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LATE APRIL 2007

# The Great Olive Oils of Tuscany, 2006


*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.

Yet making great olive oil requires an obsessive attention to detail. It results from an ideal *terroir*, low yields and harvesting at just the right moment before the olives turn from green to black. Even in Tuscany, few growers historically go to such trouble and expense.

Yet, the gap between disappointing and great was never wider than in 2006—a year in which the weather severely tested much of today's conventional wisdom, particularly the increasingly popular idea that harvesting in October insures a rich green color and intense flavor.

## What Moment is Right?

Great olive oil, like great wine, depends on perfect physiological maturity. And at many estates, 2006 was *not* a year to pick early—as a warm, dry summer, capped by one of the warmest Octobers on record, slowed the olives' development dramatically. Except for a few exciting exceptions, the October pressings lacked color and fruit, as we discovered during our annual November tour of Tuscan olive estates.

 "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*

We heard from one grower after another that when the weather finally cooled down after the October heat, their olives developed the color and flavor they had lacked. This generally occurred the first week in November, although when—and whether—it happened, depended not only on the part of Tuscany and the elevation, but whether the olive grove was north- or south-facing. (North-facing *oliveti* cooled off first.)

When cooler temperatures arrived, the olives made up for lost time, acquiring the transcendent flavors and aromas for which Tuscan olive oil is prized.

## The 2006 Oils

Climate change has profoundly affected the making of fine olive oil just as it has fine wine. In the late 1990s, a grower often had three or four weeks to harvest optimally ripe olives; today, the time to harvest is not only narrow, it is unpredictable, changing from year to year. This puts great pressure on us to select specific pressings that deliver the soaring qualities of great Tuscan oil.

Two thousand six was possibly our most challenging harvest since we began importing Tuscan oils in 1995. And we believe we have done our job well, assembling a set of 2006 oils that are richly evocative of their origins, with the weight, texture and perfume that make Tuscan olive oils so exhilarating. □

*"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*

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# 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 best Tuscan olive oils are “early harvest”—in other words they are made from physiologically mature olives that have not yet turned to black. Typically, such olives can be picked between late October and mid-November, producing oil with green color and intense flavors of artichoke and freshly cut grass.

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 yield figures are significant). Our growers often obtain only one to two 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 birthplaces of our 2006 Tuscan oils.*

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 can reduce the oil's richness of texture. We prefer to buy oils that are settled by gravity and not filtered.

**Age** — Top Tuscan oils have a window of optimal usability that is far greater than for other olive oils. During the first year of their lives, they are intensely flavored, with the 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 Oils

## COLOGNOLE

### RUFINA

*It was only* a matter of time before Tuscan olive oil caught up with the advances that have swept Tuscan wine over the past 25 years. But with fewer positive role models and an olive culture even more deeply rooted in tradition, it took a new generation to see that *terroir* could play a potentially powerful role with olive oil, just as it does with wine.



*Colognole*

In the *avant garde* of this new generation are Giorgio Franci (see page 7) and Cesare Coda Nunziante, who has taken over Rufina's venerable Colognole estate.

#### A Rare Approach

Cesare's family has grown olives for a century, but his is the first generation to realize the possibilities of soil and microclimate. His 6,000 olive trees—75% Frantoio, 15% Moraiolo, 10% Leccino—vary in elevation from 250-560 meters. He harvests each site separately, respecting how location affects the olives' maturation. But until recently, all the parcels were blended to produce just two oils, including one for the Laudemio consortium.

Cesare saw, however, that the oil from each *oliveto* was unique, with the most characterful examples coming from those hillsides with the lowest yields, due to the

age of the trees and a high elevation.

So when we arrived for our visit (just a week after the harvest began), he already had six different oils for us to taste. Yet, he had not yet harvested the highest, and oldest, olive grove, at a breathtaking 560 meters. Here, where nighttime temperatures drop up to twenty

degrees in the early Autumn, the olives enjoy a long, slow ripening that ensures maximum aromatic development.

Cesare agreed that when this *oliveto* was harvested, he would reserve the oil for us—in its unblended, unfiltered state—pending tasting and approval. Finally harvested on November 13th, it turned out to be one of our favorite oils of the year, featuring a particularly luminescent color, wonderful aromas of chlorophyll, sweet peas and artichokes and a strong, peppery finish. A great marriage of complexity and structure, only a small number of 750ml bottles could be made, so hurry.

#### 2006 Colognole 'Montegiovi' Extra Virgin Olive Oil

**\$24.95** 750ml



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

# IL CARNASCIALE

### MERCATALE VALDARNO

*Bettina Rogosky's* Il Carnasciale estate produces the mythic Super Tuscan, Il Caberlot. But this site, soaring above the Arno River, also produces one of Tuscany's most beautiful olive oils. In fact, before the Caberlot vines were planted in 1986, the estate was planted only to olive trees—mostly dating back to the 1860s.

Today, just 500 ancient Frantoio 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. With a crop already diminished by a poor Spring flowering and an extremely low yield of just 12%, there was very little oil this year. But we took every bottle we

could from Bettina's November 8th pressing—a bright green oil with explosive aromatics and a long, peppery finish. Antonio Galloni had the pleasure of tasting the oil at the estate this winter, writing: "Packed with layers of flavor as well as personality, Il Carnasciale's olive oil has become one of the staples of my kitchen."

As always, this wonderful oil comes in a striking ceramic bottle. *One bottle limit.*

#### 2006 Il Carnasciale Extra Virgin Olive Oil

**\$24.95** 500ml



# MALENCHINI

COLLI FIORENTINI

For nearly two centuries, the aristocratic Malenchini family has owned the old Medici estate, "Lilliano." Today, their 12,000 olive trees produce one of the elite oils of the *Colli Fiorentini* (the hills surrounding Florence). The fruit is always harvested by hand; pressing is quick and methodical, resulting in consistently low acidity.

This year's sweet spot was the first week of November, producing a blend of 60% Frantoio, 30% Leccino, 5% Moraiolo and 5% Pendolino olives, with a low acidity of .19%. It is a beauty: lustrous green



*Lilliano's 17th-century orcio room was built by the Medicis.*

with complex aromatics of cut grass, cherry blossom and herbs; and a smooth, concentrated palate. A moderate pepperness rounds out this outstanding oil.

This is one of the estate's finest efforts to date and a tremendous value.

**2006 Malenchini  
Extra Virgin Olive Oil**

**\$19.95 500ml**



## *Full Liters of Brilliant Tuscan Oils at Incredible Prices*

### IL POGGIONE

SAN ANGELO IN COLLE (MONTALCINO)

Ever since our first visit to the estate in 1988, we've been great admirers of Il Poggione's olive oil. This venerable Brunello producer has long made 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.

Il Poggione's director, Fabrizio Bindocci, has a fanatical commitment to quality, and his decades of experience made all the difference in 2006. While many of Il Poggione's neighbors made forgettable oils after picking too early or too late, Il Poggione harvested several outstanding lots in early November—when Fabrizio's instincts told him that olive development had peaked. From this period, we snagged a wonderfully perfumed oil, made from 99% Frantoio olives, bottled unfiltered exclusively for us.

**2006 Il Poggione  
Extra Virgin Olive Oil**

**\$27.95 1-liter**



### LA PORRONA

MONTISI

Montisi's spectacular countryside is blanketed with vineyards, wheat fields and ancient olive groves. And some say that the area's white truffles are the finest you'll find outside of Alba.

It's the kind of place you visit once and stay forever. And so Pino Brusone did, having left his high-powered fashion career (Armani, Donna Karan) to restore this 70-acre estate, with its century-old olive trees.

Pino is devoted to his trees, hand-harvesting their tiny production and putting it unfiltered into stylish liter bottles. We have our pick of the lots each year, and for 2006 we chose his October 26-28 pressing, a beautifully round and complex extra virgin featuring snow peas, water chestnuts, dried flowers, allspice and almonds. A beautiful oil at an unbelievable price.

**2006 La Porrone  
Extra Virgin Olive Oil**

**\$28.95 1-liter**



### **Frantoio del Trionfo Pouring Spots**

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 five of this year's extra virgins: Prunatelli, Monte, Vetrice, Colognole and Santo Stefano. **\$10.95**

# SELVAPIANA “PODERE SAN GIUSEPPE” RUFINA

*Year in, year out*, Rufina’s most famous wine estate, Selvapiana, produces some of Tuscany’s most exciting olive oils. And each November, we have the privilege of tasting up to two dozen different pressings, to select our offerings for the year.



*Lining them up at Selvapiana.*

The samples are drawn from the estate’s massive 200-year-old *orci* (ceramic jars), each containing a different day’s pressing. The range of personalities is extraordinary, but the quality is consistently high—making it a real challenge to choose a favorite.

This year, there were two quality peaks. The first, on October 25th, was made possible by two factors: the olives were of the Frantoio variety that ripen relatively early, and the site was one of the estate’s coolest, favoring early maturity. The second peak, November 11, was more representative of the year’s delayed ripening. But despite the time difference, the oils are remarkably similar: both powerful, long and intensely aromatic. In short, these are classic Rufina oils from a legendary producer.

**2006 Podere San Giuseppe  
EVOO - October 25 Harvest  
\$22.95 500 ml**

Dark olive green color, penetratingly complex nose of roasted almond, cut grass, artichoke and a hint of juniper and dill, the mid-palate is creamy and expansive, punctuated by a moderately peppery, artichoke-infused finish.



**2006 Podere San Giuseppe  
EVOO - Nov. 11 Harvest  
\$22.95 500 ml**

Similar dark olive green color, with a nose that leans towards the exotic: jasmine, green tea, and grass. The palate offers wonderful freshness as well as intensity, with excellent viscosity and a long mildly peppery finish.

## Our Labor of Love

*“A top source of extremely fine Tuscan olive oils.” Matt Kramer on The Rare Wine Co.*

Our awakening to the glories of great Tuscan oil came in 1988, 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. □

## CAMIGLIANO MONTALCINO

First offered in this newsletter seven years ago, Camigliano's extra virgin returned to the fold last year to widespread acclaim. Not only was their 2005 oil a standout, we were able to offer it at a spectacularly low price. Camigliano is back again this year, compelling in quality and unsurpassed in value.

Like its Montalcino neighbor Il Poggione, Camigliano read the weather perfectly in 2006, a year in which there was an exceptionally small harvest window. The oil we selected was pressed at the beginning of November and represents a seamless blend of Frantoio, Moraiolo and Leccino olives harvested at very low yields. This is one of the year's most attractive extra virgins, with bright citrus, smoke, lavender and thyme aromas and a persistent, peppery finish.

With its remarkable quality at an amazing price, this is one oil that will be hard to beat.

**2006 Camigliano  
Extra Virgin Olive Oil**  
**\$16.95 500 ml**



*Santo Stefano*

## SANTO STEFANO GREVE IN CHIANTI

Since the Bendinelli family left Florence forty years ago to settle in Greve, they have lovingly tended their ancient olive groves 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, which they turn into some of the zone's finest oils.

We expected the Bendinelli's dedication to pay off in 2006, and we were not disappointed. After days of checking the trees and finding the olives not quite ready, they chose not to pick—even though the traditional harvest date had come and gone. Instead, they patiently waited, and on November 13 and 14, they harvested and pressed a beautiful oil. Golden green with a rich bouquet of cut grass, there is excellent viscosity and weight and a long, moderately peppery finish. Again, it is one of our most elegant oils. Bottled in the 750 ml size.

**2006 Santo Stefano  
Extra Virgin Olive Oil**  
**\$24.95 750 ml**



## IL MELOGRANO CHIANTI CLASSICO

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

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.

Yields were again tiny in 2006 (barely 12%) and the best oils were pressed later than normal, after cooler temperatures arrived, giving the olives a final week to develop.



*The villa at Melograno*

It is Signora Ronconi's belief that the cold prompts the tree's sap to flow into the olives, developing a more complete aromatic and flavor profile. Indeed, our favorite Melograno oil this year, made from 100% Moraiolo, was not pressed until November 17. It is a stunning bright green with complex aromas of artichokes, mint and white blossoms; an expansive, firm palate and a lingering, peppery finish.

Sadly, this fabulous oil is very limited.

**2006 Melograno EVOO  
Moraiolo - Nov. 17**  
**\$23.95 500 ml**



# FRANCI

## MONTENERO D'ORCIA

*If there is* one superstar in Tuscan oil today, it is Giorgio Franci. From childhood, Giorgio was groomed to take over his father's *frantoio* south of Montalcino, but unlike other young Tuscans in a similar position, he gravitated to the world of food and wine that existed outside Italy.



Giorgio Franci

Like us, Giorgio sees enormous disparity in this year's oils, due to the difficult weather. But he is quick to say that *great* oil was in the grasp of skilled producers—if they understood how the olives would perform in such an unusual year.

Giorgio's 2006 oils do indeed shine, and two of his extra virgins tower above the rest. **Villa**

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. And since his first harvest in 1995, he has won every award and recognition imaginable—along with a cult following that stretches from Palermo to London.

**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 the extremely rare Gran Cru is widely heralded as Italy's finest olive oil. These are the essence of great Tuscan olive oil, so don't miss them.

### 2006 Franci EVOO "Villa Magra"

**\$22.95** 500 ml

A luminous golden green oil with layers of aromas: thistle and cherry blossoms, green tea and artichokes. The palate is a mouthcoating blend of bright artichoke and ginger flavors, and the moderately peppery finish delivers exquisite balance and flavor persistence. *One bottle limit.*



### 2006 Franci EVOO "Villa Magra Gran Cru"

**\$29.95** 500 ml

This oil lives up to its *Gran Cru* name. The color is a vibrant green and the nose is unfathomably complex, with notes of cut grass, artichoke, sweet cherries, tea and chlorophyll. The palate is firmly structured for aging and the balance perfect. *A great achievement. One bottle limit.*

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

## 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 dishes—like fresh mozzarella and tomato bathed in a rich extra virgin—is a sybaritic experience. Sop up the oil with crusty bread 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; raw vegetables like sliced fennel or baby artichokes; steamed asparagus; 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. □

# PRUNATELLI, MONTE & VETRICE

## Rufina's Great Single-Cru Olive Oils

Since 1995, our benchmarks for Tuscan olive oil have been Prunatelli, Monte and Vetrice—the Grati family's three single-site extra virgins grown in the hills east of Florence. These three oils are consistently among Tuscany's best.

We are not alone in admiring the Grati's accomplishments. In 2004, *Wine Spectator* food writer Sam Gugino picked 2002 Prunatelli as his top Tuscan oil, beating out Armando Manni's \$300/liter *Per Mio Figlio* and *Per Me*. More recently, Richard Nalley writing in *ForbesLife* called the three Grati bottlings the quintessential examples of oils that express their origins.

In fact, over the twelve years they've been bottled sep-

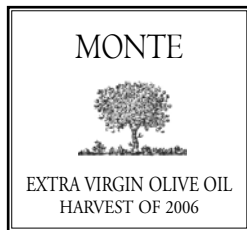


*A Tuscan Master. The Grati family patriarch, Grato, still has the final say, just as he has for a half century.*

arately for us, Prunatelli, Monte and Vetrice have stood alone in demonstrating how site influences 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 at nearly 500 meters elevation—planted 90% to Frantoio olives. Yet, each oil consistently offers site-specific nuance.

In 2006, the Grati oils are again all extraordinary—explosively scented, gracefully balanced and profoundly expressive of their *terroirs*. These are not only among Tuscany's great olive oils; they are also amazing values. All three are highly recommended.



**2006 Monte 500 ml .....19.95    2006 Prunatelli 500 ml .....19.95    2006 Vetrice 500 ml ..... 19.95**

Monte is one of 2006's transcendent oils, unrivalled in its concentration and aromatic power. The brilliant color complements the deep nose brimming with artichoke, grass, mint and pea pods. The palate is dense, and the finish is big, rich and authoritative.

In this idiosyncratic year, our favorite Prunatelli pressing didn't come until well into November—and we bought every drop. Vivid color and aromas, with scents of artichoke, hay and lavender. The palate is rich and expansive, with a moderately peppery finish.

As usually happens, Vetrice is more structured than its siblings in 2006. Yet, it doesn't give up a thing in aromatic nuance or flavor, or the beauty of its palate. All the classic Rufina notes are here, accentuated by a hint of bitter artichoke and tea rose.

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

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*The Great Olive Oils  
of Tuscany, 2006*



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