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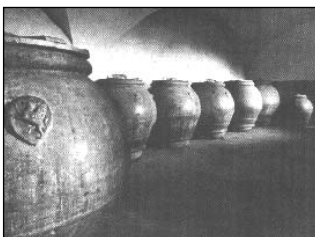


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LATE APRIL 2006

The Great Olive Oils of Tuscany, 2005

A great olive oil is one of Mother Nature's most remarkable gifts—the essence of the olive, bursting with its own constellation of flavors and aromas, yet capable of marrying with a vast diversity of foods. And in our view, and the view of many, the world's greatest olive oils come from Tuscany.



For two centuries, these beautiful terracotta orci have held fine Tuscan olive oils.

Yet making great olive oil requires an obsessive attention to detail. It results from an ideal *terroir*, low yields and harvesting at a point of perfect *underripeness*, before the olives turn from green to black. Even in Tuscany, such care and expense is beyond most producers. And so most Tuscan olive oils fall far short of greatness.

This will be particularly true when the 2005 oils come on the market this year. As with Tuscany's 2000 and 2003 oils, the variation in quality will be dramatic.

A Demanding Harvest

The cause was a difficult growing season, featuring a June-July drought, August-September rains and then, in many parts of Tuscany, unstable weather at the end of October and beginning of November, when the best growers were harvesting.

No one escaped the weather's ill effects. In fact, in the 12 years we have visited Tuscany in November to taste olive oil, we can never recall so much variation among pressings. The oils we saw were from three distinct periods:

"To my taste, olio extra vergine di oliva has found its promised land at the nation's heart, in the hills of Tuscany, where climes compel the tree of the gods to show all of its venerable mettle."

Burton Anderson

(1) **October 25-29.** In Northern Tuscany, this stretch of warm sunny weather was wedged between two rainy periods: Oct. 19-22 and the end of the month. Early harvesters made some of their best oils during this time.

(2) Due to sporadic rain, many oils pressed between **October 30** and **November 6** were weak in flavor and color.

(3) For a few days after **November 7th**, fine oils were made. At the outset, there were still plenty of green olives on the trees, but waiting even a week meant a pronounced decline in intensity.

Then, on November 20th, plunging temperatures brought the harvest to an early close at most estates.

As always, we were in Tuscany mid-harvest, tasting multiple pressings at many estates. This allowed us to find the "sweet spot" almost everywhere; and it was usually an oil pressed between Oct. 25-29 or Nov. 7-10.

The 2005 Oils

The result is a remarkable group of rich and expressive 2005 oils. They feature excellent weight, texture, and perfume. And, based on what we *didn't* select, we

know that they will soar above the 2005 Tuscan oils that will appear from less exacting sources this year.

We'll save a detailed rundown for the inside pages, where you will find many old favorites, plus one very exciting new producer, each the quintessence of great Tuscan olive oil. □

The Differences Between Good and Great

Just as subtle differences in grape source and vinification can profoundly influence the quality of a wine, there are factors that separate great olive oils from merely good ones. Here are the most important of them.

Microclimate — While olive oil is produced throughout the Mediterranean, many feel that the greatest oils of all are produced in Tuscany's interior hills—from old trees in poor soil and cool microclimates.

Ripeness — The time of harvest is crucial, with the best Tuscan oils made from olives that are harvested in late October or early November while many are still green. Olives at this stage of ripeness produce an oil with a green color and intense flavors of artichoke and freshly cut grass.

These “early-harvest” oils also have extraordinary structure—plus the ability to withstand the four enemies of olive oil: age, heat, light and air. In fact, a good early-harvest oil, if properly stored, can keep for two or more years with ease. In contrast, most commercially available olive oils (including many expensive ones) already show noticeable deterioration six months after the harvest.

The explanation is that early-harvest olives have substantially more tannins which, as in wine, retard oxidation. Consequently, Tuscan olive oils that have a greenish color hold up much better after opening, maintaining their fresh aromas and flavors.

So, why not harvest all the olives early and produce only great oil? It's very labor-intensive, costly and slow. The olives at this stage of ripeness must be plucked off one by one. Less quality-conscious growers wait until the olives are ripe enough to be shaken from the branches or fall to the ground on their own.

Early picking also produces much less oil from the same weight of olives (which is why the yield figures we quote are significant). Our growers often obtain only 1 to 2 liters of olive oil *per tree*; the big commercial olive oil producers, who harvest in January or February, can get ten or more times that amount from a single tree.

Method of Extraction — For most top-quality producers, the extraction method of choice begins when the newly harvested olives are ground into a paste, using heavy granite stones. The paste is then gently

pressed to extract oil and water, with the water separated off either by gravity or by using a centrifuge. No chemicals or heat are used. It is also crucial that the fruit arrive at the *frantoio* (the press house) speedily and unbruised. Otherwise, the olives will oxidize and develop a high level of oleic acid.

The International Olive Oil Council (*IOOC*) has adopted oleic acid as a

standard measure of quality; a high percentage indicates overripeness, damage or that olives have sat around too long before pressing. The *IOOC* permits the “Extra Virgin” label only if an oil has less than one gram of free acidity, expressed as oleic acid, per 100 grams of oil (1 percent).

In fact, top Tuscan oils have a fraction of the permitted level of oleic acid. This is due to their early harvest and the great care that goes into making them.

Filtering — Most producers filter their oil, so they don't have to explain to customers why there is sediment in the bottle, or why the oil is not crystal clear. Filtering also allows them to be less concerned with how the oil is stored and transported. But, as with wine, filtering strips the oil of richness and texture. We believe that olive oil is best if settled by gravity and not filtered.

Age — Top Tuscan oils have a window of optimal usability that is far greater than for other oils. During the first year of their lives, they are intensely flavored, with the distinctively peppery finish that Tuscans prize. As time goes on, they mellow, but if well-stored, will continue to offer exceptional flavor and aromatics.

Keeping Oil Fresh — Great Tuscan oils withstand heat and light better than other oils, but they still deteriorate if abused. Unopened bottles should be stored in a cool, dark place like a wine cellar. Once opened, they are best kept in a cool dark cupboard away from the stove. Following these rules, your oils will remain fresh and vibrant. □



The birthplaces of our 2005 Tuscan oils.

The Oils IL POGGIONE

SAN ANGELO IN COLLE (MONTALCINO)

Il Poggione's extra virgin olive oil has been a staple in our kitchen for close to two decades—ever since our first visit in 1988. This venerable Brunello producer has long produced an oil whose price-quality rapport is nearly unparalleled. But since installing its new state-of-the-art frantoio in 2004, its oil is now one of the top extra virgins of Tuscany, regardless of price.

The new equipment allows Il Poggione to take full advantage of its wealth of ancient olive trees, rooted in rocky soil at elevations of up to 500 meters. If you tried our 2004 Il Poggione oil, you already know how the quality here has soared.

But Il Poggione's new frantoio isn't the only reason why our new bottling will rival anything made in Tuscany in 2005. Arriving at the estate during the



Old and new. At Il Poggione, an ancient olive tree and the new state-of-the-art frantoio.



harvest, we were able to snag a monumental *cuvée*: the fruit of Il Poggione's oldest Moraiolo trees, harvested and pressed under sunny skies in late October. The property agreed to bottle it just for us without filtration.

Stunningly green and enormously constituted—with an intense nose of artichoke and grass, and a superbly peppery finish—it is a classically profound Tuscan oil. And at the equivalent of \$14.00 a half liter it is an mindboggling value. Not to be missed.

**2005 Il Poggione
Extra Virgin Olive Oil**

\$27.95 1-liter



10% discount on any olive oil purchase of 12 bottles or more

LA PORRONA MONTISI

Surrounded by two of Italy's most picturesque valleys—the Val d'Orcia and the Val di Chiana—the medieval village of Montisi is dedicated to the cultivation of vineyards, wheat and ancient groves of olive trees. And some say that the area's white truffles are the finest you'll find outside of Alba.

It is the type of place you visit once and stay forever. And so goes the story of Pino Brusone, who left his career running fashion houses like Armani and Donna Karan when he found a magical 70 acres outside Montisi. He restored the property's medieval watchtower into a spectacular villa, and turned the land into a working organic farm called La Porrone. Today, Pino's estate is among the showplaces of Tuscany.

Pino also acquired a century-old olive grove planted with the traditional varieties of Correggiolo, Leccino



La Porrone

and Moraiolo. While he has added a hectare or so of younger trees, it is the old trees that give Pino's oil its incredible richness and nuance.

For this year's unfiltered bottling we selected his October 28th harvest. With its low acidity of .18% and low yield of 13%, it is a marvel of complexity, with hints of sage, thistle, mint and white pepper. The color is a brilliant medium green, while the palate is smooth, creamy and delicate, with a slightly peppery finish. Again, one of our favorites. Very limited.

**2005 La Porrone
Extra Virgin Olive Oil**

\$29.95 1-liter



The Turning Point

GIORGIO FRANCI, MONTENERO D'ORCIA

The moment we first set foot in Giorgio Franci's frantoio two years ago, we knew that we had encountered an entirely new breed of *olivicoltore*. He compared his oils not to the products of other Tuscan olive growers but to Cheval Blanc and Haut Brion in Bordeaux. His strongly voiced opinions about how to make great olive oil left little room for discussion. We frankly didn't know what to think of this ultra-confident young man and wondered whether his oils could stand up to the advance billing.

When we began tasting, all our doubts soon disappeared. His oils had a purity and complexity that rivaled, if not surpassed, the finest Tuscan oils we had ever tasted. They also had a style that was all their own: intensely perfumed and flavored, yet with amazing finesse.

Throughout his life, Giorgio had been groomed to take over the frantoio that his father and uncle started a half century ago in the village of Montenero d'Orcia, just south of Montalcino. But unlike



Giorgio & Fernando Franci

countless other young Tuscans in a similar position, he gravitated to the world of food and wine that existed outside Italy. He hung out with elite winemakers and chefs and came to understand the concept of *terroir*. He learned that superior technique can make the difference between mediocre and transcendent, while acquiring the skill to blend and taste like a great winemaker.

Giorgio bottled his first olive oil in 1995 and has since become the biggest star in Tuscan olive oil, winning every award and recognition imaginable—along with a cult following that stretches from Palermo to London.

He makes a range of oils, of which two tower above the rest. Villa Magra and Villa Magra Gran Cru are made by isolating the best sites in the family's great Villa Magra *oliveto*, harvesting them separately and then blending them to create the perfect olive oil. Villa Magra offers amazing complexity, while Villa Magra Gran Cru is widely heralded as Italy's finest olive oil. Buy a bottle of each and see the future.

2005 Franci EVOO "Villa Magra dei Franci"

\$22.95 500 ml

The color is a beautiful medium green; the brooding nose of grass, earth and artichoke leads to a palate that is firm, highly structured and long, with quite a bit of pepperiness in the finish. This oil has fabulous balance, with plenty in reserve for another year or two of aging.



2005 Franci EVOO "Gran Cru Villa Magra"

\$29.95 500 ml

Even deeper in color, with a tightly coiled nose ready to explode. The nuances on the nose and palate are classic Tuscan—grass, artichoke, arugula—but with a unique red fruit component. The balance is astonishing. A very great and magical Tuscan olive oil. *One bottle limit.*

CAMIGLIANO

MONTALCINO

We first discovered the olive oil of this fine Brunello producer in 1999, entranced not only by its outstanding quality but by its spectacular price. And we are pleased to announce that the estate's 2005 oil picks up where that first oil left off.

As is typical of the great Montalcino estates, the vineyards are interspersed with olive trees, which in Camigliano's case are mostly Frantoio, Moraiolo and Correggiolo. Their 2005 oil is a sensational value.

2005 Camigliano Extra Virgin Olive Oil **\$16.95** 500ml



A pale, limpid green color. The nose is exotic—fresh hay, marcona almonds, sunflower seeds—while the palate is big and rich, bursting with the flavor of ripe olives. There is moderate pepperiness in the long buttery finish.

SELVAPIANA “PODERE SAN GIUSEPPE”

RUFINA

Each year, we eagerly await our chance to taste Selvapiana’s new oils. The estate’s cellar is full of massive 200-year-old terracotta jars (called *orci*), each containing a different day’s pressing. The range of personalities can be extraordinary, as was the case with this year’s crop.

This year’s tasting of 14 oils spanned three weeks, offering us a very clear picture of the roller-coaster ride that was the 2005 harvest.

Selvapiana began picking on October 25th. With its ravishing lime green color and its compelling richness,



The carnage after our November tasting with Selvapiana’s young proprietor Federico Giuntini.

we chose that day’s pressing for our Olio Nuovo. By October 29th, colors had become even deeper, and so had the flavor and concentration. Intermittent showers arrived the next day, forcing the estate to stop picking. The *raccolto* resumed on November 3rd, but for the next four days, the pressings were weak in color, perfume and flavor. By November 7th, color and quality were on the rise again, peaking, in our view, on November 10th.

Ultimately, we chose the October 29th and November 10th pressings for our bottlings. Rich and full of character, each is a quintessential Selvapiana oil.

**2005 Podere San Giuseppe
EVOO - Oct. 29 Harvest
\$22.95 500 ml**

One of the year’s deepest colors, with a complex nose featuring artichoke, cherry blossom, almonds and arugula. Powerful on the palate with outstanding flavor persistence. Explosive pepper and artichoke on the finish makes this a classic Selvapiana oil.



**2005 Podere San Giuseppe
EVOO - Nov. 10 Harvest
\$22.95 500 ml**

Nearly as deep in color and every bit as explosive, with scents of artichoke, arugula, plus plenty of freshly cut grass. The palate entry is soft but by mid-palate the oil builds in strength, with superb richness and structure. There’s more pepper in the very long finish.

Unleashing the Power

One of the many popular misconceptions about olive oil is that it is best used for frying and salad dressings. True, the destiny of cheap oils may be to fry with, and the *metier* of light, characterless oils is to dress a salad. But a rich, aromatic top-rank Tuscan oil has a higher calling.



A Tuscan oliveto.

Great Tuscan olive oils come into their own when drizzled over foods, especially if the foods are warm. While fine Tuscan extra virgins are wonderful for frying or sautéing, pouring a great oil over something warm magnifies its aromas, unleashing *all* of its power.

Perhaps the most classic use for extra virgin olive oil is *fettunta*—grilled bread, drizzled with oil and served warm. (Before drizzling the oil, it is common to rub the bread with a garlic clove; the bread’s warmth melts the garlic.)

Even applying Tuscan oil to cold foods can be a sybaritic experience. Take, for example, something as simple as

fresh mozzarella bathed in a rich Tuscan oil, seasoned just with salt and freshly ground pepper. Add some crusty bread to sop up the cheese-infused oil and ... *Mamma mia!*

The Tuscans understand intuitively how to use their oils, and many of their methods

are amazingly simple. For example, they drizzle their *olio* over grilled fish or meat; gently-cooked white beans or chick peas; raw vegetables like sliced fennel or baby artichokes; steamed asparagus; bruschetta of fresh tomato, basil and minced garlic; fava beans with pecorino cheese; and any hearty, thick soup.

For more uses of Tuscan extra virgin oil, consult any good Tuscan or Italian cookbook. But don’t stop there: experiment with almost any dish you enjoy, and you may find that the addition of some extra virgin olive oil just at the moment of serving enhances its flavor. □

IL MELOGRANO

CHIANTI CLASSICO

Few people have ever been more devoted to producing great olive oil than Il Melograno's Valeria Ronconi. For more than three decades, she has produced oils of great character and elegance, often sweeping the field at Italy's prestigious competition *Concorso Ercole Olivario*.



Signora Ronconi's villa at Il Melograno

Working with the gifted agronomist Marco Mugelli, she meticulously tends her 3700 trees—35% Frantoio, 30% Moraiolo, 15% Leccino, 15% Pendolino and 5% Madonna dell'Impruneta. At 300 meters elevation, they consistently produce one of the most flavorful and aromatic oils of the Chianti Classico zone.

While the quality at Melograno was excellent in 2005, the yields were tiny. So, while we normally have the luxury of bottling two different pressings, this year we were limited to just one. We selected a small lot of 100% Moraiolo harvested under sunny skies, on November 9th. It offers intense aromatics; a full, supple texture, and a moderately peppery finish. The impeccable balance make Signora Ronconi's Moraiolo a singular experience among Tuscan oils. A one-bottle limit.

**2005 Melograno Moraiolo
EVOO — Nov. 9 Harvest
\$22.95 500 ml**

10% discount on any olive oil purchase of 12 bottles or more

Our Labor of Love

"I've discovered what is surely the best American source for fine Tuscan olive oil: The Rare Wine Company." Ed Behr in Steve Tanzer's International Wine Cellar

"A top source of extremely fine Tuscan olive oils." Matt Kramer

Our awakening to the glories of great Tuscan oil came in the mid-1980's, when we had dinner one April night at the venerable Montalcino estate, Il Poggione. They were rightly proud of their extra virgin olive oil, encouraging us to pour it on every dish short of dessert. It was exhilarating. We dipped and drizzled with abandon: over the thick Tuscan soup; on fennel bulbs; over the grilled meat, and on thick slices of toasted bread rubbed with garlic cloves.

What we didn't realize at the time was that we were enjoying a precious commodity, as great Tuscan oil can only be made from tiny yields, and by harvesting early. A tree in the hills near Florence—harvested in November—may yield *only a liter* of olive oil. Compare this to the commercially farmed trees along Tuscany's coast—harvested much later—which produce 20+ liters of oil per tree.

After our experience at Il Poggione, we were shocked to discover just how difficult it was to find comparable oils in the United States. Even the expensive oils available here didn't come close to matching Il Poggione's. In fact, most of the oils we found were tired, the result of being too old or improperly stored. We were also frustrated by the fact that few labels revealed the olive source or year of production.

We took matters into our own hands. Beginning in 1995, we began importing our own selections. Each November, we taste on site, before the oils are blended—selecting pressings that offer the most character, structure and balance. We also have the trade's strictest standards: offering only unfiltered, single-estate oils; providing clear and informative labels; shipping under strict temperature control and offering the new oils as soon as they are pressed, settled and bottled.

If we've become America's best source for Tuscan olive oil, these are the reasons why.

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IL CARNASCIALE

MERCATALE VALDARNO

Bettina Rogosky's Il Carnasciale estate produces the legendary Super Tuscan, Il Caberlot.

But this site, towering high above the Arno River, also produces some of Tuscany's most amazing olive oils. In fact, before the Caberlot vines were planted in 1986, the site was planted only to olive trees—mostly dating to the 1860s and of the Frantoio variety.

Today, just 500 ancient trees remain, making Il Carnasciale's oil even more precious. The olives are pressed in the town's old stone mill, and the oil is bottled unfiltered.

Carnasciale made three pressings this year: two before the rain and one after. We chose the oil pressed later. It is a Tuscan oil of great delicacy on the palate, but with a classic perfume of artichoke and grass. As always, this wonderful oil comes in a striking ceramic bottle. *One bottle limit.*

**2005 Il Carnasciale
Extra Virgin Olive Oil**
\$24.95 500 ml



Santo Stefano

SANTO STEFANO

GREVE IN CHIANTI

Four decades ago, the Bendinelli family moved from Florence to a medieval village in Greve and for four decades they have tended their ancient olive groves with great passion.

Their trees consist of 75% Frantoio, 20% Moraiolo and 5% Leccino. Hand pruning and careful cultivation with organic fertilizers gives them a beautiful, but tiny, crop of olives each year.

We were blown away by our first encounter with Santo Stefano last year so our expectations were high when we visited this November. Despite the difficulties of the 2005 vintage, we felt sure that the Bendinellis' meticulousness, and the year's low yield of 11%, would produce at least one sensational oil.

We were not disappointed. This year's oil offers a richly evocative nose, explosive fruit on the concentrated palate, and a long, moderately peppery finish. Sadly, to produce an oil of such quality in 2005 meant tiny production. So, extremely limited.

**2005 Santo Stefano
Extra Virgin Olive Oil**
\$24.95 750 ml



ANNA MARIA CASELLI

CASTELNUOVO DELL'ABATE (MONTALCINO)

Castelnuovo dell'Abate is home to such Brunello superstars as Ciacci, Biondi-Santi, Fanti and La Poderina. It is also the site of La Colombina, the estate where Anna Maria Caselli's family has passionately

produced olive oil for more than a century. In fact, the estate's name is taken from the large round stones used to grind the newly harvested olives into a paste.

The Casellis have just 500 trees, which are treated with no chemical pesticides and only natural fertilizers. Harvesting is by hand. Yields in 2005 were less than one liter per tree and the oil, made almost entirely of Moraiolo, is a beauty. Harvested early, it has a beautiful olive green color, a sweet bouquet of herbs, freshly cut grass and green apples, and the unfiltered palate is thick and rich with a moderately peppery finish. *Very limited.*

**2005 Caselli
Extra Virgin Olive Oil**
\$19.95 500ml



The Pourer of Your Dreams

In 1997, we introduced the finest olive oil pouring spout available. Crafted in Italy of heavy stainless steel, this spout uses silicone rings to make a perfect seal against the bottle opening. It pours with incredible smoothness, and the spout comes with an attractive wood cap.



If you think that eleven bucks for a pourer is crazy, just give these a try. You won't regret it. It fits four of this year's extra virgins: Prunatelli, Monte, Vetrice and Santo Stefano.

Frantoio del Trionfo Pouring Spout 10.95

PRUNATELLI, MONTE & VETRICE

Rufina's Great Single-Cru Olive Oils

Since 1995, our benchmarks for great Tuscan oil have been Prunatelli, Monte and Vetrice—extra virgins made from the Grati family's three olive groves in the hills east of Florence. Year after year, these three oils have been among Tuscany's most glorious extra virgins.

We—and hundreds of our customers—are not alone in our admiration for what the Gratis have accomplished. In June, 2004, in his *Wine Spectator* Tuscan olive oil article, Sam Gugino picked 2002 Prunatelli as his top oil, beating out even Armando Manni's \$300/liter *Per Mio Figlio* and *Per Me*. This may have shocked some, but it wouldn't surprise anyone who's tasted *any* of the Grati oils.

Prunatelli, Monte and Vetrice could be the most profound demonstration yet of the influence of *terroir*



A Tuscan Master. The Grati family patriarch, Grato, still has the final say, just as he has for a half century.

on olive oil; they have also put Rufina on the map as perhaps the greatest of all Tuscan olive oil zones.

The three *oliveti* are all south and southwest facing hillsides, planted 90% to Frantoio olives. Prunatelli and Monte are both at about 500 meters above sea level (close to the limit for olive trees in Tuscany), while Vetrice is a few meters lower. Each of these oils offers both extraordinary quality and site-specific nuance.

In 2005, the Grati oils are once again superb—admirably low in acidity, immensely concentrated and profoundly expressive of their terroirs. These are not only among Tuscany's great olive oils; they are also stunning values. Each is highly recommended.



2005 Prunatelli 500 ml19.95 2005 Vetrice 500 ml 19.95 2005 Monte 500 ml19.95

Deeply colored, with a richly evocative nose of grass, sweet peas, artichoke and a touch of earth. The palate starts out soft but builds in volume and power, leading to a finish exploding in pepper and artichoke.

Luminously green with a nose that is a kaleidoscope of artichoke, mustard greens, green olives and acacia. The palate is rich, smooth, powerful and highly aromatic, building to a long, moderately peppery conclusion.

Monte's brilliant medium green color complements the powerfully pungent nose brimming with artichoke, grass, mint and pea pods. The palate is expansive and softly structured, and the finish is big, rich and authoritative.

10% discount on any olive oil purchase of 12 bottles or more

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**FIRST CLASS
MAIL**

FOOD & WINE BEST WINE
2002 AMERICAN WINE AWARDS IMPORTER

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