

The RARE WINE CO.

NEWSLETTER

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Spring 2016 Edition: The Great Olive Oils of Tuscany 2015

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A Tuscan Oil Year to Celebrate

We Mark our 20th Anniversary of Great RWC
Tuscan Olive Oils with the Superb 2015s



Since 1995, The Rare Wine Co. has been America's most respected source of great Tuscan olive oils. In the *Art of Eating*, Ed Behr has called us "surely the best American source for fine Tuscan olive oil."

And in the *Wine Spectator*, Matt Kramer has praised not only our oils but our prices: "A top source of extremely fine Tuscan olive oils ... prices are unusually fair."

This year's oils will, to be blunt, knock your socks off. In fact, only one harvest of the past fifteen rivals it: 2008. And even that excellent crop may not have had quite the intensity and color of the best 2015s. We might have to go back to some of our favorite harvests in the late 1990s to see this kind of quality.

As we do every year, we spent several 14-hour days in early November in Tuscany tasting through scores of oils at numerous estates. This is a ritual we've been loyal to since 1995. It enables us to hand-select the very best pressings, often from single olive groves.

The oils we selected this year promise to be the most exciting available anywhere, and they have now arrived. It is your best chance of the year to stock up on the world's greatest—yet most fairly priced—olive oils.

A Change of Pace

The 2015 oils are an exciting change of pace. In recent years, our work has been made more difficult by the warm, dry summers, which has robbed many oils of their characteristic color, perfume and punch. Yet, our diligence—and our ability to be very choosy, a privilege granted very few oil importers—has allowed us to come up with the best oils each year.

But this year was different: it was a feast of riches. Almost everywhere we travelled, we found powerful and deeply colored oils. It is a year for all of us to buy generously. But, as always, it is a year to buy wisely.

Continued page 2



Highs & Lows

That's because quality is far from uniform. Selvapiana (see photo far left above) produced some of the most exciting oil we've seen from anybody in years. Selvapiana's Rufina neighbors, Grati and Colognole, also hit home runs.

But at some other estates, especially farther south in Tuscany, the oils were good but hardly of earth-shattering quality. And everywhere pressings varied in style and even quality, based on olive variety and harvest date.

Our visit with the brilliant Giorgio Franci (above, second from left) was, as always, a highlight, as he guided us through a dizzying number of pressings. His tastings are always a lesson in how each harvest varies from day to day, site to site and variety to variety. (The middle photo above gives you an idea of how widely the colors varied this year among Giorgio's different tanks.)

Our Guarantee of Quality

Some amazing oils have been made in Tuscany in 2015. Yet, as always, caution is advised. After an economically disastrous 2014 harvest, you will hear countless claims that this or that oil is the quintessence, crafted by hand by a family grower, when in fact that will rarely be the case.

Unless you know the background, you should take such claims with a grain of salt. Very few oils that reach the US are in fact entirely estate-grown. Blending from multiple properties is common, as is the practice of buying outside oil to bolster

stocks. But since 1995, The Rare Wine Co. has not only sold only 100% estate-grown oils, many of our oils are selections from specific olive groves.

Locking Up the Best

We learned long ago that there's no substitute for being there and choosing our own oils before the producers make up their blends. Not only do we get the best; we avoid the homogenizing effect of blending two months' worth of pressings.

With good reason, wine and food writers have consistently praised RWC Tuscan oils as the best, and most fairly-priced, available. And it will never be more true than in the coming months.

Stock up!

The best 2015 oils are beautifully colored, brightly nuanced and thickly textured. As we noted earlier, with the possible exception of 2008, you need to go back to the late 1990s—a time when Tuscany's weather was cooler and more conducive to producing great oil.

On the pages that follow, you will find our selections from this remarkable harvest—each oil capturing the beauty and nobility of Tuscany's ancient olive oil-making tradition. These are very exciting olive oils: buy them with the knowledge that you are buying the year's very best.

The Best of 2015

Eight hand-chosen blue chip oils

that represent the year's best in Tuscany, at prices well below what you'll pay for even ordinary oils elsewhere.



- 2015 Franci Villa Magra (Montenero) \$29.95 [read](#) [buy](#)
- 2015 Franci Rose Olivastra Seggianese Grand Cru (Montenero) \$34.95 [read](#) [buy](#)
- 2015 Monte Vasca 2 (Rufina) \$25.95 [read](#) [buy](#)
- 2015 Vetrice Vasca 35 (Rufina) \$25.95 [read](#) [buy](#)
- 2015 Selvapiana Fusto 2 (Rufina) \$25.95 [read](#) [buy](#)
- 2015 Colognole Montegiovi Vasca 4 (Rufina) \$24.95 [read](#) [buy](#)
- 2015 Il Giardino (Rufina) \$19.95 [read](#) [buy](#)
- 2015 Carnasciale (Valdarno) \$34.95 [read](#) [buy](#)

Frantoio Franci

Montenero d'Orcio

If there's a superstar in Tuscan oil, 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 Tuscany.

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, and he acquired the skill to blend and taste like a great wine-

maker. Since his first harvest in 1995—coincidentally our first year importing Tuscan oil—he's become Italy's most revered oil maker.

Each year, we look forward to our visit with Giorgio, not only to see what wonders have come out of his state-of-the-art Alfa-Laval presses, but we also relish his take on the year's harvest, which is one of the region's best-informed.

As Giorgio's global following continues to grow, consider yourself fortunate to have direct access to some of the finest olive oils on the planet. They are essential purchases.

2015 Franci Villa Magra

\$29.95 500ml 1 bt limit

Villa Magra is Franci's flagship oil, blended from the best pressings of its best olive groves in the village of Montenero.

When we visit, we taste all of the tanks selected to go into Villa Magra, and on that basis we can anticipate what the final blend will be like. (It's a lot like barrel tasting in a winery; the more barrels you taste, the better the idea you have of the final blend.)

In the past, we always waited for Giorgio's final blend, which could be counted on to be spectacular.

But in each of the past two years, one tank has caught our eye. In 2014, it was tank 13. In 2015, it was tank 9. And in each case that's what we had bottled for ourselves.

Pressed on October 9th, 2015, at the very start of the harvest, tank 9 is the essence of a great early-harvest Tuscan oil, with excellent color, lots of artichoke and pepper in the nose, a very lively palate, and a reassuringly peppery finish. It also contains a large amount of polyphenols (as measured by milligrams of hydroxytyrosol per kilogram), which is the principal olive oil attribute believed to promote heart health. It is simply glorious.

2015 Franci Rose Olivastra Seggianese

Grand Cru \$34.95 500ml 1 bt limit

Among Franci's greatest treasures are the 230 Olivastra trees it owns 8 kilometers to the west towards Mount Amiata, near the town of Seggiano. This is the town known by food lovers for its fabulous Seggianese pastas and by oil insiders for its Olivastra olive oil.

Franci's Olivastra trees are several hundred years old and, when conditions are favorable, produce oil with a captivating scent of roses.

The oil we chose—tank 23—is a vivid green, bordering on neon. The nose has roses in spades, along with a strong mint character and plenty of classic Tuscan scents like artichoke, bell pepper and arugula.

The palate is surprisingly delicate, with only moderate amounts of pepper and *amaro*.

Franci classifies this oil as Grand Cru, which tells you something about its stature. We were really lucky to get some this year. It is an oil not only of great history and rarity, but of distinctive beauty.

To place your order online, [click here](#)

Vetrice & Monte

Exhilarating Extra Virgins

from a Legendary Rufina Grower

The Grati Family are the quintessential Tuscan olive growers. They produce wine—in fact, excellent wine—from their Rufina vineyards. But for us, their calling cards are their amazing olive oils, from three different olive groves (*oliveti*): Vetrice, Monte and Prunatelli.

Each site commands a high position overlooking the Rufina valley. This not only promises beneficially cool temperatures, it also provides relative freedom from frost, so that most of their trees are extremely old, having survived the terrible freeze of 1985.

Each year between 1996 until 2013, we featured oils from all three groves, revealing in their distinctiveness. But this year, given the extraordinary quality of Monte and Vetrice, we chose to feature them alone. They are that great.

2015 Vetrice

\$25.95 500 ml

In singular years like 2015, Vetrice defines what Tuscan oil is all about. Its intensity of color; its Frantoio-dominated bouquet; and its very rich, long, spicy palate are about the closest thing you'll find to olive oil coming straight from the press. A selection of olives pressed between October 15th and 30th, this is one of finest examples of Vetrice made in years.

2015 Monte

\$25.95 500 ml

All finesse and perfume, Monte plays Château Margaux to Vetrice's Château Latour. Enjoying one of the highest elevations of any *oliveto* in Tuscany, Monte has some of the region's oldest trees. This year's selection was pressed between November 2nd and 13th and offers fantastic palate-clinging density, a tribute to the year's epic low yields. You'll want to stock up!



Selvapiana, Rufina

Each year, we eagerly await our visit to Selvapiana in Rufina. It's an important visit not only because we love their oils, but because the quality of their harvest is usually a good indication of how things went generally in Tuscany. So, it's usually one of our first stops.

Selvapiana's main business is, of course, wine, and olive oil is more a labor of love for the estate. They have two main clients—RWC and a high-profile UK restaurant; between the two of us, we soak up most of their production. Yet, if the weather doesn't cooperate, and they have problems with the harvest, they're willing to leave all the fruit on the trees, as they've done twice in the past decade.

Fortunately, 2015 produced stunning oil, with the brilliant green color you see when the estate really nails it.

For this offering, we selected the oil

that was being stored in Vasca 2, which was picked between October 26th and 30th. It is a classic Selvapiana oil, with all the power and richness this important estate is famed for.

2015 Selvapiana \$25.95 500ml

Reminiscent of those great Selvapiana oils from the late 1990s, this has it all. The color is brilliantly green, and the nose is explosive, with vivid notes of artichoke, grass, asparagus, and subtle floral tones. The palate has the Rufina power we all yearn for, with great richness and concentration and a long peppery finish. Making olive oil at Selvapiana is a roller-coaster ride, with great harvests juxtaposed to disastrous ones. Mark this year up as *great*.



"The best American source for fine Tuscan olive oil: The Rare Wine Co."
Ed Behr, Art of Eating



This year's tasting at Selvapiana.

A Cold Halloween Wind

Colognole, Rufina

Old-timers among Tuscan olive oil growers believe that the key to aromatic power in their oils is a cold snap in late October. And such events have been less and less frequent in recent years.

But in 2015, nature was kind to our good friend Cesare Coda Nunziante, scion of the noble family that owns Colognole. In a game of meteorologic brinksmanship, the very last day of the month, Halloween, delivered what he needed.

That night, a strong cold wind came whistling down the Appennine valleys that connect Rufina to the north of Italy. Temperatures plunged overnight, setting the stage for his most wonderfully aromatic oils in years.

And no one was more deserving of a great year than Cesare. He has some of the most beautiful old olive oil groves in Tuscany, on the slopes of Montegiovi, the mountain that towers over the town of Rufina.

And like his neighbors, in the

spring he suffered through rain at the time of flowering for Moraiolo, so that only the Frantoio olives developed well. Yields were also very low, just 11-12% weight of oil to weight of the olives.

But the compensation came in the quality of the year's oil, especially the oil in Vasca 4, which we chose. It was also Cesare's favorite oil of 2015: rich in Frantoio character, with plenty of spice.

2015 Colognole

\$24.95 500ml

The lustrous color is medium green with glints of gold. Aromatically, there are loads of floral scents to go along with the classic artichoke and grass that typifies a Colognole oil. The palate is richly detailed and textured, building slowly to a wonderfully peppery finish. A gem from one of our favorite estates.



To place your order online, [click here](#)

Il Giardino, Rufina

For the first 18 years we visited Rufina in search of oil, we thought we knew everyone. But then in 2012, we discovered the Il Giardino estate, whose owner, Andrea Pavi, not only has his own *frantoio* (pressing facility), he descends from four generations of olive growers in Rufina.

His 10,000 trees over 50 hectares—mostly the Frantoio variety—make Il Giardino among the largest oil estates in the area. Andrea uses no pesticides, and the estate is now certified organic.

All Andrea makes is oil, which is unusual for Rufina where most estates do both oil and wine. Andrea's explanation is that he prefers to do one thing well, and so he does.

His is also a firm traditionalist, believing that filtration can remove some of the oil's character, including some of the pleasing *amaro* and *pizzica* which is so quintessential to Tuscan oil.

And here's the best part: Andrea's prices, which are the lowest we've come across in the elite Rufina zone.

On our annual visit with Andrea, we selected his November 1st pressing for this year's bottling. The exceptionally low yield of less than 13% (weight of the oil to the weight of the olives) is reflected in the oil's concentration. The color is a moderately extracted yellow-green and there's a nice pepperiness in the finish. The nose and palate are classic for a Rufina extra virgin.

Andrea's modest prices, combined with this year's strong Dollar, allows us to bring the 2015 Il Giardino oil to you at a sensationally low price.

2015 Il Giardino

\$19.95 500ml

Olive green color. The nose is exudes scents of artichoke, grass, asparagus, butter and chive. The palate is full-bodied, with very good weight and texture, and then picks up a bit of heat towards the back, finally ending in a slow, gentle pepperiness. There are few Tuscan oils of such quality to be found at a price this low. Sadly, we only have a small amount to go around.



Il Carnasciale, Mercatale Valdarno

Bettina Rogosky's Il Carnasciale estate produces Il Caberlot, the legendary Super Tuscan. But this high-altitude site also produces some of Tuscany's most beautiful olive oils. In fact, before the Caberlot vines were planted in 1986, the site was planted only to olive trees—mostly dating from the 1860s and of the Frantoio variety.

Today, just 500 ancient trees remain, making the oil even more precious. The olives are quickly and gently pressed, and the oil is bottled unfiltered. And this beautiful oil comes in a striking ceramic bottle, which all by itself separates Carnasciale's extra virgin from every other oil.

And no oil has a more devoted following among our clients. And it requires devotion, since so little is made! In most years,

we can only allocate a bottle or two per client, and the same appears to be the case this year.

You won't want to miss it.

2015 Il Carnasciale

\$34.95 500 ml 1 bt limit

One of the most elegant of Tuscan olive oils—as elegant as Bettina—and at the top level of recent Carnasciale releases. The overall impression is luxury, like silk. Scents of dandelion, alfalfa, chive and peppercorns dominate, with a hint of lemon. On the palate a subtle, but cool, mintiness adds to the oil's complexity. The texture is smooth and the finish is long.



To place your order online, [click here](#)

A Labor of Love

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.

We didn't realize at the time 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 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.

The Differences Between Good & 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.

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

While coastal Tuscany produces some of the region's greatest wines, we believe that interior olive groves typically produce better oil. So, long ago we restricted our search for great oils to areas well away from the sea.

Ripeness: The time of harvest is crucial, with the best Tuscan oils made from olives that are harvested in 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 easily keep for two years, and often even longer. 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 antioxidants. 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? The answer is “time and money.” Most growers prefer to wait until the olives offer little resistance and can either be swept from the trees or fall to the ground on their own.

Early picking also produces much less oil from the same weight of olives. Our growers often obtain only one to two liters of olive oil per tree; the big commercial olive oil producers, who harvest later, can produce many times that amount from a single tree.

Speed of Pressing: It is crucial that the fruit arrive at the *frantoio* (the press house) speedily and unbruised. Otherwise, the olives will oxidize and develop a high level of oleic acid.

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

Method of Extraction: Olive pressing basics have changed little in recent years: the entire olive (skin, pulp and pit) is crushed, ground and worked into a paste. The oil is extracted from this paste, exposing it to as little heat and oxygen as possible. But while the essentials haven't changed much, many improvements have been made to the processing equipment, to obtain purer, cleaner oil, with a high level of polyphenols and a minimum of oxidation.

Age: Top Tuscan oils have a window of optimum usability that is greater than for other oils—and they can often age for several years when well stored. In estimating ageability, look to variables such as pepperiness, green color and depth of flavor in the young oil. Generally, the more intense these characteristics, the better the prospects for extended aging.

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.