



THE *Pornanino* OLIVE OIL NEWSLETTER

No. 8, April 2008

Ah, the never-ending changing of the seasons! Here's yet another spring bursting with the green energy of new growth, as nature gets down to business prodding and coaxing and kicking all manner of living things back into motion after the long winter break. To us here in Italy, spring heralds the all too familiar ritual of early elections – given 59 governments in 62 years as a republic, it rather seems to go with the season. Let's hope the next offshoot proves sturdier than the previous ones! Our private little corner of the peninsula is doing fine nonetheless, and here's the latest news. Enjoy springtime and do let us know how *you're* doing!

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Franco's olive grove diary



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riot of greenery elbowing for a spot of sunshine. Welcome to a brand new growing season! [Read more](#)

A slippery business

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All about YOU

Hey, come on in. Our community bulletin board is full of new posts, including a **super offer you don't want to miss!** Be sure to check it out right now. [Read more](#)

Grandma Lia's olive oil recipes



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as vibrant as the season demands. [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

You know how spring is: one minute the hills are nice and tidy, and the next everywhere you look is a riot of greenery elbowing for a spot of sunshine. Welcome to a brand new growing season!

One of the first symptoms of spring is restlessness. With daylight hours getting longer and more sunshine providing the illusion of warmth, by mid-February one vaguely feels that's it's been winter long enough and it's time



to move on. Surely after Christmas and all of January for skiing and enjoying one's own fireplace, the charms of the cold season are well-nigh exhausted.

Yet the wise people of old knew that March is unpredictable ("*marzo pazzo*", they used to call it – mischievous March) and, even though spring has officially started by then, April is not to be trusted either ("*aprile non ti scoprire*" says the old adage – don't put away your coat yet!).

We should know better, but you know how it is. You just feel you can't spend another afternoon holed up indoors. And hate every freezing minute you have to toil outside, especially when you'd been expecting (foolishly) that it would be milder today. Nope, spring's not in the air yet. Drat.

Spring this year was her usual fickle self – here one day, gone the next. Note that spring in Italian is most definitely female just like summer, while autumn and winter, the old bores, are both male. La Primavera, as we call her in Italian, is the ultimate prima donna. You know the kind, a radiant young lady in a flimsy dress carrying a cornucopia of vegetable goodies, to the accompaniment of a Vivaldi concerto. She's the one we've been fretting for, the goddess from Botticelli (who, as a native of Florence, was technically a neighbour of ours).

Ok, back to reality. Goddesses unfortunately have their bad days too.

One major reason why our olive oil is so good is that the soil is just about perfect for growing olive trees. Grape vines also thrive, and that's pretty much all the crops you can expect to flourish around here. If you can believe it, until a few decades ago the Chianti was a seriously poor, underdeveloped area. Too many stones and too little water – except in spring.

Rain in spring is a good thing. It acts as a combined wake-up call and morning coffee for the vegetal world, as well as replenishing the underground aquifers in anticipation for the dry summer months. Which is all very well, were it not for the peculiar composition of the local red earth which combines with water to form a slippery squishy sticky kind of mud that is exactly like wet clay. Which explains why pottery, terracotta tiles and bricks have been so popular around Tuscany for millennia, doesn't it.

So off we plod, skidding and sinking under gentle spring showers (highly beneficial but still cold and wet), as we struggle to keep up with nature's enthusiastic awakening. Who needs all that sophisticated gym equipment with so much good clay weighing down your boots and so many slopes to climb? And the non-stop cutting and pruning do wonders for the muscles of the shoulders and arms – again and again. As any gardener knows, the more you cut the quicker it grows right back!

Obviously neither Mr Botticelli nor Mr Vivaldi (a city born and bred Venetian) had any first-hand experience of spring in the countryside. Think of us as we battle mud and over-eager growth. We're doing this for you! With all our love.

A slippery business

If you can't tell good oil from bad by looking at it, if you can't judge it either by the label or the bottle, how on earth are you supposed to choose?

We have borrowed our title from an extremely informative article by Tom Mueller published in the New Yorker issue of August 13, 2007. All of its over 5,500 words (or 6 closely printed A4 pages) are devoted to oil-related fraud, and don't think it seems rather too much because, in fact, the author just skimmed the surface of an ocean-sized mess.

To us in Italy olive oil is a staple you'll find in each and every kitchen along with salt, sugar and coffee. Elsewhere around the world it has to compete with many other edible fats, yet the American market alone slurps up olive oil to the tune of an astounding one and a half billion dollars a year. And it's still growing despite a 100% increase over the past decade.

Olive oil is obviously a global player, much as it was across the Mediterranean world in ancient times so it's no wonder that even back then unscrupulous traders had come up with all sorts of scams. Today it's such a money-maker that Italian authorities reckon flawed olive oil might be as profitable as cocaine, with none of the unpleasant downsides of the drug trade.

Let's face it – olive oil is easy to fiddle with, and it doesn't help that making it by the rules is a slow and expensive business. Cheap and fast can be achieved in a number of ways, the most straightforward being to bulk-buy inexpensive olives by the shipload around the world and turning them into "Italian" oil, the most prized, at a hefty profit (often without breaking any law). As if French wine could be made by importing Chilean grapes, with a little chemical make-up to mask the mouldy taste of rotting fruit.

That is an almost childish trick compared to the practice of cutting olive oil with seed and hazelnut

oils, which are chemically very similar and therefore difficult to detect. A little chlorophyll takes care of the color, and artificial flavorings do the rest. Of course a heavy-handed doctoring would not pass the test of a discerning consumer, since the bouquet of real olive oil cannot be faked, but low-end customers are likely to privilege cost over quality. And with seed oil being much cheaper than olive, there's ample margin for profit even when the price tag is suspiciously low. .

Then there's an intermediate scam, where you label your olive oil as extra virgin when it's not. According to European law, extra virgin olive oil should be obtained by mechanical means only (no chemicals or heat allowed), have a low acidity (meaning the olives that went into it were reasonably fresh) and, since lab tests are sometimes unable to detect fraud, it has to be passed by a panel of registered professional tasters. In practice extra virgin is quite often blended with lower grade virgin olive oil, and even bottommost *lampante*, with the excess free acids and unpalatable bits fixed chemically.

The bottom line is – even if the label says "Italian", chances are the olives that went into it were imported, or even the oil itself; in fact, it might not actually be 100% olive oil. And if it is, it could be a blend of different grades. That's discouraging. And it's one of the reasons why Franco makes his own!

What can the hapless consumer do? Avoid cheap brands. Only buy first cold pressed extra virgin olive oil. Always taste some before buying in quantities. Don't assume that a sky-high price will guarantee quality – crooks love cashing in fat cheques in exchange for fancy bottles of olive oil look-alikes. Above all, use our PORNANINO nectar as a touchstone. You can't go wrong.

Sorry, no US tour this year

What, no US tour!? Unfortunately that's quite correct - Franco is not coming to the States this year. But don't panic. Some busy little bees are planning ahead for 2009 and meanwhile why don't *you* come and see us?

How can this be, we can almost hear some of our aficionados wonder in disbelief. Franco has been coming over to the States every year around April for quite a few years now, and very much looking forward to his American trips as an occasion to look up old friends and meet new kindred spirits. You should know by now how passionately committed to his olive oil-furthering mission he is! So what on earth went wrong?

We are almost ashamed to admit that we were just too busy to think about it until it was too late. Actually it was only when somebody asked about dates and venues that Franco realized we had quite forgotten about the tour! And it's not something you can set up at a couple of weeks' notice either. This just goes to show what happens when you start giving things for granted, but it won't happen again, we promise.

By the way, may we take this opportunity to remind all of you that Franco would be happy to talk about olive oil to your country club, community center, restaurant, school, or whatever audience you think could be interested in hearing an enthusiastic self-made olive-man talk about a truly fascinating subject matter. Franco is both informative and fun, and his audiences always have a great time. Any venue will do provided it's possible to serve food – you can't just hear about wonderful olive oil, you have to taste it! For more information please send us a mail. We are planning ahead for the spring of 2009!



To learn all you'll ever need to know about olive oil (or most of it, anyway) you don't have to wait for Franco to come to the States. Just pack up and head for sunny Italy where the food is superb, life is sweet and you'll never, ever get bored! Also,

you'd get a chance of visiting us in PORNANINO to see the place where your favorite olive oil is lovingly produced.

Seriously, if you are planning to visit Tuscany or the Chianti area do let us know! We'd love it if you dropped by for a chat, and if you want Franco to give you his little lecture about olive oil that can be arranged as well, for a small fee (including a generous bruschetta session!). All of our friends are of course entitled to a discounted rate for the olive oil seminary, which we will be glad to extend to any friends of our friends. Just mention the Newsletter when booking, so we know there are VIPs coming!

Perhaps you are wondering what kept us so busy last year. First of all there was a new entry in the family – a brand new baby girl born to Franco and Lia's son Stefano. Grandchild no. 4, whose name is Lavinia, looks very promising despite the young age, and might soon contend her brother Ettore (4) his prized seat on Grandpa's red tractor. Ettore just loves chug-chugging around on the tractor! Franco's grand-daughters by daughter Francesca are both teenagers, and as such understandably unimpressed by country life as yet.

At 11 and ½ (that's Beatrice and she'd like people to think of her as a 12 year old, please) and nearly 14 (Veronica) they are not all that keen to follow in their father's admittedly muddy footsteps. Franco's son-in-law Matteo relocated with his family to PORNANINO about three years ago and is now helping Franco full-time around the estate. Which is growing, much like the family, with new plots and olive groves to care for, and bigger harvests to lovingly turn into wonderful oil for the widening circle of our gourmet friends.

That's what kept us extra busy, and we're not complaining either! Ours is a good life, doing something we truly enjoy in a beautiful place. Do come round and we'll show you just how lucky we are! Could our oil be so good because it's made from contented olives? There's food for thought here ...

Mamma mia, the ultimate Italian phrasebook

So it's a deal. This year you're coming over to our place. First time in Italy? Then this handy little Italian phrasebook is for you.

The problem with phrasebooks is that if you're too good at asking in the local language, people will be delighted to answer you. And you won't understand a thing. So does it actually make sense to bother memorizing a few phrases, or had you just as well improvise as you go?

Since most of the people you'll meet know at least a smattering of English, you can actually spare yourself the effort. Just remember to smile a lot and be very patient, because the average proficiency over here is pretty low – and the Italian accent as thick as budino (that's the Italian for pudding).

But it's nice to be able to speak at least a few basic words, so here we go. Before we start, though, be advised that Italian is a much more complex language than English. Just for starters, nouns can be either masculine or feminine therefore adjectives, articles, pronouns etc. should be adjusted accordingly. Also plurals can be either masculine or feminine, and don't think you can just throw in an "s" at the end! To clarify, here's a simple phrase that will win you over the prickliest Italian parent (or grandparent or sundry family member with kids in tow):

Che bel bambino! (*kè bèl bam-bèe-no*)

what a beautiful little boy

Che bella bambina! (*kè bèl-la bam-bèe-na*)

what a beautiful little girl

Che bei bambini! (*kè bèl bam-bèe-nì*)

such beautiful little boys

Che belle bambine! (*kè bèl-le bam-bèe-ne*)

such beautiful little girls

Now if you think you can detect a pattern there, think again. The Italian language is all about exceptions to a long-forgotten general rule. Don't even try. Just relax and accept that you'll inevitably say something silly - no one will ever hold it against you. Italians get it wrong all the time ...

Let's start by being polite:

Buongiorno (*boo-òn djiò-rno*)

hello, formal to be used until dusk

Salve (*sàl-ve*)

hello, non-committal

Ciao (*châ-o*)

hello, bye, informal to be used with close friends

Buonasera (*boo-òna sè-ra*)

good evening

Arrivederci (*arree-ve-dèr-chee*)

see you, bye

Per favore (*pèr fa-vò-re*)

please

Grazie (*grà-tsee-e*)

thank you

Grazie mille (*grà-tsee-e mèe-lle*)

many thanks – literally "a thousand"

Prego (*prè-go*)

you're welcome, don't mention it – standard answer to anyone's "grazie"

Scusi (*scòo-see*)

excuse me, sorry

Mi dispiace (*mee dee-speeà-che*)

I'm sorry

Le dispiace? (*lè dee-speeà-ce*)

do you mind?

Posso entrare? (*pò-ssò en-trà-re*)

may I come in?

Posso fare una foto? (*pò-ssò fà-re ùna phò-to*)

may I take a picture?

Posso guardare? (*pò-ssò goo-ardà-re*)

may I have a look around?

Molto gentile (*mòl-to djen-tèe-le*)

very kind (of you)

Molto buono (*mòl-to boo-òno*)

very good, very tasty

Molto bello (*mòl-to bèl-lo*)

very beautiful

Bella casa (*bé-l-la cà-sa*)

beautiful home/house

Bellissima! (*be-llèe-ssee-ma*)

very beautiful - feminine

Bellissimo! (*be-llèe-ssee-mo*)

very beautiful – masculine

Bravo cane, cuccia (*brà-vo cà-ne, còo-chcha*)

good dog, down – telling doggie you mean no harm

Aiuto! (*aeè-òoto*) Help!

To be continued – **segue** ...

All about YOU

Welcome to our community bulletin board! If you'd like to post a message just let us know and we'll include it in the next issue of the Newsletter. By the way, we are proud to inform you that we are growing fast: the January issue reached all of 4,500 olive oil enthusiasts!

Get smart, get quick, GET A DEAL!

So who cares if the greenback misbehaves, pushing prices through the roof. **We are freezing the euro/US dollar exchange rate until June!** Just pre-order the 2008 olive oil between now and the end of June and you'll take advantage of our **special exchange rate of USD 1.50 per euro.** Blocked, guaranteed. We'll charge your credit card upon receipt of your order, and you can stop worrying about fluctuating exchange rates. But you **have to be quick, because the offer will expire at the end of June!** Get smart, pre-order your 2008 olive oil early and save! Delivery will be in December, after the harvest, as usual.

Bear Necessities

We are very glad to report that the Bear Tie Crystal Ball charity event was a success. As you will remember we had given some of our olive oil to be auctioned, as well as a week at one of the cozy cottages we rent out, here on the PORNANINO estate, as a prize for the raffle. Some lucky Chicagoans will be coming over to stay with us! Well, it's the just deserts for supporting such a truly deserving mission as Bear Necessities'. If you want to know more about what they do to help children with cancer and their families please check out their website at www.bearnecessities.org.

For Jan – casoncei recipe

Dear Jan, as is so often the case with Italian cuisine there seem to exist as many versions of traditional dishes as there are cooks around ... *Casoncei* are typical of the mountains that arch across the northern rim of Lombardy, Veneto and Trentino Alto Adige, marking the border with Switzerland and Austria. Basically they are just the local word for the kind of filled pasta that is elsewhere known as *ravioli*, *agnolotti*, *tortelloni* and in many other ways. The basics are the same everywhere – you make a dough with flour, a little semolina, fresh eggs and as much cold water as it takes for a soft but not sticky consistency, knead it until it turns shiny and elastic, and roll it out as thin as you can. You then put small amounts of filling on the dough and seal them in, cutting the individual pieces the shape and size you prefer – squares, rounds, half-moons or whatever. As for the filling, it could be just about anything! This is a really huge family, spanning from all sorts of meats to vegetables (*casoncei*, in particular, often feature pumpkin, potatoes, spinach and beetroot), to cheeses and even fish. Sometimes they're sweet instead of savoury and served as a dessert. Sorry Jan, we couldn't find a *casoncei* recipe featuring mushrooms but you can try mixing ricotta (or cottage cheese) with plenty of grated Parmesan cheese, a little bread soaked in water, 1 egg (or more, depending on overall quantity) and roughly chopped cooked mushrooms (bell mushrooms mixed with a few dried Porcini will do), parsley and a little ground nutmeg.



Grandma Lia's olive oil recipes

Light, colorful and brimming with vitamins and fresh herbs, these springtime recipes are as vibrant as the season demands.

Lemony chicken (serves 4)

4 large chicken legs (about 14oz each)
2 lemons
2 garlic cloves (optional)
3 large sprigs of rosemary
freshly ground pepper
extra virgin olive oil

Set the oven to fairly hot – about 400° F.
Wash 1 lemon and slice it. Gently pull the skin off the chicken legs without removing it and push underneath one lemon slice and a bit of rosemary for each leg. Arrange the chicken legs into a roasting tin greased with a little extra virgin olive oil. Scatter the remaining lemon slices and rosemary over and between the chicken legs, as well as the garlic cloves if liked. Sprinkle with salt and freshly ground pepper and douse with the juice of the second lemon. Drizzle with extra virgin olive oil and roast in the oven for about 35 minutes. To test whether the chicken is done prick the meat with a fork: the liquid that comes out should be clear. If it's pale pink the meat is still raw.



Vegetable gratin (serves 4)

4 potatoes, medium sized
2 fennel bulbs, small
4 shallots
2 leeks, medium sized
2 heads of red radicchio salad
fresh thyme, parsley, rosemary, oregano, bay, sage, chili pepper
freshly ground pepper
extra virgin olive oil

Set the oven to slow, about 300° F.
Thoroughly wash, peel and cut the vegetables in big chunks. Arrange them in a baking tin lightly greased with extra virgin olive oil. Sprinkle with salt and freshly ground pepper, generously season with extra virgin olive oil and toss with the chopped herbs (about 4 tablespoons in all) and chili pepper to taste, making sure the vegetables are evenly coated all over. Add a little water (no more than ½ cup) and bake for 1 ½ hours or until the potatoes are cooked through, adding more water if needed.



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