

Divine origins

The characteristic silvery foliage of **olive trees** reflecting in the **sun** is an unmistakable part of the Mediterranean landscape. Indeed, the **olive** is one of the very cornerstones of the region's culture and civilisation, a life-giving fruit that has an almost **mythical** status along the lands that border the ancient sea.

Perhaps more than any other product it also forms the basis of a rich culinary tradition whose appeal has spread across the globe.

When the Romans colonised their 'Mare Nostrum' the trade in olives, and more importantly olive oil, was already very old, dating back beyond a succession of civilisations to the very origins of settlement. According to Greek mythology, the olive has divine origins, but more recent research ascribes its introduction into southern Europe to the Phoenicians, a seafaring nation who brought it from the east. A whole way of life subsequently developed around this unassuming little fruit, whose oil became a prized commodity that was used as currency and traded with other luxuries such as wine and gold.

Just as 'black gold' lubricates today's economies, so 'liquid gold' was the motor of the classical economy. Although Spain is today by far the largest producer of olive oil in the world, the produce from Italy – and Tuscany in particular – remains the strongest brand. Local conditions, with hot summers, cold winters, high seasonal rainfall and the influence of the salty air from the Ligurian coast ensure that Tuscany produces an oil that is particularly rich in flavour and character. Unlike the huge expanses of olive groves that mark southern Spain, production in this region is characterised by a large patchwork of small groves, many of which have been in production since before Roman times.





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Retailing at anything up to \$100 per litre in overseas delicatessens, this is big business, but, as always with the Italians, you get the impression they do it more out of love and tradition. Indeed, to set up a new working grove is a costly affair, as once planted it takes the trees up to ten years to become fully productive. In traditional groves, three different varieties are grafted onto one trunk, creating a three-pronged tree that seems to fall away from its centre. These days some farmers will even sprinkle fruit around so the soil absorbs them and the flavour is brought out in the oil, but in Tuscany most prefer to do things au naturel.

The same can be said of the methods of harvesting, which contrary to public misconception do not require the shaking of the tree. “That is done in Greece,” says A Capo’s Emilio Masserati. “Here we rake the branches, ‘caressing’ the olives on to plastic nets that are then collected and manually sorted to eliminate leaves and bits of branch. It’s a wonderfully rustic and labour-intensive system whose loving care and attention is rewarded in the quality of the final product.”

After picking, the olives are taken to the mill as soon as possible - to keep down oxidation and acidity. Here they are washed before being gathered into a huge bowl where they are crushed into a paste. A centrifugal separator is then employed to separate the liquids from a paste that is used in soap making or as fertiliser, while a further process of centrifugation extracts the oil from the water.

The sooner the result is bottled, sold and delivered to your table, the more you will feel a little fresh Mediterranean sunshine with your food. ■

Olive Oil:

Important terminology

Extra-virgin olive oil may only be produced by cold pressing of olives, and must contain no more than 0.8% acidity. Low levels of acidity are a sign of freshness: the longer the time between picking and pressing, the higher the acidity. Extra-virgin olive oil may not contain refined oil. In Tuscany significantly lower levels of acidity are achieved, and the oil is judged to have a superior taste. It is also arguably healthier than other oils, because it contains higher levels of antioxidants.

Virgin means that the oil was produced by a physical process without the use of any chemicals.

Cold pressing is essential: the application of heat in the process will change the chemical constitution of the oil.

100% Pure Olive Oil – be careful: this is often the lowest quality available for retail consumption. Look at least for the word ‘virgin’.

Hand-picked should render better quality, because farmers who pick by hand pick sooner.

‘Produce of?’ Choose oil marked clearly as having been grown, pressed and bottled in the same place - otherwise you could be buying oil which has been pressed in one country and bottled in another (often much later).

Freshly Pressed Olive Oil
Few people understand that olive oil is best consumed fresh.

If you think that the words Extra Virgin guarantee you the best olive oil, think again. Yes, Extra Virgin Olive Oil is finer than other olive oils, but little of it is consumed fresh (i.e. within no more than 3 months of pressing) outside growing areas.

What is the difference between olive oil from the supermarket (even if Extra Virgin), and freshly pressed olive oil?

Think of the difference between freshly squeezed orange juice (squeezed at home and consumed immediately) and the stuff you buy in the shop. A world apart. Well, it’s the same with another very special fruit juice - for that is what olive oil is. Put a little fresh oil into a shot glass and take a sip: initially you notice a lovely silky smoothness. Then, after about 5 seconds, the peppery freshness explodes as a kick on your palate. Fresh oil is hot and spicy! Compare that with even the best extra virgin oil from a delicatessen, and you will never go near anything that’s not fresh again...

Olive oil (extra virgin or not) imported to non-producing countries, including the UK, can arrive months, maybe even a year, after its pressing. Hence, by the time it reaches our shelves, most of the freshness and delicate nuances of the oil are already dulled or often even lost. Each variety of olive has a particular “pepper” punch (which, in very simple terms, is influenced by the time of picking within the harvest season, and also by the length of time between picking and press). For true aficionados the worst sin is to blend olive varieties. This can lead to a confused punch, or series of punches – completely out of order!

But in the 21st century, we can dream of a new world order in olive oil. After having always been almost entirely a northern hemisphere product, olive oil is now produced in New World countries like Argentina, Chile, Australia and New Zealand, thus filling what used to be void seasons in the northern hemisphere for freshly pressed oil. So now, if olive oil producers and supermarkets could only get their act together, we could enjoy fresh pressed oil nearly all year round.





We stayed at **A Capo**, a smallholding near **Lucca**, Tuscany, as their guests during the recent 2008 harvest.

Holidays from tree to press - with a bang!

In view of The Leaning Tower of Pisa, the grassy terraced slopes of south-facing hillsides at A Capo, San Macario in Monte, near Lucca, nurture olives long recognised as the source of some of the world's finest olive oil. For centuries, the two Tuscan towns of Lucca and Impruneta have vied each other as producers of the best olive oil in Italy. Courteously, Lucca acknowledges that Impruneta is the best - and vice versa! In her definitive 'Italian Food', although also admiring the oil of Liguria, Elizabeth David went for Lucca.

The two Tuscan oils are different: near the sea, Lucca delivers greener grassy, saltier silky flavours, but both are packed with the Tuscany's characteristic fiery peppery punch, whose flames often linger for the first few months, as the oil softens. For almost half a century the olive grove at A Capo lay abandoned. Creepers covered the olive trees, and they lay fallow until 2002, when a new Anglo-Irish proprietor took over the abandoned 12-acre hillside estate, cleared the land and brought the groves back into production. The almost 1,000 trees currently yield



some 800 litres, though he hopes to produce more as the trees recover.

The harvest generally lasts from Mid-October to mid-November. If you are interested, you can join the proprietor, his family, Emilio Masserati (their simpatico English speaking Director of Husbandry) and his local team for the harvest. Emilio teaches the art of picking olives, nurturing them during the shortest possible interval between tree and press, taking them to the Lucca DOP press, understanding the pressing process, and on the very same day enjoying the freshest olive oil you can ever taste.

Up to six guests stay luxuriously at the farm during the harvest, with room for more nearby. Stay for a couple of nights, a long weekend, a week or even for the whole harvest. Enjoy Tuscan fare at farmhouse meals at this most convivial time of year. Warm by day, mild by night, as the chestnuts fall and the myrtleberries and persimmons ripen, spread out the nets, shake or comb the trees, and gather the olives into baskets... The resulting, limited cold-pressed seasonal production is offered direct from the farm or from a very small number of UK stockists.

Available from mid November every year - consume within 3 months for peppery freshness, from 4-6 months for a softer fragrance. It would be surprising if there is any left after that.

The Frost Family from London came in 2008: property developer Simon and medical professional Pauleen had long wished to understand the secret of olive oil. Their student daughter Clare insisted on coming with them. "This is something we had wanted to do for years, but didn't know how," says Simon. Pauleen proudly shows off her oil to friends at home: "I picked that: it's my own olive oil - what a punch: enjoy! Yes, it requires a little exercise, but I can't think of a more satisfying way to burn off those delicious calories we also ate and drank at A Capo - simply stunning."

The harvest ends with a bang: 5th November is the day the British commemorate a 17th century plot to blow up the Houses of Parliament - King, Court and all. Guy Fawkes was caught in the act, instead bringing his own life to an end on the scaffold. Locals join the harvesters for what has become an annual Anglo-Irish-Italian "Bonfire Night" party at which 'gunpowder, treason and plot' are celebrated traditionally, burning all the olive prunings and culminating in a firework display. Given that the Gunpowder Plot was Catholics against Protestants, the Pope is never on the guest list! ■



From press to outlet



The proprietor of A Capo and his partner deliver oil direct to their select list of UK outlets: “We don’t make a profit,” he says, “but, importantly, the income reduces the cost of maintaining the land - essential we do this to the standards expected by our guests staying at other times in the year (we also do wild asparagus weeks, for example). Trees must be pruned and fed, land kept tidy – otherwise it would be a let-down.”

Successfully selling freshly pressed olive oil requires retailers with a passion for real food, retailers who see their business as an antidote to the mundane universal conformity of mass-produced food and seek to give their customers a fun experience. “We have been selling oil from A Capo to a small number of UK suppliers for several years,” says the estate’s owner. “Each year, we seek to expand our outlets by no more than one or two. As we are, ourselves, consumers of high quality food, these new outlets tend to introduce themselves naturally to us during the year. 2008 was no exception: in August, out of breath and late for an engagement in The Cotswolds, we found ourselves dashing into Chipping Campden’s Le Petit Croissant, looking for a quick coffee.”

Half an hour (and a deferring phone call to our destination) later, we emerged laden with cheeses, pâtés and breads. Immediately out of the shop, we exclaimed to each other: “Freshly Pressed Olive Oil!” Paul Hennessy, and his partner John Dines, bought Le Petit Croissant in early 2008. They had been searching for a Bakery, Delicatessen and Café to indulge in their love of food. “Their enthusiasm and desire to

impart some of their passion for artisan foods crafted with respect for land and ingredients hit us as we walked through the door. They make it clear that they strive to support local businesses and producers.”

“Well, olive oil isn’t exactly local to The Cotswolds, but, as our UK base is all but just round the corner, we felt we somehow qualified. When we returned three months later, we were as delighted as they, at our precious five-day old samples.” Paul says: “We were thrilled to secure a small and exclusive supply of first class Freshly Pressed Olive Oil, with an unforgettable taste and the colour of the freshest and finest green olives. Savouring this oil for the first time, we were overwhelmed by its incredible robustness of flavour and its ability to set the taste buds on fire!”

May we also reveal a little secret: Paul and John make the best bread in The Cotswolds. Their customers keep telling them this, which makes it an even more

challenging acclamation to maintain: at this level bread is a very unpredictable product - even the weather makes a difference! But, as the French say “a day without bread is a day wasted” - Team Petit Croissant does not seek to argue this one. “This is important to us, because the best way to sell oil quickly is to taste it – and there no way better than having potential customers dip pieces of really good fresh bread into it.”

“But if you want the fresh oil, hurry: we only produce limited quantities and prefer not to leave first time retailers with too much stock. If it hasn’t all have gone by Christmas Eve, Father Christmas will take the rest for his own stocking!”

+ Details:
Le Petit Croissant
 Pedlars House, High Street
 Chipping Campden
 Gloucestershire GL55 6AL UK
 Tel: +44 1386 841 861

The other new outlet for A Capo’s Freshly Pressed Olive Oil is the Horse & Groom pub at Bourton-on-the-Hill, also in the Cotswolds. This Grade II listed Georgian building of honey coloured Cotswold stone is bursting with character and original period features, and enjoys spectacular views over the surrounding landscape from its hill top setting – and, yes, you can stay there.

Chef Will Greenstock and Front of House brother Tom are becoming increasingly respected for their high standards: winners of the Good Pub Guide: Gloucestershire Dining Pub of the Year 2009, no less.

The oil from A Capo is not for retail sale here, but, while stocks last, ask for dishes with Freshly Pressed Olive Oil and see what wonders Will can deliver...

+ Details:
Horse and Groom
 Bourton on the Hill
 Moreton-in-Marsh
 Gloucestershire GL56 9AQ
 Tel: +44 1386 700 413
 www.horseandgroom.info