**

**2 oz butter**

**2 tablespoons flour**

**Grated nutmeg**

**1 small carrot, finely chopped**

**1 celery stick (roughly double the weight of the carrot), finely chopped**

**1 medium-sized onion, finely chopped**

**2 bay leaves**

**11 oz ground meat**

**5 oz fresh sausage (salsiccia)**

**½ cup grated Parmesan cheese**

**1 tablespoon tomato purée**

**A few dried porcini mushrooms (optional)**

**2 oz dry white wine**

**Salt and freshly ground pepper**

Soak the dried porcini mushrooms in a little warm water, if using. Finely chop the carrot, celery and onion and cook them in a saucepan with a little butter and Pornanino Extra Virgin Olive Oil over a slow heat until soft and translucent. Add the bay leaves, ground meat and mashed sausage (remove the skin first), turn up the heat and cook for a few minutes, stirring with a wooden spoon to prevent it from sticking. When the meat is no longer pink and raw-looking douse with the wine, add the tomato purée, chopped mushrooms (if using) together with their soaking liquid, a pinch of salt and a little freshly-ground pepper. Cover with a lid and cook over a very slow heat for 3 hours, adding a little water or stock if it looks like sticking. Don't add too much and only if needed. Adjust the seasoning if needed and put aside. It will keep for a few days in the fridge. It freezes quite well.

Make the white sauce: melt the butter in a saucepan, add the flour and cook for a couple of minutes, stirring all the time. Remove from the heat, add a little milk and stir vigorously. When the mix is smooth pour in the rest of the milk and cook for about ten minutes. Season with salt, freshly ground pepper and some grated nutmeg. When it's cooked remove from the heat and add two tablespoons of grated Parmesan cheese. Stir to dissolve.

Scald the lasagna squares in plenty of boiling water if necessary (read manufacturer's instructions). Cover the bottom of a well greased baking tin with a layer of lasagna squares. Cover with ragù, sprinkle with grated Parmesan cheese and spread enough white sauce to cover. Add another layer of lasagna squares, ragù, Parmesan cheese and white sauce. Finish off with one final layer of lasagna squares, the last of the white sauce, a generous sprinkling of Parmesan cheese and a few dots of butter. Bake in a moderately hot oven (375°F) until golden on top, about 40 minutes.

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