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MARCH 2008

Small Miracles

The Great Olive Oils of Tuscany, 2007

Olive Oil is among 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 are made from early-harvested olives grown high in the Tuscan hills.

But what Mother Nature giveth she can take away, and so she did in 2007—a harvest that will go down as the most challenging since 1985, the infamous year when almost all of Tuscany's trees froze to the ground.

In '85, of course, growers were lucky to eke out even 10% of their usual production. This time, the odds of producing oil were better, with output down by only 30-50%. But the challenge of making something *great* was equally daunting.

In 2007, the growers faced an entirely different set of weather-related gremlins. A warm winter led to a larger than normal population of *mosca*, the olive flies which can destroy an entire crop. A warm spring induced poor fruit set, promising a small harvest, while a warm summer produced further generations of *mosca*, which spread beyond the usual coastal olive groves into the interior hills.

By fall, more problems appeared. The typical aroma-enhancing October cold snap failed to materialize. And the ongoing drought so weakened the olives' stems that, by mid-October, a large proportion of the region's olives were on the ground, the



*"Surely the best
American source
for fine Tuscan olive oil:
The Rare Wine Company"*
*Ed Behr in Steve Tanzer's
International Wine Cellar*

victim of either wind or rain.

Such conditions doomed the oil crop at some of Tuscany's best addresses. You will not find oil in these pages, for example, from the normally blessed climes of Selvapiana, Colognole, Malenchini, La Porrone or Santo Stefano, nor, for the first time in fourteen years, from the Grati family's superbly

sited Prunatelli grove. Each of these providential spots was hit by conditions that either decimated the crop or reduced oil quality to below our standards.

Clear Choices

During the second week of November, we spent several days travelling the length of Tuscany tasting oil. Our advance knowledge of the year's problems was confirmed by the scores of pressings we sampled. Never have we seen such dramatic swings in quality, from place to place, or even from day to day in the same olive grove. And because the lion's share of what's sold under Tuscan labels are blends, most of what reaches the market will be mediocre at best.

Yet, the magnitude of our tasting paid off richly, as here and there an individual day's pressing, almost if by miracle, leaped out—serving as a poignant reminder of what makes great Tuscan olive oil so special.

And so, on the pages that follow, you will find the survivors of a difficult year: twelve 2007 Tuscan olive oils that managed—despite adversity and tiny production—to capture the beauty and nobility of Tuscany's ancient olive oil-making tradition. □

***Inside on Page 7:
Incredible New
Balsamic Vinegars
from Pedroni***

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 2007 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. And so we try, whenever practical, to purchase oils that have been settled by gravity.

Age — The conventional wisdom is that olive oils should be consumed within a year or so of harvest. This may be true for mediocre Tuscan oils, but the best oils will live much longer, if well-stored.

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, you will maximize the life of your oils. □

The Oils

PODERE COGNO

CASTELLINA IN CHIANTI

The last thing we expected to find in Chianti Classico this year was an exciting new producer. Many growers pressed *no* oil, and a number of the region's small *frantoio* (press houses) never even opened their doors.

So we were astonished when a friend told us about a tiny producer in Castellina in Chianti who had made some *great* organic oils. When we asked how they had done it, the answer was simple: elevation and temperature ... the higher and the cooler, the better.

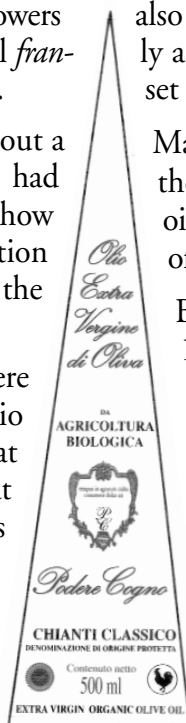
The source of the oils is an ancient estate, Podere Cogno, with 3000 olive trees—mostly Frantoio with some Moraiolo and Leccino—planted at about 450 meters. What's extraordinary is that their *oliveto* is protected by dense stands of trees that keep the olive trees cool. Proprietor Marco Matteini believes that this is what ultimately

saved him from the *mosca*. The cooling effect was also crucial in allowing the olives to ripen more slowly and develop the range of aromas and flavors that set great Tuscan olive oil apart.

Matteini makes multiple oils each year, highlighting the strengths of his artisanal approach. His flagship oil, labeled simply Podere Cogno, is a fabulous blend of mostly Frantoio with some Moraiolo and Leccino.

But he also makes a tiny amount of very rare 100% Leccino oil. For years, we've lusted after the 100% Leccino oil made by Signora Ronconi at Il Melograno; but sadly there is never enough for us to buy. Cogno's rivals hers with an enormous bouquet and powerful structure.

These are quintessential Tuscan oils—and among the year's best. Don't miss them.



2007 Podere Cogno EVOO

\$21.95 500 ml

2007 Podere Cogno EVOO "Leccino"

\$23.95 500 ml

Beautifully green, this blend of Frantoio, Moraiolo and Leccino has a penetrating nose infused with notes of artichokes, cut grass and rose petals. It is very elegant on the palate with a seamless texture. The rich flavor lingers on and on in its impressively peppery finish.

Leccino is an intensely aromatic varietal whose character is magnified by warm foods. And Cogno's '07 is a stunning example: deep green with a complex perfume of pea pods and sweet herbs and a fascinating smoky nuance. The palate is seductively rich and spicy; the finish long and peppery. A great new Tuscan oil.

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

The Pourer of Your Dreams ...



Eleven years ago, we introduced the finest olive oil pouring spout made. Crafted in Italy of heavy stainless steel, this spout uses silicone rings to make a perfect seal against the bottle opening. And it pours with incredible smoothness and ease. The spout also 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.

Frantoio del Trionfo Stainless Steel Pourer

\$10.95

*Fits the following 2007 oils:
Monte #4, Vetrice #4, Vetrice #5*

IL CARNASCIALE

MERCATALE VALDARNO

Bettina Rogosky's Il Carnasciale estate is, of course, the source of the legendary Super Tuscan, Il Caberlot.

But this site, towering high above the Arno River, also produces some of Tuscany's finest 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. And the olives are pressed in the town's old stone mill.

Carnasciale pressed three tiny lots this year, and the third stood out for us. It resembles the 2006 Carnasciale oil in its delicacy on the palate, but with a classic perfume of artichoke and grass. As always, this distinctive oil comes in a beautiful ceramic bottle.

One bottle limit.

**2007 Il Carnasciale
Extra Virgin Olive Oil**
\$24.95 500 ml



The poetry of Tuscan olive trees

CAPUNTO

SINALUNGA

Also newly discovered this year, Olio del Capunto is an organic extra virgin from the picturesque Siena hillsides, where the vineyards and olive groves rise high above the lush valleys.

Olio del Capunto is made from 36 hectares of organically farmed olive groves meticulously tended by the Giganti family. Their trees, many as old as 100 years, are mostly Frantoio with a small percentage of Leccino and Pendolino.

In 2007, the family harvested very early, beginning in mid-October. They caught the fruit at the right moment, and the resulting oil boasts a very low acidity of .08, lovely aromas of hay and cherry blossom and a rich, buttery palate with good heat in the finish. A fine addition to our 2007 list.

**2007 Olio del Capunto
Extra Virgin Olive Oil**
\$20.95 500 ml



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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.

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



An olive grove in Chianti.

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. □

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 & Fernando Franci

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.

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 2007 oils do indeed shine, and two of his extra virgins 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 the extremely rare Gran Cru is widely heralded as Italy's finest olive oil. These are the essence of great Tuscan olive oil ... and essential purchases this year.

2007 Franci EVOO "Villa Magra dei Franci"

\$29.95 500 ml

A pale, limpid green color. The nose is a laser beam of cut grass, artichoke and Marcona almonds. The flavors are also very focused and explode on the mid-palate with classic hints of hay and pepper. The spiciness builds into an elegant, peppery finish. *Extremely limited.*



2007 Franci EVOO "Gran Cru Villa Magra"

\$39.95 500 ml

If this is not the finest oil made in Italy in 2007, we'll be surprised. Strikingly complex and elegant, it boasts a luminescently pale green color and a nose bursting with green almonds, hay and artichoke. On the palate there is wonderful balance and a hint of Franci's signature red fruit component. A triumph. *Extremely limited.*

IL POGGIONE

S. 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 real prize, however, is their cache of old olive trees planted at elevations up to 500 meters. So even in a devastating year like 2007, some of the estate's higher-placed *oliveti* excelled.

This year's best pressings were all from the highest elevations, where temperatures remained cool in October, keeping the *mosca* at bay and allowing for maximum

aroma and flavor development.

Thus, we selected a lot picked on November 3rd and made from one of the estate's highest and oldest groves, planted to 50% Moraiolo and 50% Frantoio. The inviting bouquet of freshly cut grass and artichoke leads to a rich, lush palate, full in body, with excellent structure and a moderately peppery finish. Packed in a generous **one-liter** bottle, this is once again a monumental bargain in Tuscan olive oil.

**2007 Il Poggione
Extra Virgin Olive Oil
\$29.95 1-Liter**



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 produced oils of great character and elegance.

Working with the gifted agronomist Marco Muggelli, she meticulously tends her 3700 trees, which are 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 in Chianti Classico.



Signora Ronconi's mastery of her *oliveto* was the key to her success in 2007. She timed her harvest perfectly, avoiding the extensive *mosca* damage that afflicted most of her neighbors, many of whom made no oil at all.

And though she harvested just *one-sixth* of her 2005 crop, she managed to produce two of the year's loveliest oils.

Given her miniscule production, there is, sadly, a strict one-bottle limit for both oils.

2007 Melograno EVOO "Frantoio 10/28"

\$24.95 500 ml

A beauty. Limpid medium green with sweet aromas of herbs, pea pods and artichokes. Intense on the palate with complex flavors and impressive balance. A classic Frantoio varietal oil from Melograno.

2007 Melograno EVOO "Moraiolo 11/6"

\$24.95 500 ml

An extra week of cool temperatures around Melograno intensified the flavor of the Moraiolo olives. In this compelling early November pressing, mint, sweet herbs and cut grass are followed by a long 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 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



Ancient terracotta aging vessels.

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 ruthlessly selected single-estate oils; providing clear and informative labels; shipping under strict temperature control and offering the new oils as soon as they are pressed and bottled.

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

Balsamic Breakthroughs

Three Stunning Values from Acetaia Pedroni

For nearly 150 years, the Pedroni family have been artisanal Balsamico makers—with most of their vinegars destined for their famed restaurant, the Osteria del Rubbiara just outside Modena in Nonantolo. Here, patrons revel in the classic Modenese fare of handmade pastas, delectable onion frittatas and roasted meats, all liberally doused with the family's fabulous vinegars.

And because the Pedroni's are essentially restaurateurs, they make a broader range of vinegars than families who are only in the luxury vinegar trade. Of course, they make an explosive 25-year-old *Extravecchio*,



The Pedroni acetaia.

which we have carried for several years, and a beautiful 12-year-old *traditional*. But they also make spectacular younger vinegars, along with an incredible Balsamic Jam, that are featured in the Osteria.

Demand for these products is so strong among Osteria customers—and Pedroni's longstanding private clients—that they seldom find their way outside Italy. But we managed to coax the family into giving us a small allocation, which arrives next month. You won't want to miss them.

“Vecchio”

The crown jewel. Pedroni's Vecchio is one of the bottles that Osteria patrons most often reach for to dress their roasted potatoes or *tortellini in brodo*.

Stunningly sweet, rich and complex, Vecchio is a magical blend of vinegars of up to 10 years of age, just short of the age requirement for *Balsamico Tradizionale*. Left to slumber in a battery of oak barrels in the acetaia, the Vecchio takes on a refinement and balance generally reserved for much older vinegars.

Pedroni's Vecchio has become a go-to bottle in our

kitchen, as it is in the Osteria del Rubbiara. Incredibly versatile, it is the perfect match for simple, grilled foods (tossed with grilled vegetables or drizzled over grilled and roasted meats), and pasta dishes. And it makes an excellent salad dressing when paired with a superb extra virgin olive oil.

Pedroni “Vecchio” Balsamic Vinegar of Modena

\$34.95 250ml



“Maturato”

Maturato is the other sleeper in Pedroni's portfolio. Aged in barrel for about three years, it may not have quite the ambrosial sweetness of Vecchio, but it still delivers the goods in sweetness and richness. And its greatest virtue is its high-toned intensity, which is reminiscent of a fine old wine vinegar.

With its glorious tanginess, Maturato excels in salad dressings, marinades and glazes. It is a must-have in any kitchen.

Pedroni “Maturato” Balsamic Vinegar of Modena

\$18.95 250ml



“Balsameda”

We have fallen in love with this intriguingly rich *confiture*, or jam, made from aged *Balsamico Tradizionale*. Startlingly delicious, we first tried it with aged Parmesan and it was amazing. But it is one of those foods with infinite versatility; it's marvelous even at breakfast, flavoring yogurt or spread on toast.

But it's true calling may be on a cheese board where it is fantastic with both hard and soft cheeses. And it is a wonderful alternative to fruit with *panna cotta*.

Pedroni “Balsameda” Balsamic Jam

\$9.95 120g/4.2 oz.



Pedroni Sampler: One each of these three nectars for \$59.95

MONTE & VETRICE

Grato Grati's Gamble Results in Three of the Year's Best Oils

For worshippers of Rufina olive oil, 2007 was heartbreaking. Normally, this town to the east of Florence can be counted on for monumental oil—the result of its high elevation, cool temperatures and remoteness from the sea. But in 2007 Rufina suffered along with the rest of Tuscany, and at two of our favorite properties—Selvapiana and Colognole—the crop was a near-failure.



Grato Grati

A third legendary Rufina oil artisan—the Grati family—might have followed Selvapiana and Colognole into the abyss had it not been for two days in late October when Mother Nature smiled. The Grati's year was rescued by a small, but beautiful, harvest that took place on October 25 and 26 in two of their *oliveti*, Monte and Vetrice (though, sadly, not in their sister grove Prunatelli). The three Monte and Vetrice oils harvested on those two days stand among the superstars of 2007 oil.

A Break in Tradition

If not for an abrupt change in Grati family tradition, these oils would never have been made. Family patriarch Grato Grati has always insisted that they start harvesting on November 2nd, and never a day earlier. But in 2007, Grato sensed that waiting could spell disaster, and so he sent his pickers into the groves on October 22—well before most of his neighbors.

The first pickings were good, though not profound. But on October 25 and 26, the oils sang: gorgeously colored, perfumed and textured. They possess the classic Rufina artichoke nuance, the result of coming almost entirely from old Frantoio trees on south and southwest facing slopes about 500 meters above sea level.

These are triumphs for the year and must not be missed.

2007 Monte "Orcio 4"

\$20.95 500ml



A beautiful, rich green color and all of the aromatic power we expect from Monte. The dense, layered palate shows off high floral and red fruit tones, amazing intensity and an explosive, peppery finish.

2007 Vetrice "Orcio 4"

\$20.95 500ml



Our top pick for 2007. This deep green oil has it all: perfume, structure, finish. Bright aromas of herbs, grass and artichoke lead to a concentrated, weighty palate. Has real intensity.

2007 Vetrice "Orcio 5"

\$20.95 500ml



Picked one day later than Vetrice Orcio 4, this oil shows more sweetness in the mouth and finishes with an impressive pepperness. Harmonious and smooth, it, too, has the earmarks of a great Rufina oil.

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

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of Tuscany*



MARCH 2008

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**FIRST CLASS
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