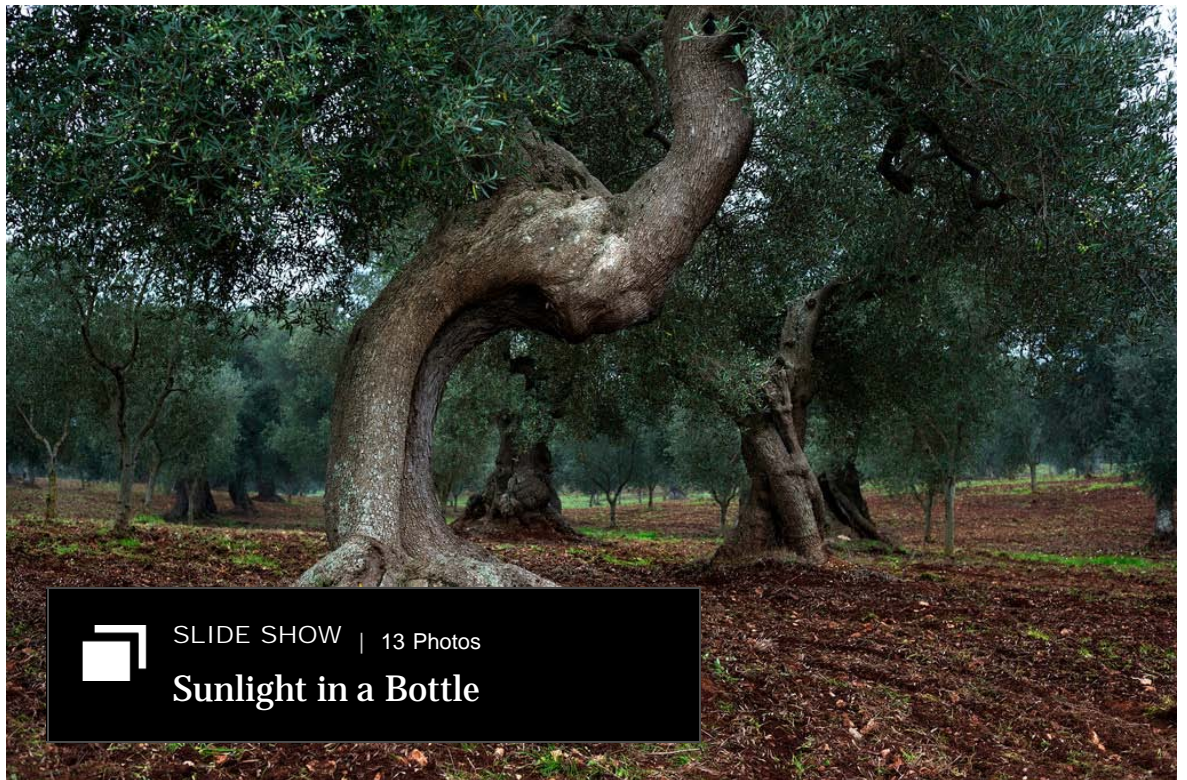


TRAVEL

Italy's Treasured Olive Oil, at the Source

By DANIELLE PERGAMENT MAY 22, 2015



Giulio Piscitelli for The New York Times

The bottles were presenting a problem.

The stainless steel one was best at keeping out the light, but it conducted heat and it wasn't cheap. The painted glass bottle was

promising, but only if it was made with the right paint. Dark glass was still an option, though not ideal.

“The wrong container can ruin all of our work,” said Nico Sartori, our host, his hands shaking with feeling. It had been an emotional morning — and we hadn’t even gotten to the subject of corking.

I had been invited to Fattoria Altomena, an olive oil farm just outside of Florence, to meet six of the region’s most respected olive oil producers. Outside our rough-hewed tasting room, flaxen hillsides were teeming with plump rolls of hay, and the ribbons of road that cut through them were dotted with cars rolling patiently behind huge green tractors. Late summer was painting itself on the landscape of northern [Tuscany](#). And the land between the geometric fields and canopies of grape vines was given to olive trees — hillsides populated with soothingly straight grids of trees, spindly branches giving way to tufts of pale green.



Setting out nets for the olive harvest in Ostuni in Puglia.

Giulio Piscitelli for The New York Times

We sat around a massive wooden table in Mr. Sartori’s tasting room, the famously golden Tuscan sunlight spilling over our shoulders, three bottles resting on a tray in the middle, waiting for judgment. Every few months, these gentleman farmers — all of whom favor crisp, button-down shirts and elegantly trimmed facial hair — meet at one of their

farms to discuss machinery, bottling, whatever is going on in their business.

“There is no competition; we all love olive oil,” said Francesco Biagiotti of [Compagnia degli Oliandoli](#). “If the whole world used as much olive oil as we do, we would be very rich.”

Olive oil, they explained, is more than something to drizzle over a dish when you want to impress company. It is a lifestyle. It is a necessary ingredient at every meal. So none of them, I asked, have so much as a stick of butter in their refrigerators? They laughed. They guffawed. Butter! But then, slowly, quietly, Mr. Sartori raised his hand.

“It’s true,” he squeaked. “I use butter. I’m not from Tuscany — I’m from the mountains!” Someone actually crumpled a piece of paper and threw it in his face.

Olive oil is as old as time. Egyptians, Phoenicians, Greeks and Romans all cultivated it. And here, in this sacred conclave of olive oil producers in a small farmhouse on a hillside — and throughout Tuscany and more rugged regions to the south — it was almost a religion.

“A good wine lasts one dinner; a good oil lasts many meals,” said Michele Porcu of [I Greppi di Silli](#). “Once you taste a high quality oil, you can’t go back to the other kind. It will taste rancid, like chemicals.”

I was in Italy to get exactly this sort of education. I love olive oil. Always have. I pour it on everything and it magically makes me feel as if I live closer to the Mediterranean. My trifecta of culinary joy could be summed up as: wine, cheese and olive oil. But while I have passing knowledge of the first two, my erudition of olive oil is limited to articles about its health benefits and which labels I like the best.

More than any time in recent memory, olive oil is an increasingly precious commodity. Last year’s harvest was severely damaged by extreme heat, torrential rains and hailstorms, as well as a devastating [fruit fly infestation](#). But even worse, a few regions to the south, in Puglia, olive trees have suffered a [catastrophic bacterial infection](#) that has wiped out at least one million trees. It’s been a disastrous year. Some experts predict many olive farms will go out of business; others foresee skyrocketing prices. One thing is clear: We can’t take olive oil for granted.

With all this in mind, I had come to the old country, joined by my

husband and two children, on a monthlong quest to develop my American taste buds (and a quest to have a monthlong vacation). People go on wine tours of Italy, why not an olive oil tour?

Our itinerary was simple: Start in Tuscany, sampling delicate, precious olive oils from the world's most famous producing region. Once my palate was (somewhat) educated, we'd head due south toward the Mediterranean, not stopping until we reached Puglia, the rugged, salty heel of Italy's boot. Less famous, but far more prolific, Puglia is the olive oil capital of the country. I was here to smell, to taste, to learn. If I could do it without sounding like an idiot, all the better.

"There's no olive oil more or less north of Florence; this is pretty much the end of the line," my friend John Voightmann had told me. Mr. Voightmann, who owns the boutique hotels [La Bandita](#) and La Bandita Townhouse in Pienza, had explained the difference between Italian olive oil provenances. "We're at 500 meters above sea level here. Olive oil from this part of Tuscany is delicate, like a pinot noir. When you get to Puglia, the olive oil is like a big cabernet, it's much heartier."

Back in the tasting room, someone passed me a small bottle of cloudy green oil, a tiny container of fatty Tuscan sunlight. I poured a teaspoon's worth into a glass and drank. It tasted like ... olive oil. My schooling had a way to go.

Technically, extra-virgin olive oil can include no chemicals and must have an acidity level of less than 0.8 percent. Less technically, "when you taste the oil, you must smell leaves of tomato and wild artichoke," said Filippo Alampi of [Fattoria Ramerino](#). "That's a good Tuscan oil."

As I left, Mr. Sartori handed me an armful of olive oil bottles, all slightly chilled from storage. He looked me dead in the eye.

By The New York Times

"Light. Heat. Air," he said. "These are their natural enemies."

I placed my young, fragile bottles in the passenger seat of my rental car, which had been baking under a big, blazing sky all morning. But Mr. Sartori's words echoed in my head and I started to panic. I turned the air-conditioning dial as high as it would go; I redirected all the cold air to the front seat. I placed my jacket on top of the bottles, shielding my charges from ultraviolet light. And finally, confident they were protected from their enemies, I started driving to the next stop on my

odyssey, shivering the whole way.

I arrived in the Val d'Orcia just as the afternoon air was at its golden hued best, a calendar come to life. I made my way down a dusty dirt road to [Chiarentana](#), once part of the historic La Foce estate, to meet Donata Origo, the daughter of the English writer Iris Origo, who moved here from Florence with her husband in the 1920s. (La Foce, run by Ms. Origo's sister, is next to Chiarentana.)

Chiarentana is the Tuscan villa to end Tuscan villas: a three-story castle with ivy-covered walls and a sprawling stone courtyard in the middle. It's almost disappointing when the maidens in flower crowns don't come breezing through. (Kenneth Branagh, your next Shakespeare set is ready.)

Ms. Origo, tan and statuesque, has the kind of elegant disposition that makes me hyperaware of my posture. I followed her into the olive oil press, the frantoio.

"People like the taste of their childhood," said Ms. Origo, who has made olive oil at Chiarentana for seven years. "In Tuscany, olive oil has many different tastes, ranging from freshly cut grass, sage and artichoke to tomatoes and bananas. And pepper. A good Tuscan oil should scratch your throat slightly."

Ms. Origo makes several different oils from five varietals (leccino, moraiolo, frantoiano, maurino and pendolino) and two blends, Chiarentana and Confini. I poured a thimbleful of oil from one of the steel vats and drank it. Wrong, wrong, wrong.

"To taste an oil, you must first smell it with one nostril, and then the other," said Ms. Origo, explaining that one nostril is always stronger. "Now take a tiny sip and let it slide down your tongue."

Then she sort of half-smiled, half-smirked, leaving her mouth slightly agape — and suddenly made a loud noise, half-sucking, half-gasping. For a moment, I thought she was choking. But this was her technique for bringing out the subtleties of the oil, and I was expected to do the same thing.

I made my way down the row of steel vats. Pour, smell, sip, gasp. As stupid as I felt, the technique really did work. There was the spicy tang of the moraiolo, the smooth grassiness of the leccino, the sweet bitterness of the Chiarentana.

Inside, I danced a little jig: That was the first moment I have ever tasted flavors in olive oil. I can't attest to the banana, but the green earthiness of tomato leaves was there, and I was definitely left with a scratchy throat. Most surprisingly, the taste that lingered on my palate was not oil. This, it turned out, was a good thing.

"If your mouth feels oily, that is a bad sign," Ms. Origo explained. "Olives must be picked and pressed immediately. The whole process, from tree to oil, should take no more than four to six hours. When it takes longer, oxidation is a risk. The quality can drop when you ship olive oil if care isn't taken to maintain the proper temperature."



A worker picks olives at a Tuscan farm. Giulio Piscitelli for The New York Times

Later that evening, I had dinner with friends in the garden of La Bandita Townhouse. Sitting in the cool summer air, we were surrounded by twinkling candles and enveloped in the classically Tuscan smell of rosemary and lavender. Each table had its own bottle of La Foce olive oil. It was time to put my skills to use. When a bowl of warm tagliatelle with fresh pesto and shaved Parmesan was placed in front of me, I skipped the salt and drizzled oil instead. A few drops made the flavor stronger, and definitely more throat-scratchy. It was as satisfyingly delicious as pasta can be, the kind of meal that inhibits conversation.

A few days later, I found myself at [Il Palagio](#), a sprawling estate in

Figline Valdarno that makes wine, honey and olive oil but is most famous for its owners: Sting and his wife, Trudie Styler, bought Il Palagio in 1997 and have been making organic olive oil there since 1999.

“In Italy, we say, the bread of one day, the oil of one month, the wine of one year,” said Paolo Rossi, the property manager, establishing parameters for freshness and essentially articulating my entire Italian summer diet. “Olive trees are a generous plant. Here in Tuscany, one tree can produce one liter. In Puglia, one tree can produce 30 liters. If you go to Puglia, you will see trees so big you need three people to hug them. You won’t believe your eyes.”

The next morning, it was time. We set off to not believe our eyes.

Driving south, the hillsides of Tuscany gave way to craggy mountains, then lush countryside, until finally, after hours in the car, we entered a low, flat plateau that ran along the coast of the Adriatic; dry and rocky, and vaguely prehistoric. Puglia is stark, beautiful, almost North African. The air is dry and salty and the earth is rough and stony and burned red with clay under an unforgiving blue sky. And everywhere, in every direction, at every turn: olive trees. It was like the gods had chosen to carpet the entire heel of Italy with a shaggy, olive green rug.

Puglia produces almost 40 percent of the olive oil in Italy. There are some 60,000,000 olive trees here, and millions of them are so old they are protected by the government. With water on three sides, it’s the perfect place to bring in olive oil from outside Italy, process or bottle it in Puglia and pass off fake stuff for the real thing, as the region allows easy access to the Italian market.

This is a real problem, and a reason to go to the source.

“The vast majority of what’s sold around the world as ‘extra-virgin olive oil’ isn’t extra-virgin at all,” said Tom Mueller, the author of “Extra Virginity: The Sublime and Scandalous World of Olive Oil.” “Real extra-virgin olive oil is fresh-squeezed fruit juice; after all, olives are stone fruits, like plums or cherries. The fake stuff is dead liquid industrial fat.”

Worse, there’s a good chance the Italian olive oil I had been drizzling freely back home was not even from Italy.

“A lot of fraudulent companies have names that sound Italian,” Mr.

Alampi had told me in Tuscany. “The olives come from somewhere else — Spain, Greece, Tunisia — but they may be crushed here so they call the oil Italian.” Complicating matters, many of the oils are mixed with nut oil — or worse.

“The Mediterranean Sea is full of boats stocked with chlorophyll,” said Armando Balestrazzi of [Masseria Il Frantoio](#), a hotel and olive farm just outside Ostuni, in Puglia. “People see green oil and think it’s better, but of course the color has no bearing on the quality. You must be careful and educate yourself about these things. There is no sommelier for olive oil.”

If there was, though, his name would be Angelo Silibello. Mr. Silibello owns [Cibus](#), a restaurant in the village of Ceglie Messapica. White stone walls, open-air archways, pergolas of vines — Cibus is the kind of place that is so authentic that you feel like the first foreigner to ever stumble upon it.

My hosts that afternoon were Mr. Silibello and Giuseppe Pannarale, who owns the nearby [Pannarale olive oil farm](#). We sat at a table covered in a starched white tablecloth, a decorative centerpiece of bright green apples and two dozen bottles of Pugliese olive oil. We had work to do.



Fresh olive oil spills from a mill at Chiarentana. Giulio Piscitelli for The New York Times

“It is not good to be sitting so close to the kitchen,” Mr. Pannarale said. “The smells will interfere with our tasting.”

Mr. Silibello shrugged. What could he do? Move his kitchen?

“You must try oil in a dark blue glass,” Mr. Pannarale continued. “This is the only way you will not be persuaded by the color, which is irrelevant. You must hold the glass in your hands to warm it.”

Mr. Silibello took a crisp green apple from the centerpiece, which was not decoration after all, and sliced off a piece.

“This is the best way to clear the taste out of your mouth,” he said.

It was becoming clear that there are as many ways to taste oil as there are people who produce it. Mr. Rossi at Il Palagio had suggested trying olive oil on a slice of warm boiled potato. Ms. Origo had her smell, sip, gasp method. Dania Masotti, of the revered Tuscan restaurant [La Chiusa](#) in Montefollonico, had maybe the most sensible advice: “Use a spoon. You don’t need anything else.”

A dozen olive oils later, drunk with polyphenols, I left Cibus and walked out into the blinding sunshine. I tried to remember what olive oil tasted like when it tasted like nothing more than olive oil, before I could detect different flavors, and I couldn’t do it. My schooling had been a success.

That afternoon, my husband and I walked around Ostuni, a maze of blindingly alabaster stone buildings framed by a sky so blue as to look two dimensional. Later that evening we made our way to a friend’s house for a dinner party just outside of town. We arrived after dark, the warmth of the day radiating up from the white stone patio. The table, draped in mismatched Indian print tapestries, was set up outside, as all Pugliese dinner tables are in the summer. It sat under the canopy of an olive tree, delicate blue Christmas lights wrapped around the branches and tiny votive candles blinking from every surface. Our friends David and Francesco brought out platters of pasta, bread, fresh fish and sautéed vegetables, while Ghigo and Clement, our friends visiting from Calabria, uncorked bottles of primitivo, the robust local wine. It was magical, la vie bohème, Mediterranean style. And it lasted long after the last votive flickered out.

A few days before we were scheduled to go home, I had one last meeting, with the Pugliese version of that Tuscan round table where I

started my education. Only this conclave of olive oil producers would not be in a tasting room. Instead, we met, appropriately, at an olive tree park.

Torre Guaceto is a 5,000-acre wildlife preserve populated with some of the oldest trees in all of Italy, so gnarled and twisted they looked as if they could unroot themselves and stumble away. I was meeting the heads of seven of the most reputable olive oil farms in the region. Imagine a team in which the uniform is hair gel, chunky watches and pastel linen shirts unbuttoned to the sternum. This is Team Puglia Olive Oil.

“In Puglia, you can find olive oil to match any food,” said Francesca Faccilongo of L’Agricola Paglione. “It’s like wine. You would never serve coratina oil with fish. Could you imagine?”

Actually, yes, I could. Maybe I wasn’t as well versed as I thought. What olive oil would they put on, say, a humble dinner roll? This was met with looks that can only be described as piteous. Next they were going to tell me that I couldn’t keep my olive oil next to the stove.

“It can’t be near the heat from the kitchen,” said Pietro Intini of [Olio Intini](#). Where did he keep his? “In a cave, of course.” Of course.



A grove in Ceglie Messapica. Giulio Piscitelli for The New York Times

After a month in Italy, I’d be leaving with an appreciation of this

ancient oil, for the way tomato and wild artichokes and almonds can make their way into its aroma, for the importance of dark bottles, and I'd always know to raise an eyebrow at olive oil that's a little *too* green.

"We love our trees, we take care of our trees, and our oil is like wine, each batch is different," Ms. Faccilongo said, as we walked back to our cars, now covered in a thin layer of dark red dust from the clay earth. "If it always tastes the same, that's not how olive oil works. If it always tastes the same, you have missed all the magic of olive oil."

Oils to Look For

Some starting tips: To ensure you are getting real extra-virgin olive oil, make sure the bottle does not allow much light inside, and look for details like the name of the farm and an expiration date (which should be within 18 months). Look for reputable extra-virgin olive oils at specialty shops or online. Here are some Italian labels to keep an eye out for.

Tuscany

Chiarentana From the renowned Val d'Orcia, the varietals and blends from the Chiarentana estate are considered among the best olive oils in Tuscany. chiarentana.com

Il Palagio Sting's and Trudie Styler's organic farm (and agriturismo site) in Chianti produces honey, wine and extra-virgin olive oil. palagioproducts.com

Manni A favorite of the chef Thomas Keller, it's one of the few olive oils used at Per Se. buymanni.com

Altomena Just outside of Florence, the olive trees of Altomena overlook the famous Arno Valley. www.altomena.it and williams-sonoma.com

I Greppi di Silli Between Siena and Florence, this farm produces seven different varietals. www.igreppidisilli.it

Fattoria Ramerino Organic olive oils from a farm south of Florence, in the area known as Bagno a Ripoli. fattoriaramerino.it/en/

Balduccio Made near Pistoia and considered one of the best in the

region. balduccio.it

Puglia

Intini The Intini family makes organic and conventional olive oils near the town of Alberobello. oliointini.it



A scene from land Angelo Silibello owns. Giulio Piscitelli for The New York Times

Stasi Aziende Agricole A farm with 18,000 olive trees.
agricolestasi.it

Galatino This family has made extra-virgin olive oils since 1926.
galantino.it

Le Tre Colonne A small family-run farm in the north of Puglia.
letrecolonne.com/shop/en

Pannarale Originally from Bari, the Pannarale family has made olive oil for four generations. amazon.com or agricolapannarale.it

If You Go

Many olive oil farms in Tuscany and Puglia are accessible only by car. If you are up for a lengthy drive, fly into Rome and rent a car. If not, fly into Florence to visit Tuscany and fly into Brindisi or Bari for

Puglia.

Places to Stay

Borgo Egnazia The most luxurious hotel in Puglia, it has a beach, pools, wonderful restaurants, golf and all the other beautiful things about the Mediterranean in one place. Rates start at 220 euros, or \$244 at 1.12 to the euro. borgoegnazia.com

Masseria Torre Coccaro Part beach club, part luxury hotel, part amazing restaurant, it's the definition of low-key luxury. Rates start at 284 euros. masseriatorrecoccaro.com

La Bandita Townhouse A modern boutique hotel in Pienza, centrally located to all the Tuscan olive oil (and wine) action. The owner, John Voigtmann, is well-versed in which olive oils are worth packing in your luggage. Rates start at 250 euros. la-bandita.com

Monteverdi Tucked into the hills overlooking Sarteano, Monteverdi encompasses almost an entire centuries-old village. The hotel has a pool, elegant guest rooms, jaw-dropping views and a staff happy to arrange an olive oil tasting. Rates start at 400 euros. monteverdituscany.com

Rent a House The easiest way to feel like a local is also one of the most cost effective. Puglia and Tuscany are ablaze with lovely houses to rent. Trullo della Scrittrice (ownersdirect.co.uk/accommodation/p8138068), Trullo Aromatic (airbnb.com/rooms/53243) and properties in Tuscany (pilgrimsway.it) are all good choices.

Things to Do

Antica Masseria Brancati If you have never seen an olive tree that is over a thousand years old — let alone a field of them — book a tour here. It's even better if you have children; these trees make great forts. masseriabrancati.it

La Chiusa An old-school restaurant in one of the least touristy villages of Tuscany. Dania Masotti, the lovely proprietor, knows all there is to know about olive oil and great Italian cooking. ristorantelachiusa.it

Cibus A small, charming restaurant in the small, charming town of Ceglie Messapica, Cibus is ideal for a warm evening. Request a table toward the front, where there is no roof, order the whole-wheat spaghetti with burrata, basil and tomato, and drizzle olive oil on top. ristorantecibus.it

Danielle Pergament is a frequent contributor to the Travel section.

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