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LATE APRIL 2005

# A Magnificent Harvest

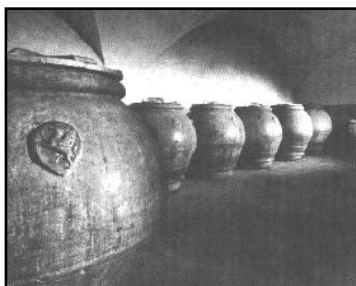
## *The 2004 Tuscan Olive Oils are the Finest in Years*

*Thomas Jefferson* once wrote that olive oil was perhaps Nature's most precious gift. The purest, concentrated essence of the olive, great olive oil explodes with a constellation of flavors and aromas, yet is 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—particularly from inland estates with the best *terroirs* and a dedication to quality.

Yet, even for the finest Tuscan growers, each year's oils will vary in quality, style and abundance, depending on the weather. And, as longtime readers of this newsletter know, Tuscany has gone through a series of difficult harvests in recent years, mostly the result of abnormally warm summers and drought. But in 2004, we are happy to report, Mother Nature has again smiled on Tuscan olive oil lovers, giving us a healthy crop of classically rich, pungent and intensely aromatic oils—overall the best since 1999.

As we have done for the past decade, we were in Tuscany in the midst of the November harvest, sampling scores of oils to find the very best. Because we tasted before the oils were blended, we were often able to select individual pressings, sometimes representing a single-day's harvest or a particular olive grove. Our selections were allowed to settle naturally and were bottled unfiltered in January, and shipped to us in a temperature-controlled container.



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

*"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*

### **A Classic Year**

Call it chance. Chalk it up to global warming. Consider it a gift for long-suffering Barolo lovers. However you explain it, Italy's weather has been unusually hot and dry of late, and while great for wine, it has seldom favored Tuscany's elite olive oils.

In 2004, Tuscany's extreme weather took a breather.

For the first time in five years, the region experienced a truly classic year: relatively cool, dry conditions and a very gradual olive ripening. After several years of increasingly early harvests, growers were able to wait until the first or second week of November to pick—achieving not only wonderful color and flavor intensity, but fine balance and the structure for years of aging.

For *olio* lovers, this is a year to revel in the oils' incredibly rich texture, evocative aromas and long, peppery finishes. And, once again, we believe that we have assembled the finest selection *anywhere*.

Many old favorites are represented in our 2004 portfolio: Il Poggione, Selvapiana, Melograno and the Grati family's incomparable Prunatelli, Monte and Vetrice.

But we have also made a number of exciting new discoveries. In fact, this year's line-up features the most first-time appearances in years.

These oils have been a long time coming. Don't miss them. □

# 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 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 2004 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. □

# The Oils

## SANTO STEFANO

### GREVE IN CHIANTI

For more than four decades, the Bendinelli family have been carefully tending the olive groves surrounding an ancient stone village in Greve.

Having bought the estate as a respite from their careers in Florence, the family decided almost immediately to make Santo Stefano their full-time home.



*Santo Stefano*

Their olive trees, which average 150 years of age, are made up of 75% Frantoio, 20% Moraiolo and 5% Leccino. Hand pruning and careful cultivation with organic fertilizers leaves them with a beautiful, but tiny, crop of olives each year.

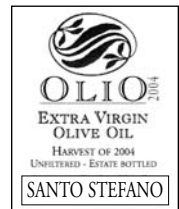
We visited Santo Stefano for the first time this year, at the end of a long day of tasting. As is our custom, we sampled their complete range of pressings; we were enthralled with the oil harvested November 3rd. We loved its aromas and the way it combined intense fruit with a supple texture, a rarity even among great oils.

Since this was our last visit of the day, we also indulged ourselves in the fresh tomatoes, Tuscan bread, and salt we found on the table. With these, the November 3rd oil became even more magical. By the time we were ready to leave, we were sipping the oil from a glass—it was that good.

There was only one *orcio* of the November 3rd oil, but we got it all—bottled for us unfiltered in 750ml dark glass wine bottles. With its brilliant green color, its rich aromas of artichokes, hay and hazelnuts; its luxurious texture, and its moderately peppery finish, there's no better Tuscan oil for drizzling on *fettunta*. *One bottle limit.*

**2004 Santo Stefano  
Extra Virgin Olive Oil**

**\$24.95 750 ml**



**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 oils is to dress a salad. But a rich, aromatic top-rank Tuscan oil has a higher calling.



Superb Tuscan oils come into their own when drizzled over foods—especially warm foods. Tuscan oils are great for cooking, but pouring them over something warm magnifies their aromas, unleashing *all* of their power.

A classic use for Tuscan 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 sybari-

tic 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. □

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# 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, often sweeping the field (as she did in 2004) at the prestigious *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.



*The villa at Il Melograno*

Each year, Signora Ronconi lets us taste through all of her pressings to select the best. We chose two strikingly different oils this year. As a pair, they remind us of the *great* 2002 Melograno oils. The Nov. 4 Moraiolo is rich and powerful, while the Nov. 10 Frantoio is more ethereal, but with a strong Tuscan finish. As both oils were produced from historically low yields—below 10%—limited quantities are available.

### **2004 Melograno EVOO** **"Nov. 10 Harvest - Frantoio"** **\$23.95 500 ml**

Made entirely from Frantoio olives—the variety prized by Tuscans for its finesse—this oil is richly evocative of freshly cut grass, artichoke and thistle on the nose. The palate is seamless—lush, creamy, and long—and the finish is classically peppery. A beauty from the Tuscan hills. *One bottle limit.*



### **2004 Melograno EVOO** **"Nov. 4 Harvest - Moraiolo"** **\$23.95 500 ml**

Like the monumental 2002 Melograno Moraiolo, this is a masterpiece: beautifully perfumed with scents of artichoke, hay and lavender; rich, concentrated and expansive on the palate, and moderately peppery in the long finish. The balance is breathtaking. *One bottle limit.*

# 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.



*Montisi*

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

and Moraiolo. The old trees yield little, but the oil is always stunning. We're in a position to know: we have been following Pino's oil for the past three years. In the first two years, Pino had no *olio* to spare; but in 2004, he enjoyed a healthier crop and rewarded our patience with a few cases. With a very low acidity of .15 and a yield of 14%, the 2004 La Porrone oil is rich, expansive and magnificently perfumed ... among our favorites of the year.

We are excited to make the first American offering ever of La Porrone—bottled unfiltered for us in one-liter bottles. *Very limited.*

### **2004 La Porrone** **Extra Virgin Olive Oil** **\$29.95 1-liter**



# SELVAPIANA “PODERE SAN GIUSEPPE”

## RUFINA

*Selvapiana* is one of the great estates of Tuscany, known not only for its powerful red wines, but also its magnificent extra virgin olive oils.

Each year, we anxiously 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 diversity of personalities is extraordinary, but the quality is always consistently high.

But that still didn't prepare us for the incredible range of oils at Selvapiana this year. The moment we entered



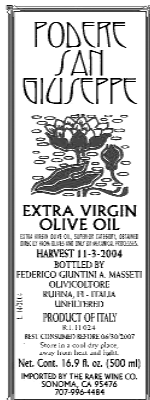
*One week's pressings. November 2nd to 9th. For us, the pinnacle was reached on Nov. 3rd & 4th: deeply colored, expressive, superbly balanced oils.*

the *orcio* room, and could smell the powerful aromas, we knew we were in for a treat. After nearly two hours of tasting, we made our choices: the single-day pressings of November 3rd and November 4th.

These two oils are the essence of Selvapiana: deeply colored, richly structured, harmonious and intensely aromatic. They were made from tiny yields—less than 12% weight of oil to weight of olives—and the acidity level extremely low. This is what great Tuscan oil is all about. *Very limited.*

### 2004 Podere San Giuseppe EVOO - Nov. 3 Harvest \$22.95 500 ml

A memorable Selvapiana oil—harvested in a single day. The color is medium green with yellow highlights, the nose is bursting with scents of artichoke. The concentrated, peppery and assertive palate is capped by a long peppery finish.



### 2004 Podere San Giuseppe EVOO - Nov. 4 Harvest \$22.95 500 ml

Harvested just a day later, the color is an even deeper green. The nose is quite powerful, tending towards freshly cut grass, and the flavors on the palate are explosively rich and evocative. The finish delivers a shade more heat than Nov. 3, promising a long evolution in bottle.

## MALENCHINI COLLI FIORENTINI

*The historic* Lilliano estate was owned by the Medici family until the early 18th century when it was purchased by the aristocratic ancestors of Diletta Malenchini—establishing a long tradition of devotion to making olive oil. Today, Diletta Malenchini produces one of the top olive oils of the Colli Fiorentini (the hills surrounding Florence).

Blessed with southfacing hillsides, the Malenchini's are always among the first in the Colli Fiorentini to harvest. In fact, Diletta's pickers almost always begin harvesting at the end of October. The fruit of her 12,000 trees is harvested by hand; pressing is quick and methodical, resulting in consistently low acidity.

The yield for our lot of 2004 Malenchini *olio* was 13% (that is only one kilo per tree!), and acidity is a

very low .1%. The blend consists of 60% Frantoio, 30% Leccino, 5% Moraiolo and 5% Pendolino olives.

Malenchini is one of Tuscany's elite oils and consistently one of its best values. Our 2004 selection is beautiful—one of the most refined and elegant oils of the year, but with expansive, mouthfilling flavors.

*Two bottle limit.*

### 2004 Malenchini “Fattoria Lilliano” Extra-Virgin Olive Oil \$19.95 500 ml



# IL CARNASCIALE

## MERCATALE VALDARNO (ARNO VALLEY)

*Last November*, it was the trail of a mythic wine that led us to Il Carnasciale—the estate where Bettina Rogosky, for the past 15 years, has made one of Tuscany's legendary cult wines.



*Signora Rogosky and an ancient olive tree at Il Carnasciale.*

The wine, Il Caberlot, was true to its reputation (more on that in a later issue). But we were also stunned by Bettina's olive oil, served at lunch with *zuppa di farro*.

The surreal color and explosive aromas and flavors not only transformed our meal, but left us begging to buy as many bottles as we could.

Unfortunately, with only 500 trees (most dating to the 1860's), Bettina had little oil to give us. At an altitude of 430 meters, the old trees produced few olives, and even less oil (the oil yield was a mere 14%).

Carnasciale's trees are mostly Frantoio, though small

pockets of Moraiolo and Pendolino line the border of their hillside vineyards. The olives are pressed in the town's old stone mill and the oil is bottled unfiltered.

With its emerald green color, artichoke perfume and luxurious mouthfeel, Il Carnasciale's 2004 oil is simply stunning.

The predominance of Frantoio olives gives the oil an unmistakable elegance, yet it is surprisingly full-bodied with classic pepper in the finish.

This fabulous extra virgin comes in a striking ceramic bottle. *One bottle limit.*

**2004 Il Carnasciale  
Extra Virgin Olive Oil**

**\$24.95 500 ml**



## 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. □

# 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 Montalcino estate has long produced an oil whose price-quality rapport is nearly unparalleled. But lately, its oil has gone to a new level.



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

The oil we selected this year was harvested the first week of November and immediately pressed in their new facility. Like the estate's wonderful 2003 oil, it offers proof positive that Il Poggione has become one of the elite oil producers of Tuscany. And at just \$26 a liter, their extra virgin continues to be one of Tuscany's great olive oil bargains.

Il Poggione is, of course, primarily a Brunello producer (a great one at that). But like other old Montalcino estates, it produces other agricultural products, with a full 10% of the estate devoted to olive trees. And with the 2004 harvest, the estate put into operation its new state-of-the-art *frantoio* (press house).

A large percentage of Il Poggione's olive trees are quite old. Planted in rocky soil at elevations of up to 500 meters, they are evenly divided between Moraiolo and Frantoio. Thanks to the trees' age and the weather, the olives in 2004 produced very little oil (the yield was just 14.5%). And with the new *frantoio* in operation, the acidity is the lowest we've ever seen here: only .13%.

**2004 Il Poggione  
Extra Virgin Olive Oil**  
**\$25.95 1-liter**



This *olio* has it all: a pretty pale green color; the scent of ripe olives and freshly cut grass on the nose; artichokes and almonds on the palate. The texture is fabulous: soft, creamy but concentrated ... real presence. There are more artichokes on the finish, plus a reassuring amount of pepperness. Truly sensational.

# 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.

But despite its rich history, this tiny producer is little known outside Tuscan

olive oil circles. The Casellis have a mere 400 trees, which they harvest by hand, using only natural fertilizers and no chemicals. They are artisans in every sense of the word.

Anna Maria's 2004 oil is marvelous: richly green with scents of artichokes, mint and grilled nuts, and great richness on the palate. A fantastic new discovery for us this year. *One bottle limit.*

**2004 Caselli Extra Virgin Olive Oil**  
**\$20.95 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. Fits six of this year's extra virgins: Prunatelli, Monte, Vetrice, Santo Stefano and the two Selvapiana oils.

**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. Last June, 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 2004, the Grati oils are again all extraordinary—low in acidity, immensely concentrated 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.



**2004 Prunatelli 500 ml .....19.95    2004 Vetrice 500 ml ..... 19.95    2004 Monte 500 ml .....19.95**

Once again, a candidate for Tuscan oil of the year, 2004 Prunatelli boasts a beautiful green color, a distinctive artichoke perfume, wonderful texture on the palate and moderate pepperiness at the end. Offers amazing richness and length.

Vetrice is consistently one of the most powerful Tuscan oils, and the '04 is no exception. Luminously colored, the bouquet exudes artichoke, and there is great presence and grip on the palate (a characteristic of Vetrice). A quintessential Rufina oil.

As in years past, Monte boasts incredible grace and great richness. The perfume of green tea, lavender and artichoke is ethereal; the palate is voluptuous and long. Plays Margaux to Vetrice's Latour. A fabulous Monte.

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

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*The Great Olive Oils  
of Tuscany*

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**FIRST CLASS  
MAIL**

**FOOD & WINE** BEST WINE  
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