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LATE APRIL 2004

The Great Olive Oils of Tuscany, 2003

Thomas Jefferson once wrote that olive oil is perhaps Nature's most precious gift. And Nature's generosity is most clearly evident in Tuscany, where we are given incomparably rich, aromatic and long-lived olive oils year in, year out.

But even Tuscany can know Nature's wrath, as it did in 1985 when a deep freeze devastated its olive groves. At first, it was thought that more than 80% of the trees had been killed; later it was realized that most were simply "killed" to the ground. With time, the roots produced new growth; and by the new Millennium, production had returned to normal. The memory of 1985 faded.



These ancient olive trees have seen more than a century of harvests.

A Second Blow

Last year, 2003, brought a more gentle reminder of Nature's capriciousness. In April, just as the olive trees were budding, a serious freeze slammed the region. The potential crop was reduced to a fraction of its potential size.

A hot, rainless summer brought further troubles. Young trees lacked the water to produce ample fruit; only old trees, thanks to their deep roots, had the nourishment to produce full, healthy olives. And the olives ripened weeks early. Only growers in cooler sites who picked in late October or early November could produce oil of structure, balance and perfume.

When we first heard reports of the situation late last summer, we feared the worst: tiny quantities, sharply higher prices and poor quality. And while the broader

market in fact will be vulnerable to *all* these problems, The Rare Wine Co. has weathered the storm.

Tuscany's Best

Our growers are generally blessed with very old trees and are among Tuscany's earliest harvesters; as a consequence, their 2003 oils are classic. Production at their estates was down, too; but each producer worked hard to give us as much oil as possible. And, despite their shortages and our weak dollar, they worked with us to keep our Tuscan oil prices the lowest in America.

We did not, however, escape 2003's difficulties unscathed. Conditions were so bad at two properties, Le Boncie and Castello di Volpaia, that there will be no 2003 oil. Also, 2003 oils are not destined for the years of cellaring to which Rare Wine Co. customers are accustomed. The 2003's will be at their peak over the next 12 to 18 months—or until the 2004's arrive—adding richness, complexity and character in a diversity of dishes.

For the ninth consecutive year, The Rare Wine Co. is proud to offer a remarkable selection of Tuscany's finest new olive oils. The quality of our unfiltered oils always soars above what is generally available in the marketplace, and this will be even more the case this year. So, while this has been our most challenging oil harvest yet, 2003 could be the most satisfying. You're sure to enjoy these unique gifts of nature. □

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

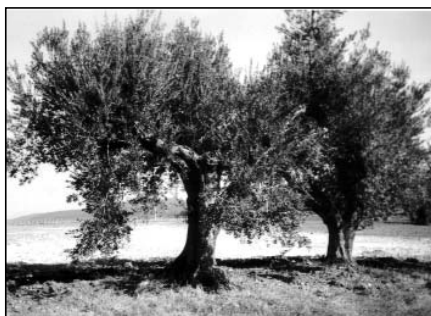
The purest, concentrated essence of the olive, great olive oil explodes with a constellation of flavors and aromas, yet is capable of marrying with an infinite variety of foods. And in our view, and the view of many, the world's greatest olive oils come from Tuscany.

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 Brunello di Montalcino estate, Il Poggione. Like others in Montalcino, they made their own extra virgin olive oil, which they encouraged us to pour 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.

Rarity

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 infinitesimal yields, and by harvesting and pressing the olives 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



"When the oil of a particular hillside or farm shows its innate personality, then extra vergine compares to standard olio di oliva as a grand cru classé relates to a blended and pasteurized jug wine."

Burton Anderson

the expensive oils available here didn't come close to matching Il Poggione's oil. In fact, most of the oils we found seemed tired, the result of being too old or improperly stored. We were also frustrated by the fact that few labels gave information like the source of the olives or the year of production.

A New Benchmark

We took matters into our own hands. Beginning in 1995, we began importing our own selections, adopting a set of standards which were revolutionary: offering only unfiltered, single-estate oils; providing clear and informative labeling; shipping under strict temperature controlled conditions and offering the latest

crop of oil as soon as it was pressed, settled and bottled.

Each year, we choose our oils not only by identifying the best growers, but by choosing pressings that offer the most character, structure and balance. This year, as always, tasting was during mid-November, before the oils were blended. This gives us the opportunity to select individual pressings, often representing a single-day's harvest or a particular olive grove (*oliveto*).

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

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The Oils

MALENCHINI

COLLI FIORENTINI

The historic Lilliano estate was owned by the Medici family until the early 18th century; in fact, one of the most compelling features of the villa is the *orcio* room, built in 1646 for storing olive oil in the classic ceramic jars.



The 17th-century orcio room at Fattoria Lilliano

The aristocratic Malenchini family purchased the property in the 1830's, establishing a long tradition of devotion to making olive oil. Today, Delitta Malenchini produces one of the top olive oils of the Colli Fiorentini (the hills surrounding Florence). The Malenchinis' 2002 oil was rated Tuscany's finest olive oil, even surpassing the 2001 that had been one of only five Tuscan oils to receive Slow Food's coveted "5 olives."

Blessed with southfacing hillsides, the Malenchini's are always among the first in the Colli Fiorentini to harvest. In fact, this past autumn, Diletta's pickers were in the trees on October 20th. The fruit of her 11,000 trees are harvested by hand; pressing is quick and methodical, resulting in consistently low acidity.

Our Choice for 2003

As was the case in 2002, we found that Malenchini's best 2003 oil was made not at the beginning of the harvest, but a little later: the week of November 10th. This oil boasts a green-yellow color, a classic nose of freshly cut grass; and a soft, velvety palate that builds to a slightly peppery finish.

The yield for our 2003 Malenchini *olio* was 13% (weight of oil to weight of olives), and

acidity was comfortably less than .2%. The blend consists of 60% Frantoio, 30% Leccino, 5% Moraiolo and 5% Pendolino olives.

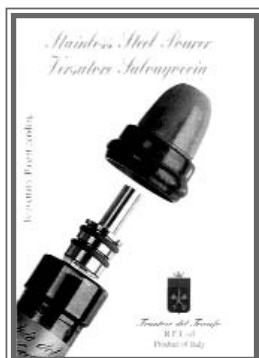
One of the elite Tuscan oils, Malenchini is also one of Tuscany's best values. Not to be missed.

2003 Malenchini
"Fattoria Lilliano"
Extra-Virgin Olive Oil
\$19.95 500 ml



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

The Pourer of Your Dreams ...



Six 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 2003 oils:
Monte, Vetrice, Prunatelli,
Castello di Bolgheri.

IL MELOGRANO

CHIANTI CLASSICO

For more than three decades, Milan's Ronconi family has quietly been producing some of Tuscany's best olive oils on their estate, Il Melograno, in Mercatale, in the valley of the Pesa River. Their accomplishments have not gone unnoticed: each year Melograno is judged one of Tuscany's top oils at the prestigious national olive oil competition, *Concorso Ercole Olivario*.



A misty view of the Pesa river valley from the villa at Il Melograno

A Singular Estate

Like most Tuscan estates, Melograno has both vineyards and olive groves, the latter 35% Frantoio, 30% Moraiolo, 15% Leccino, 15% Pendolino and 5% Madonna dell-Impruneta. At an elevation of 300 meters above sea level, the estate's 3,700 trees produce one of the most concentrated, flavorful and aromatic oils we've found in the Chianti Classico zone.

While the quality at Melograno was excellent in 2003, quantities were not: down two-thirds from last year. So, while we normally have the luxury of bot-

tlung two different pressings, this year we were limited to just one. We selected a small lot of 100% Moraiolo harvested very early, on October 23rd.

With a yield of only 14.3% (weight of oil to weight of olives), and a very low .16% acidity, this is one of the year's finest Tuscan oils. It offers an olive-green color; a complex nose that runs the gamut from grass to artichoke; fine weight and viscosity on the palate, with excellent inner-mouth per-

fume, and a moderately peppery finish.

Melograno has again produced one of our favorite oils. A one-bottle limit.

2003 Melograno
"October 23rd Moraiolo"
Extra Virgin Olive Oil

\$21.95 500 ml



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 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 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 oil just at the moment of serving enhances its flavor. □

Rufina's Great "Single-Cru" Olive Oils

PRUNATELLI, MONTE & VETRICE

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 the richest, most exciting oils made anywhere in Tuscany. And the 2003's are no exception.

At the time we first met in November 1995, the Grati's were bottling just one extra virgin olive oil—a blend of the three sites. But when they allowed us to taste the three sites' olive oils separately, we were struck by how distinctive each was. At our request, they began bottling the three oils separately for us.

Unique Expressions

It is astonishing how consistent in style and character these three oils have been. Monte is always the most delicate, Vetrice is typically the most powerful, and Prunatelli is usually the richest and fullest.

The key to the quality of these three oils is the *terroir*—south and southwest facing hillsides overlooking the town of Rufina. Because these hills average 500 meters above sea level, the trees were spared much of 1985's devastation. Today, the average age of the trees is 60 years at Vetrice and 80 years at both



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

Monte and Prunatelli. The groves are overwhelmingly Frantoio variety, with just a few trees of Pendolino and Moraiolo.

The olives ripen slowly at this altitude, producing oils that are intensely flavored, peppery and remarkably long-lived. It is our view that Rufina, with all of its attributes, is Tuscany's greatest olive oil zone.

One more reason for the quality of these oils is Grato Grati, the family's patriarch. He has been making oil from his trees for more than a half-century, his methods changing little over the years. He has always been an early harvester and each

year begins picking on November 1st or 2nd, regardless of what his neighbors are doing.

The 2003's

All three Grati oils are again excellent—low in acidity and clearly expressive of their *terroirs*. Quantities are generally good as well. Thanks to the high altitude, most of Prunatelli's and Monte's trees had yet to bud when the freeze struck in April; thus, their loss of fruit was small. Vetrice, however, was hit hard, losing most of its crop.

These are not only among Tuscany's greatest olive oils; they are also amazing values.



2003 Prunatelli 500 ml19.95

As is usually the case, the 2003 Prunatelli is one of Tuscany's most deeply colored oils. The nose is rich and evocative, recalling the heady aroma of freshly pressed olives in the *frantoio*. The palate is powerful and concentrated, with an intensely peppery bite. A classic Tuscan oil.

2003 Vetrice 500 ml 19.95

Again one of Tuscany's most powerful oils. The color is just slightly lighter than Prunatelli, showing a bit more yellow; the bouquet marries grass and artichoke, and the palate is rich and expansive, with excellent structure. As always, Vetrice is the quintessential Rufina *olio*.

2003 Monte 500 ml19.95

This is one of those rare oils that combines incredible grace and great richness. The color is similar to Prunatelli in its depth. The nose is the essence of artichoke and the palate is supple and smooth. The taste of artichoke echoes on the long, peppery finish. One of our favorites.

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

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, in the Chianti Classico, Montalcino and Chianti Rufina zones—from old trees in poor soil and cool microclimates.

Ripeness — The time of harvest is crucial, with the greatest 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 birthplaces of our 2003 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 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. □

CASTELLO DI BOLGHERI

BOLGHERI

We first discovered the remarkable olive oil of Castello di Bolgheri in 1997. One of Bolgheri's most historic estates, the property has been in the same family for more than 500 years. The current owner—Franca Spaletti Trivelli—is directly descended from the Conte della Gheradesca, who built the *castello* in 1500.

The estate consists of 300 acres—120 of which are vineyards that bear the same “Bolgheri” appellation as Sassicaia and Ornellaia. There are also 50 acres of olive groves, whose 7,000 trees are 60% Frantoio, 20% Moraiolo, and 10% each Leccino and Pendolino. A large percentage of the trees are extremely old, a few dating back to the 18th century. The youngest trees were planted in 1986, replacing trees lost in the 1985 freeze.



Castello di Bolgheri's ancient olive trees against a backdrop of cypresses.

The trees' great age (and deep roots) served the estate well during the 2003 drought, producing a yield of 15.5% (weight of oil to weight of olives) and a very low .2% acidity.

The Castello di Bolgheri 2003 oil is outstanding, with one of the most lustrous green colors of the year. The nose is classically grassy and the palate long, lush and rich. The touch of heat at the end delivers the perfect finish for a classic Tuscan oil. Highly recommended.

2003 Castello di Bolgheri Extra Virgin Olive Oil
\$19.95 500 ml



POGGIO CAPPONI

CHIANTI CLASSICO

The beautiful estate of Fattoria Poggio Capponi is a vast 15th-century property in Montespertoli, in the heart of Chianti Classico.

At 250 meters above sea level, the estate consists of 120 acres of vineyards, 500 acres of woods, 400 acres of wheat and other crops, and 50 acres of olive groves. Three-quarters of the 4,000 trees are more than a half-century old, and the breakdown by variety is 70% Frantoio, 25% Moraiolo and 5% Leccino.

Poggio Capponi's extra virgin was unknown to us prior to our November tastings last year; yet it stood out as one of the year's best. This low-yield, low-acid



At left one of the historic buildings at Poggio Capponi; at right a panoramic view of the estate's olive groves.



olio offers an olive-green color and a nose full of artichoke and spice. The palate is full and fleshy, with a soft texture. There is just a touch of Tuscan heat at the end, making it one of the gentler oils in our 2003 offering. A very

promising new Tuscan oil. One-bottle limit.

2003 Poggio Capponi Extra Virgin Olive Oil
\$20.95 500 ml

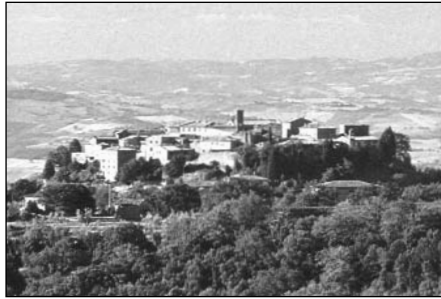


10% discount on any olive oil purchase of 12 bottles or more

IL POGGIONE

MONTALCINO

Il Poggione's olive oil has been a staple in our kitchen for nearly fifteen years—dating back to our eye-opening visit in 1988. This venerable Montalcino estate has long produced an oil whose price-quality rapport is nearly unparalleled. But in 2003, having made an oil of *amazing* quality, there can be no doubt that this is Tuscany's single finest olive oil value.



The ancient hilltop town of Sant'Angelo in Colle & the home of Il Poggione.

Il Poggione is one of the oldest producers of Brunello di Montalcino. But like other old Montalcino estates, it produces a diversity of agricultural products. A full 10% of the estate is devoted to olive trees, and it is one of Tuscany's few estates to have its own press house (*frantoio*).

A large percentage of Il Poggione's trees are quite old—planted in rocky soil at elevations of up to 500 meters. The trees are a 50/50 mix of Moraiolo and Frantoio, producing 1,000 cases of oil at yields averaging 17% (weight of oil to weight of olives) with acidity between .2% and .3%.

A Great Success

There were few better oils made in 2003 than Il Poggione—regardless of price. This classic oil boasts a rich, green color; an enticingly sweet, grassy bouquet; a fabulously smooth, concentrated and beautifully balanced palate; and just the right amount of pepper in the finish. Rich and flavorful today, it

should prove to be one of the longest-lived 2003's.

At the equivalent of just \$13.00 per half-liter, it's a dream-come-true for Tuscan oil fanatics. Very limited.

**2003 Il Poggione
Extra-Virgin Olive Oil**
\$25.95 One Liter



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

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of Tuscany*



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**FIRST CLASS
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