



TUSCAN OLIVE OILS, 2011

THE RARE WINE CO. NEWSLETTER

Online Edition
Spring 2012



*Pictured: Last November's tasting of just-preserved olive oils at Melograno in Mercatale Val di Pesa. Each year, we have the privilege of spending the better part of an afternoon with Signora Ronconi, hearing her philosophy and tasting a broad range of oils from which we choose. **Page 7.***

Priceless

Hard-Won Beauty Emerges from the Arduous 2011 Harvest

In talking with Italian winemakers about recent vintages, it's striking how pivotal the year 2000 is thought to be, as vintages have been consistently warmer since the beginning of the new millennium.

Whether this change is permanent or temporary, only time will tell. But there can be no disputing that Italian summers and early autumns in the 2000s have been generally warmer and drier than in the previous 60 years.

This has challenged Tuscany's winemakers, who've had to contend with riper fruit and lower acidity. But it has *really* challenged the region's olive oil makers, since to make great olive oil you need moisture to nourish the trees, moderate summer temperatures to slow fruit development, and cool early autumn nights to develop perfume—all of which have been elusive over the past decade.

Prophecies from the '90s

In the 1990s, we argued that the hills of central Tuscany were *the*

place to get great oil. Today, they may have become the *only* places, as these havens from summer heat also offer older trees and cool autumn nights, and are much less accessible to the dreaded olive fly that can wipe out a year's crop.



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

These assets were critical in 2011—a year whose challenges have been rivaled in recent years only by 2002 and 2003.

After a crop-thinning winter freeze, a summer drought caused many olive trees to drop their fruit in August. Flavor maturity for the remaining olives was slow in coming, and production was minute. A cool microclimate was critical.

But even that wasn't enough at most properties. Virtually every estate we visited in November reported

that their crop was a fraction of normal. And not all of it was of the high standard we demand. And so, we cut back our December *Olio Nuovo* offer from the usual six oils to just three.

And for our big spring shipment, the reduction was from 17 oils to only 12. Two favorite growers, La Porrone and Selvapiana, had no oil at all for us this year. As for the total number of liters imported, it has been cut in half.

A Clear Path

Such reductions were necessary to deliver Tuscan oils of a quality you've come to expect from us since we began importing olive oil in 1995.

Our commitment then, as now, was **100% estate-grown oils**—personally selected by us in the estates' cellars during the harvest and then treated with the same care as the great wines we sell, including shipment in a temperature-controlled container.

Of course, that's just the beginning of why our oils are so special, since many are now single pressings, and not blends—since the quality and style of pressings now varies so much from day to day.

Here then are 12 noble oils, each a child of the Tuscan soil and of one of the world's great oil-making traditions. ►

“ ”

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

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.

MICROCLIMATE — 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.

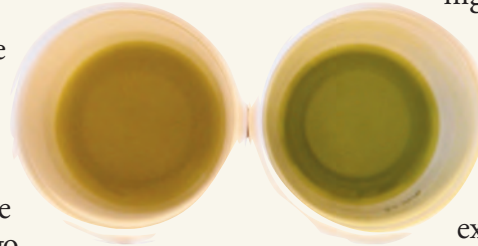
These “early-harvest” oils also have extraordinary structure—plus the ability to withstand the four enemies of olive oil: age, heat, light and air. In fact, a good early-harvest oil, if properly stored, can keep for two or more years with ease. In contrast, most commercially available olive oils (including 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. □

Monte, Vetrice & Prunatelli

Exhilarating Extra Virgins from Rufina's Providential Hillside



*Rufina's valley from
Villa Vetrice.*

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 Prunatelli—produce three of Italy's greatest oils, and they do it effortlessly. The secret is some of the finest hillside *terroirs* in what could be Tuscany's greatest olive zone.

Once again, the three oils soar. Because the groves are all at

relatively high elevations—250 to 500 meters above sea level—and have old trees, their olives ripened beautifully in 2011.

Yields were down significantly, in part because of the drought but also because of three serious freezes during the winter. Yet, oil quality was excellent.

These three oils have long been our most popular, because of not only their incredible quality, but also their low prices. Let us just say that, for the money, there are no greater olive oils made on the planet.

“” *The real joy is seeking out Grati's three single-grove olive oils selected and distributed by The Rare Wine Co. Peter Liem*

2011 Monte “Orcio 2”

\$23.50 500 ml

We've always found Monte to be the most elegant of Tuscan olive oils, and the 2011 Monte upholds its end of the bargain. It boasts one of the year's best colors, leading to classic notes of artichoke with thyme and sage accents, and a refined, almost creamy, palate. The finish is classically *piccante*.

2011 Vetrice “Orcio 2”

\$23.50 500 ml

While many other Tuscan oils have withered in the heat of recent summers, Vetrice has thrived. It has produced year after year of rich, powerful oils bursting with typicity and character. As usual, it is the most powerful of this trio, with the thickest palate, offering lovely aromatics, very persistent flavors, and a generous kick.

2011 Prunatelli “Orcio 1”

\$23.50 500 ml

The Prunatelli *oliveto* is blessed with a high elevation and some of the oldest trees in Tuscany. This pedigree expresses itself in a 2011 *olio* that smells of freshly cut grass, dill, pea pods and green tea. The palate is moderately spicy, yet, as the Tuscans would call it, *rotondo*. A delightful Rufina oil.

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

**Flat-Rate Ground Shipping
\$14/cs. California - \$22/cs. elsewhere**

Podere Cugno, CASTELLINA IN CHIANTI (Organic)



We discovered Podere Cugno in 2007, when Marco and Giovanna Matteini's oils were among that year's best. And in each of the next three years, the Cugno oils surpassed just about everything else made in Chianti Classico.

The Matteinis secret: very old trees, a 550-meter elevation, organic farming, a unique microclimate and a passion for perfection. Their prize is a grove of 450 old Leccino trees, which produce an oil of astonishing perfume and one that is nearly unique in Tuscany.

But sadly, the Matteini's Leccino olives bore the brunt of the 2011's hot, dry conditions and became fully ripe before they could develop the powerful, evocative flavors this rare varietal produces at Cugno.

Frantoio Stars

Fortunately, the estate's Frantoio olives fared better, as they ripen more slowly, allowing the flavor and perfume to keep pace with physiological ripeness.

Marco and Giovanna were patient, waiting until October 27th to begin picking, bringing in a small crop of perfect Frantoio. But the harvest was brief, ending November 5th, due to rain. For the second year in a year, the Matteinis were forced to leave a substantial part of their crop on the trees.

We are grateful that Marco and Giovanna gave The Rare Wine Co. first priority, and we were able to select a beautiful oil that is a traditional blend of Frantoio, Moraiolo and Leccino. The Frantoio steals the show in this classic olio, imparting grace on the palate and ample perfume. Unfortunately, there is little of this oil to go around.

2011 Podere Cugno 'Misto'

\$24.95 500 ml

Bright green/gold color. Very clean nose of mint, arugula, artichoke and pepper. The palate is beautifully balanced and nuanced with hints of hay and artichoke, building to a pronounced and sustained pepperiness in the finish.

La Ragnaie, MONTALCINO (Organic)



Ragnaie's oliveto beyond the vines.

Guided by the passionate Riccardo Campinoti, Le Ragnaie is an emerging Brunello star. In a region where 95% of the region's young winemakers are taking a modernist approach, Riccardo's role models are the likes of Gianfranco Soldera and Cerbaiona's Diego Molinari. Look for Le Ragnaie to become a traditional icon in the years ahead.

Like others in Montalcino, Riccardo also looks after a few hundred olive trees, which he farms organically and presses and bottles with the same care as his wines. But Riccardo's trees offer something special: they are planted between 590 and 620 meters above sea level, virtually at the limit where olive trees grow in Tuscany. Such a high elevation produces oil with the brilliant green, peppery and intensely aromatic profile we love.

We also believe that the oil composition of 50% Leccino, 30% Frantoio and 20% Moraiolo imparts a unique nuance.

As in 2010, it was nearly mid-November before Riccardo could press his best 2011 oil, thanks to the year's slow flavor development. But for him, and for us, it was worth the wait. But if you'd like one of our prized 1-liter bottles, you'll need to hurry.

2011 Le Ragnaie EVOO (organic)

\$39.95 1-liter



Lovely green/gold color. This high-altitude oil features high-toned aromas of jasmine, lavender, beeswax, thyme and mint. On the palate, balanced flavors of arugula and artichoke are followed by a fairly intense hit of classic pepperiness.

One-bottle limit.

Il Poggione, MONTALCINO



Harvesting at Il Poggione

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

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

Il Poggione's real prize, however, is their cache of old olive trees planted at elevations up to 500 meters. Even in a devastating year like 2011, these trees made possible a small crop

of fine oil.

The 2011 harvest began on October 23rd with unusual urgency, as the olives in some groves quickly went from immature to mature. But as is normally the case, the oldest trees at higher elevations delayed their ripening long enough to produce rich flavors and classic perfume. For our bottling, we chose the estate's next-to-last lot (#4), a 50/50 blend of Frantoio and Moraiolo, pressed the first week of November.

Packed in a generous **one-liter** bottle, this is once again an incredible bargain in Tuscan extra virgin olive oil.

**2011 Il Poggione
Extra Virgin Olive Oil**
\$29.95 1 liter

Medium green color. An enticing, seductive nose of jasmine flower, sweet honeysuckle, olives and green peppercorns leads to viscous, lightly peppery flavors, hinting of green tea and mint. An unparalleled value.



Colognole, RUFINA



Colognole

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.

For years, his oils have been part of the fashionable Laudemia line-up, but in 2006 we met with Cesare to discuss the possibility of setting

aside his most intensely green and aromatic pressing for an exclusive Rare Wine Co. bottling. As many will remember, our first collaboration, in '06, was a great success.

But we were unable to match that oil the next three years, and so Colognole was missing from our annual offerings.

Back in the Stable

Of course, Colognole returned to our offerings in 2010 ... triumphantly. Cesare was intent on making an explosively rich oil just for us, and over a three-day period in late October, Cesare had his pickers select only those trees whose olives had arrived at perfect, still-green maturity. Sadly the glorious oil that resulted was Cesare's only 2010 oil, as torrential rains soon ruined the rest of his crop.

The situation was again difficult for Cesare in 2011. Because of his olives' delayed flavor development, he had to wait until nearly mid-November to achieve a pressing up to our standards. But this pressing, made on November 12th, was miniscule, yielding only 125 liters of lovely oil from the upper slopes of Montegiovi.

**2011 Colognole 'Montegiovi
Extra Virgin Olive Oil**
\$27.95 750ml



A bargain in the 750ml size. Bright golden green color. The nose is softly minty, with nuances of mustard greens, artichokes and caraway. The palate entry is spicy, and then round on the mid-palate, with greens reappearing in the classically peppery finish.

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.

2011 Il Carnasciale Extra Virgin Olive Oil

\$29.95 500 ml

Bettina again made just a few dozen bottles of her precious oil in 2011, and we were indeed fortunate to get some. The color is greenish gold and the distinctively floral nose hints of cherry blossoms, spearmint, pea pods, arugula. The palate features the taste of fresh olives and artichokes, and the finish is soft and creamy. As always, an oil as elegant as its maker.

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OUR LABOR OF LOVE

"A top source of extremely fine Tuscan olive oils."

Matt Kramer on The Rare Wine Co.



Ancient terracotta aging vessels

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. □



Il Melograno, MERCATALE VAL DI PESA

Like Giorgio Franci (*see next page*), Valeria Ronconi is revered by Italian olive oil aficionados. And she's not resting on her laurels either. Her recent efforts to perfect olive oil extraction technology have won her nearly as much admiration as the quality of her Melograno oils.

A grower for more than 30 years, Signora Ronconi is working closely with agronomists to develop a new system of extraction that promises to revolutionize olive oil making in Tuscany. It is designed to retain structure, antioxidants and vitamins, while virtually eliminating oxygen during pressing and extraction.

Each November, we spend the better part of an afternoon with her, hearing her philosophy and tasting a broad range of oils from which to choose.

2011 Melograno Frantoio (Nov. 4 & 5)

\$27.95 500 ml

Signora Ronconi's skills always bring out the best in the noble Frantoio variety. And so it is in 2011. The oil's color is bright green/gold, its aromas full of freshly cut grass, artichoke, arugula, alfalfa and bitter greens. The palate unleashes a wave of grass and mint, followed by spicy pepper, finishing on a note of bitter greens on the long finish.

With few exceptions, each oil reveals remarkable purity, varietal clarity and balance. She harvests in very small lots, rejecting out of hand anything she doesn't believe will contribute to the final blend.

Incredibly, 2011 was our 12th harvest working with Signora Ronconi. Normally, we choose a mono-varietal Moraiolo and a mono-varietal Frantoio, plus one of her magical "Misto" blends.

But this year, we passed on the pure Moraiolo pressing; 2011 was especially difficult for this early ripening variety. We found heaven instead in her Frantoio (Nov. 4/5) and Misto (Nov. 8), while we look forward, hopefully, to a better Moraiolo year in 2012.

2011 Melograno Misto (Nov. 8)

\$27.95 500 ml

The goal of a master blender is to produce an oil whose sum is greater than the parts. Here, the Frantoio and Moraiolo olives merge seamlessly to produce remarkable complexity. The nose features fresh flowers and cut grass, while the palate has a compelling mintiness. A subtle pepperiness in finish closes out this lovely oil.

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. □

Frantoio Franci, MONTENERO D'ORCIO

If there is 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 has won every award imaginable, firmly establishing himself as Italy's most revered oil maker.



Giorgio Franci and his father, Fernando.

duction was down 60% from normal, thanks to the heat and drought. Watching his olives rapidly ripen, he began to harvest his finest olive grove, Villa Magra, on October 10th, a startlingly early date for this normally patient *olivocoltore*.

As in years past, we chose to focus on his two most coveted oils: **Villa Magra** and **Villa Magra Gran Cru**, which 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 olive oil.

Giorgio has acquired a cult following that spans the globe, so scarcity is most definitely a factor. But we've been buying his oil since 2005, and once again received a coveted allocation in 2011.

Quantities are very limited.

Even if you only buy a bottle or two of each, **Villa Magra** and **Villa Magra Gran Cru** are essential purchases.

Production Down 60%

But even this superstar wasn't spared the difficult conditions of 2011. His pro-

2011 Franci "Villa Magra"

\$28.95 500 ml

The hallmark of all Franci oils is their purity and amazing balance. The 2011 Villa Magra offers a pretty emerald green color and a vigorous nose of freshly cut grass and white flower blossom. The palate features a rich entry, with buttery and spicy flavors, and remarkable complexity, with hints of artichoke, asparagus and freshly cut grass.



2011 Franci "Villa Magra Gran Cru"

\$39.95 500 ml

An oil worthy of its reputation as Italy's best. It's all about nuance and balance here. The nose is classic, brimming with aromas of freshly mowed grass. The palate offers plenty of presence, with fine richness and spicy green flavors. The persistently pepper finish delivers quite a kick, with notes of green peppercorns and arugula.

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