



THE GREAT OLIVE OILS OF TUSCANY, 2013

Online Edition
Spring 2014

THE RARE WINE CO. NEWSLETTER



A picker and his son at Il Poggione (Montalcino). See page 7.

Threading the Needle

.. Or How Two Weeks Saved a Crop of Outstanding Tuscan Oils

The fruits of our labor—thirteen superb 2013 Tuscan extra virgin olive oils—have arrived. And if you sampled any of our *nuovo* bottlings in December, you'll have an idea of how splendid they are.

But seeing, smelling and tasting them, you'd have no idea how hard to come by they were. (And how rare Tuscan oil of this quality will be this year.)

It's All about Timing

As with wine, choosing when to harvest olives is more than just luck. Yet, the finest olive growers, like the best wine growers, seem to have a knack for knowing just the right moment.

While the trend in recent years has been to pick during October, the savvy growers knew the olives weren't ready until the very end of the month, if not in early November. But at that point, it became a race against the clock. In less than two weeks heavy rains came, and as one of our growers commented, "the game is over." Except for that two-week period, the harvest was a near-disaster.

Fortunately, we were on the spot between November 10th and



The al fresco "tasting room" at Podere Cogno, overlooking a magnificent olive grove.

12th, choosing our just-pressed oils from 2013's undeniable sweet spot: the two weeks between October 25th and November 10th.

The oils have some of the finest colors we've seen in years. Though there's some variation, the basic theme is that oils pressed during that two-week period are vividly green, in a way that's rare in recent years.

They are also very aromatic. The aromas are classic too: with plenty of artichoke and freshly cut grass.

“ ”

I've discovered what is surely the best American source for fine Tuscan olive oil: The Rare Wine Co. Ed Behr, The Art of Eating

The Rare Wine Company ... imports some of the best green olive oils from Tuscany. Daniel Patterson in Aroma

And they're not intensely peppery, so they're easy on the palate. The palates are smooth, with plenty of fruit, but without the heat in the finish that marks the oils of some years.

A Word to the Wise

Given the year's difficult conditions, we worry about the quality of many of the 2013 Tuscan oils that will appear on the market this year.

For starters, many quality-conscious growers produced very little oil. At Cogno, where Leccino is a specialty, most of the olives from this variety were left on the trees. As for Cogno's other important olive variety, Frantoio, production was a fraction of normal levels. (We grabbed every drop of Frantoio oil Cogno made this year.)

At less conscientious estates, much of the 2013 oil that's bottled and sold will be mediocre at best. This is a year in which to be careful about what you buy.

But RWC clients should have no such concerns. We have done our job as we always have—electing oils with great care and passion.

You will find that each of the oils in this year's offer will transcend what is otherwise available in the market—providing great pleasure throughout 2014 and beyond.

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 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 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.



Such extremes of color demand that we buy only what we taste and see.

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. □



Il Melograno, MERCATALE VAL DI PESA

Like Giorgio Franci (*see page 9*), Valeria Ronconi is revered by olive oil aficionados. Her recent efforts to perfect olive oil extraction technology have won her nearly as much admiration as the quality of her Melograno oils.

An olive grower for more than 30 years, Signora Ronconi is working closely with agronomists to develop a new system of extraction to retain structure, antioxidants and vitamins, while virtually eliminating oxygen during pressing and extraction.

With few exceptions, each of her oils reveal remarkable purity, varietal clarity and balance. This was our 14th harvest working with Signora Ronconi.

When we visited on November 10th, we tasted a number of blends, based on either Frantoio or Moraiolo olives. We were knocked out by her "Frantoio B" blend, which is entirely Frantoio olives pressed beginning on November 6th.



There is an elegance to Signora Ronconi's oils that

sets them apart from nearly everything else made in Italy. We strongly urge you to include at least a bottle of her 2013 Frantoio *extravirgine* among your purchases this year.

**2013 Melograno
Frantoio
\$29.95 500 ml**

Signora Ronconi's pickers were very busy on November 5th and 6th, delivering two separate lots to the press house on the 6th. The yield of oil from each olive was a mere 10% of its weight. (Big oil producers often get more than twice that from their fruit.) The result is an olive oil of supple texture, but with quite a bit of Tuscan heat in the finish. The flavors and aromatics are diverse and compelling: artichoke, arugula, pea shoots and mint.

TUSCAN OLIVE OIL & FOOD

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 oils 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. □

Flat-Rate Olive Oil Ground Shipping: \$13.95/cs. California - \$21.95/cs. elsewhere. For other rates and details, see page 9.

Colognole, RUFINA



Scion of a noble Tuscan family, Cesare Coda Nunziante carries on an ancient tradition of growing olives on Montegiovi, the mountain that towers over Rufina.

As always, in 2013 Cesare let us choose from his best pressings. This year, we chose an *olio* pressed on November 1st.

To create a masterpiece that day, Cesare brought in carefully selected green olives from three different *oliveti*: Lastra, Olmo and Noci, each from a different elevation on Montegiovi. The average oil yield was just 9%—an incredibly low number, even for 2013.

We call this oil "Cesare's Labor of Love." You'll call it beautiful.

**2013 Colognole 'Montegiovi'
Extra Virgin Olive Oil**
\$27.95 750 ml

A bargain in its 750ml format. Greenish gold color, the nose offers rich scents of nuts, butter, freshly cut grass, with hints of menthol. The oil fills your mouth with butter, spice, oyster shell and pepper, with just a touch of heat at the end. A lovely oil that speaks of a family's passion.

Selvapiana, RUFINA

Each year, we eagerly await our visit to Selvapiana. It's an important visit not only because this is one of our favorite producers, but because their oils are often a bellwether of Tuscany's *olio* fortunes.

Such was the case in 2013. Like nearly everyone else, the olives weren't ripe enough to pick until the end of October. And the mid-November rain doused any hopes for an extended harvest. Their best oils were produced on two days, November 8th and 11th. While we might have asked for the two pressings to be bottled separately, we chose a marriage of them. This was one of those times when the whole is greater than the sum of the parts.



The result is a classic Selvapiana oil heaven-made for brushchetta, fetunta and fresh mozzarella.

2013 Selvapiana EVOO
\$24.95 500 ml

The yellow-green color foretells an oil that is vibrant and youthful. The nose is very olivey, with lots of asparagus and artichoke, with background notes of yeast and brioche. The palate is firm and powerful, and there's more than a little heat in the long finish. Outstanding!

You can now order on line!

[click here](#) for our easy on-line order form.

*10% discount on Mixed 12-bottle Case Purchases.
Save even more with our flat-rate olive oil ground
shipping: \$13.95/cs. California - \$21.95/cs. elsewhere*

For other rates and details, see page 9.

Monte, Vetrice & Prunatelli

Exhilarating Extra Virgins from Rufina's Providential Hillside

There is no better demonstration of the influence of *terroir* on olive oil than the extra virgins of Rufina's Grati family.

Year in, year out, the family's olive groves—Vetrice, Monte and Pruna-telli—produce three of Italy's greatest oils, and they do it effortlessly. The secret is some of the finest hillside *terroirs*—and some of the oldest trees—in what could be Tuscany's greatest olive zone.

"The real joy is seeking out Grati's three single-grove olive oils selected and distributed by The Rare Wine Co."

Peter Liem



Because of the weather conditions, Grati's yields were very low again. But the oils are a revelation: highly concentrated, marvelously aromatic and elegant.

These three oils have long been our most popular, because of not only their incredible quality, but also their low prices. For the money, there are no greater olive oils on the

2013 Vetrice "Vasca 3"

\$23.50 500 ml

Another stunning oil from a legendary olive grove. Harvested in the year's sweet spot—November 3rd to 9th—this fantastic Frantoio-dominated blend provides all the evidence you'll ever need that Vetrice is one of the great *oliveti* of Italy. The oil itself is a brilliant green with yellow highlights, and the nose is classic: freshly mowed grass and cut hay. The palate is firm and concentrated with just enough heat in the finish to remind you of the oil's Rufina origins.

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

2013 Prunatelli "Vasca 6"

\$23.50 500 ml

Of all the Grati *oliveti*, Prunatelli enjoys the highest elevation. As a result, its olive trees were largely spared the devastating 1984 freeze that killed so many of Tuscany's ancient trees. We always marvel at the richness, power and balance of Prunatelli oils. And we have those qualities in spades in our 2013 selection. Harvested between November 5th and 8th, this oil features a beautiful greenish-gold color, an effusive nose of artichoke, grass, acacia blossoms and chlorophyll, and a firm, balanced palate. There is excellent flavor persistence and moderate heat at the end. Classic and essential.



2013 Monte "Vasca 2"

\$23.50 500 ml

Year in, and year out, Monte is the Grati family's, if not Tuscany's, most elegant oil. And the 2013 is true to form. Harvested the first week of November, the color is medium yellow-green, with a subtle nose of green tea, plum blossom, grass and artichoke. The chlorophyll gives a cooling sensation to the silky palate, and there is moderate pepperness in the long, satisfying finish.

Podere Cogno, CASTELLINA IN CHIANTI

(Organic)



Marco Matteini loading olives to go the frantoio for pressing.

We discovered Podere Cogno in 2007, when Marco and Giovanna Matteini's oils were among that year's best. And ever since, the aromatic power of the Cogno oils surpasses just about everything else made in Chianti Classico.

Marco and Giovanna's secret? Very old trees, a 550-meter elevation, organic farming, a unique microclimate and a passion for perfection. The oils' aromas stem from the site's high elevation and the surrounding forests, which keep the trees cool throughout the summer. This allows the olives to ripen more slowly and develop the range of aromas and flavors that set great Tuscan olive oil apart.

Cogno makes two oils, a pure Leccino and a traditional blend of Frantoio, Moraiolo and Leccino that is called "Campo Grande." Our strong preference this year was for the small amount of Campo Grande made. Fortunately, the Matteinis allowed us to have their entire production of the oil.

It is simply brilliant. Not to be missed.

2013 Podere Cogno EVOO
"Campo Grande"
\$24.95 500 ml

Made from tiny yields (less than 11% oil to weight of the olives). A beautiful green color is matched by an equally vibrant nose featuring artichoke, grass and roasted almond. The palate is intense and pungent, yet velvety with an explosive bitter artichoke and pepper finish. A preponderance of Frantoio olives is to thank for this oil's supreme elegance and peppery character.



Sàgona, PRATOMAGNO

(Organic)



We are always looking for small growers whose oils fit the flavor profile we love. On average, we are lucky to make one new find each year. Something tells us that our 2013 discovery is a keeper: Sàgona.

This spectacular estate is nestled high in the mountains that run the length of Eastern Italy. At about 500 meters above sea level, it is rough-

ly the same altitude as the Grati estate in Rufina or Carnasciale. And like each of these, Sàgona produces both oil and wine.

But Sàgona also produces something else that's very special: the famous and rare Zolfino de Pratomagno beans, which many consider Italy's best. Production is difficult and unreliable (some years see no crop at all), and Sàgona is one of the few growers whose production is certified. At \$50 a kilo, no wonder they're considered the caviar of legumes.

Sàgona's extra virgin olive oil is no less special. From 100-year-old trees, three oils are made: pure Leccino, pure Moraiolo and a Frantoio-dominated blend. All three are outstanding, but it was the Leccino this year that got us really excited.

Sàgona only has 300 Leccino trees, so even in an abundant year, there's not much oil to go around. With 2013's low yields, the oil is like vapor. We were fortunate enough to get some.

2013 Sàgona Leccino
\$24.95 500 ml

Deep green gold color. Notes of light artichoke, earth, alfalfa, figs and ripe olive fruit fill the nose. The palate is rich, viscous and long. Lots of impact on the palate and outstanding resonance. Only slightly peppery on the long finish. An outstanding discovery and an oil to follow in years to come.

Il Poggione, MONTALCINO



Ever since our first visit to the estate in 1988, we've been great admirers of Il Poggione's oil. This venerable Brunello producer has long made an oil whose price-quality rapport is nearly unparalleled.

But since installing its state-of-the-art *frantoio* in 2004, its oil has become one of the top extra virgins of Tuscany, regardless of price.

Il Poggione's real prizes are its ancient trees, planted at elevations up to 500 meters.

This year, we tasted more than a half dozen different pressings, starting with October 20th. Ultimately, our choice came from an *oliveto* named Vie Piane, at 300 meters. This grove is planted primarily to Frantoio olives which, in this protected setting, weren't ready to

harvest until November 18th. This is our only 2013 oil harvested that late, but it is one of the finest Il Poggione oils we've seen in recent years.

And as always, it's an absolute bargain in its liter bottle.

2013 Il Poggione EVOO

\$29.95 1 liter

The deep green color stands out among this year's oils. The nose is vibrant, with scents of grass, pepper, mint and almonds. There is plenty of volume and viscosity on the palate, which finishes with moderate pepperiness. This is an amazing value for a Tuscan extra virgin olive oil of such quality and stature.

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

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Harvesting at Il Poggione

Il Carnasciale

MERCATALE VALDARNO



Bettina Rogosky's Il Carnasciale estate produces Il Caberlot, the legendary Super Tuscan. But this high-altitude lofty 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. As always, this wonderful oil comes in a striking ceramic bottle.

**2013 Il Carnasciale
Extra Virgin Olive Oil**
\$29.95 500 ml

Bettina again made just a few dozen bottles of her precious oil in 2013, and we were indeed fortunate to get some. Bright golden color. Very clean nose of cherry blossom, sweet butter, fennel and sage. Classically elegant on the palate with artichoke and pepper flavors and a soft, creamy finish. As always, an oil as elegant as its maker.

**10% discount on Mixed
12-bottle Case Purchases**
Flat-Rate Olive Oil Ground Shipping:
\$13.95/cs. California - \$21.95/cs. elsewhere
For other rates and details, see page 9.

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 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. □

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 winemaker. Since his first harvest in 1995, he's become Italy's most revered oil maker.



Giorgio Franci and his father, Fernando.

As in years past, we are pleased to offer his flagship oils: **Villa Magra** and **Villa Magra Gran Cru**. These are made by isolating the best sites in the family's noble Villa Magra *oliveto*, harvesting them separately and then blending them to create the perfect oil.

But he also made a small amount of pure **Moriaiolo**, which is superb. We grabbed what we could.

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. Even if you only buy a bottle or two of each, these are essential purchases.

2013 Franci "Villa Magra" \$29.95 500 ml

Bright and intense aromas of artichoke, grass and fresh olives. In the mouth, the texture is quite rich and viscous, with a classic pungency to give structure and balance. Lots of pepper on the finish, which is very persistent. Beautifully crafted.

2013 Franci Moraiolo \$29.95 500 ml

Moraiolo olives produce oil of great richness, but they've suffered in the hot weather of recent years. This is the only Moraiolo oil we purchased in 2013, and its beauty pertains to both Villa Magra's *terroir* and Giorgio Franci's skill. Rich, intense and complex. Classic.

2013 Franci "Villa Magra Gran Cru" \$39.95 500 ml

An oil worthy of its reputation. It bears Franci's hallmark refinement and balance. Rich artichoke, pepper and wheat grass mark the very pure nose. The palate is very concentrated, building to a long, peppery finish. The balance is thrilling.

Ground Shipping Rates for This Offer Only

1-6 bts \$9.95 Cal. \$17.95 elsewhere*
7-12 bts \$13.95 Cal. \$21.95 elsewhere*
13-24 bts \$19.95 Cal. \$27.95 elsewhere*
*In the continental U.S.

All Olive Oil orders will ship separately from wine orders.

All orders received and confirmed by April 3rd will be shipped the week of April 6th.

Sorry, we cannot accommodate requests for shipment on specific days.

Please tell us in advance if you want us to hold your oil for future shipment or pickup at our warehouse.

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