



## Tastes: IN THE KITCHEN WITH SAM GUGINO EXTENDING THE OLIVE BRANCH FROM WINE SPECTATOR MAGAZINE, OCTOBER 31, 2008 ISSUE

No country is more associated with olive oil than Italy. It is as central to the lives of Italians as wine and bread. It is the lubricant for the engine that drives Italian cuisine. "The first time I harvested and made oil in Tuscany in the early 1990s, I was overwhelmed by the reverence for the oil," says Paul Ferrari of A.G. Ferrari Foods, a San Leandro, Calif.-based Italian foods company. "One olive oil producer, who also makes wine, told me, 'We could live without wine but not without olive oil.'"

Like Italian cooking, Italian olive oil varies from region to region. The final product depends on the varieties used, the terroir and the skill and style of the producer. A good region to start with is Tuscany, whose oil is considered by many to be the benchmark for quality. (However, as with wine, what sets the standard isn't always the best fit for any occasion. Tuscan oil is only one of several oils in my pantry, just as there are a variety of wines in my cellar.)

Classic Tuscan oils have "an archetypal richness, weight, intensity and palate persistence that other oils don't have," says Emmanuel Berk of the Rare Wine Co. in Sonoma, Calif., which imports only Tuscan oils. In addition, they should have a deep green color, good viscosity and hints of artichoke, grass and mint. Also characteristic is a pepperiness that strikes the back of the throat—a trait that can be overpowering to those not used to it.

Tuscany's primary olive varieties are the Frantoio (highly aromatic and fruity) and the Moraiolo (grassy, with a pleasant bitterness). Most top Tuscan oils are blends of these two varieties; some also use Leccino and Pendolino olives. This year, Berk is selling a 100 percent Leccino oil called Podere Cagno (\$24 for 500ml); it has a grassy nose, with artichoke and herbaceous notes and an assertive but not overpowering pepperiness.

The hilly, cooler inland areas of Tuscany produce the best oils. "Lowland oils don't have the staying power or the intense fruit of oils from higher elevations," Berk says. In recent years, warmer temperatures have necessitated earlier picking. Although early picking is part of the Tuscan style—encouraging high phenolics (which provides maximum flavor and aromatics) and favorable antioxidant levels (which makes the oil healthful)—picking too early can result in olives that aren't sufficiently mature.

Of all the Tuscan oils I tasted, my favorite was **Le Corti (\$38 for 500ml)**. It had an intense grassiness, with artichoke notes, the right amount of pepperiness and an olive finish. I also liked the riper Vetrice, with its mellower grassiness, and artichoke and cardoon flavors; at \$21 for 500ml, it's a Tuscan bargain. For a more throat-grasping Tuscan experience, try Fattoria Fazzuoli (\$64 for 500ml).

In the Tuscan kitchen, olive oil is typically applied with abandon to seasonal vegetables. It can also be brushed on bistecca alla Fiorentina and used in many bean dishes. Many cooked dishes are "christened" with a drizzle at the table. Berk suggests using heavier Tuscan oils on cold foods and lighter ones on hot foods. "The heat from the hot food aromatizes the oil and gives it a flavor boost," he says.

The region that most closely approximates Tuscany's olive oil style is Umbria, on Tuscany's southern border; it uses the same olive varieties and its oils have a similar pungency. Umbria's landscape is similar to Tuscany's, but it is a bit warmer, so Umbrian oils are often riper and rounder. Such is the case with **Viola Collerguita (\$50 for 500ml)**, which has very good balance and a long, smooth finish. This olive oil is certified by the Denominazione di Origine Protetta (DOP), which means that it comes from a specified area and is made according to strict DOP standards.

Umbrian oils can be used much like Tuscan oils, especially in bean or vegetable soups. They are also good with hearty grains and with black truffles, which are found in abundance in Umbria from November through March.

We're seeing more oils from other regions in central Italy: Marche, Abruzzo, Molise and especially Lazio, where my favorite oil from this group is produced. Tiburtini (\$30 for 500ml) beautifully blends the grassy, peppery Tuscan style with the riper styles from the south to create what is perhaps the best-balanced oil I've ever tasted.

Northern Italian cooking is typically less focused on olive oil, in part because little is produced there. Still, Tim Bucciarelli of Formaggio Kitchen, a shop in Cambridge, Mass., is particularly fond of the Corte Marzago (\$65 for 750ml), which he imports from the Veneto. "It has excellent balance, more than most Italian oils," he says. I liked it too, especially with lighter presentations. Slightly more robust but still well-balanced is **Vanini Osvado (\$28 for 500ml)** from Lake Como in Lombardy.

One northern region where olive oil takes center stage is Liguria, the birthplace of Italy's most famous olive oil-based sauce, pesto. This boomerang-shaped region hugs the Ligurian Sea, which is why seafood is a significant part of the cuisine, along with vegetables, nuts and herbs. Sophisticated and complex, Ligurian cooking demands the lighter oil that comes from the Taggiasca olive. The result is a fragrant oil that is sweet and delicate. Look for Olio Carli (\$29 for 500ml) and Roi Carte Noir (\$43 for 500ml).

The quality of olive oils from Puglia, Basilicata, Sardinia and Sicily has improved dramatically in the past decade. While the hotter climate and flatter terrain in the south typically yield riper, yellower and mellow oils, it is increasingly common to see more robust, Tuscan-style oils coming out of this region. Whether or not this is a good thing is up for debate.

Oils from Puglia, which produces more of the product than any other Italian region, were traditionally used for blending. But today more producers are bottling their own oils. "I have tasted some oils from Puglia blind and couldn't tell if they were from Puglia or Tuscany," says Nicola Marzovilla, who owns olive groves in Tuscany. Marzovilla also has a Pugliese restaurant in New York called I Trulli.

Piana Degli Ulivi (\$18 for 8.5 ounces) is a good example of Pugliese oil. It has a mildly herbaceous nose and is pleasantly grassy on the palate, finishing with a mild cardoon note. Goccio d'Oro (\$22 for 500ml) is riper, sweeter and more mellow. According to Marzovilla, Pugliese cooking "starts and ends with olive oil," especially when it comes to pasta and vegetables dishes such as cavatelli with broccoli raab.

One region to watch is Basilicata, the instep of Italy's boot. Traditionally, Basilicata's abundant olive trees were machine-picked. However, more oils are now being made from handpicked olives, since human pickers can judge when the olives are closest to the peak of ripeness (or, as with Tuscan-style oils, underripeness), resulting in higher quality. Look for Cavalli (\$15 for 8.8 ounces) and **L'Olio dei Sassi (\$24 for 500ml)**. Incidentally, both of these oils are made by women—a growing phenomenon in Italy.

Ferrari describes Sardinia's rough terrain as being similar to Basilicata's. Sardinians, whose culinary influences are extremely diverse, use olive oil on grilled foods and on fregola, the semolina couscous-like pasta. I liked the balance and artichoke flavor of **Giorgio Zampa (\$41 for 500ml)** and the herbaceousness and cardoonlike bitterness of Antichi Uliveti (\$42 for 500ml).

Sicilian oils have improved so much that they took five of the top six awards at the International Olive Oil Awards in Zurich this year. Most of Sicily's olive oil is produced on the warmer, western side of the island, from the Nocellara olive. I loved the green and grassy quality of Olio Verde (\$31 for 500ml). Also look for the floral Costanza Hyblon (\$42 for 500ml) and the best deal of all the oils I tasted, Formaggio Kitchen's Artisan Cooperative Blend (\$18 for 750ml). Unlike delicate Ligurian oils, which should be used on lighter fish preparations, bolder Sicilian oils are good for dressing meatier fish such as tuna and swordfish.

"It's hard to know what came first, the olive oil or the cuisine," Ferrari says. "It's one of those chicken and egg things." By the way, have you tried eggs fried in olive oil? It's delicious.

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