

£3.95

March 2010

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LIQUID GOLD

FIONA BECKETT visits Tuscany to see how making olive oil compares to making wine – and to find out why the top end oils are so expensive...

Bandino Lo Franco carefully lays slices of rough Tuscan bread on a rack and places it on the glowing embers of an open fire. He toasts the slices on each side, sprinkles each piece with salt, rubs over a garlic clove in one quick movement then pours a generous amount of deep-green, two-day-old oil over the toast. 'Wait a few seconds...' he urges. 'Now eat!' The result? The most extraordinary oil I've ever tasted – so intensely vivid and grassy that I feel like I'm tasting olive oil for the first time.

Bandino and his brothers Gianni and Antonio run a 1,350ha (hectare) estate in south-east Tuscany called Fattoria La Vialla. Olive oil is just one of the crops here: they also produce wine, bread, biscuits, cheese and preserved vegetables, all of which are sold direct from the farm. It's a model 21st-century food business that combines labour-intensive, artisanal practices with state-of-the-art technology.

The olives, for example, are crushed on a traditional stone mill at a picturesque wooden farm building at the top of the estate. But next to the press is a sealed, temperature-controlled, stainless-steel mixer that reduces the olives to a paste, keeps them cool and protects them from air (oxidation is the number-one enemy of top-quality oil).

The unappealing brown sludge that results would at one stage have passed to a press. Today that has been superseded by two sealed tanks, one which separates the oil from the solids, then a centrifugal unit



Left: Beckett gets up close to capture oil emerging from its eight-week evolution

Something you can't quite imagine them doing down the road at Isole e Olena. 'Now we can press the same day the olives are picked,' says Bandino.

So how else does the oil-making process compare to winemaking? The olive harvest takes place from the end of October to December, conveniently following the grape harvest. Although they run lab tests to determine the level of acidity in the olives, pickers can tell when they're ready to pick by the colour and feel – when green varieties start to turn black; how easily they pull off the stalk; and whether they 'give' under pressure. (Olives need to be ripe – but not too ripe – to preserve the grassy flavour.) You certainly can't decide based on taste. I pick one from a nearby tree and spit it out almost immediately. It's mouth-puckeringly bitter.

Tuscan blend

Different varieties ripen at different rates but unlike grapes, olives are not picked separately. 'Olive groves need to be mixed so that one variety can pollinate another,' explains Bandino. The main varieties are Leccino (which makes up 50% of the La Vialla plantings), Frantoio, a variety that gives Tuscan olive oil its particularly aromatic taste, Raggiaie, and Morelline, although many of the farms La Viella has taken on over the years have other olive varieties. 'There are 66 in Tuscany alone, and we're constantly planting new ones.'

PHOTOGRAPHS: OWEN FRANKEN/CORBIS; FIONA BECKETT



'I pick an olive from a nearby tree and spit it out almost immediately. It's mouth-puckeringly bitter'



Above: Antonio Lo Franco of La Vialla tips the harvested olives ready to be crushed into paste by a stone grinder (right)

It's a long process. A new tree takes six to seven years to establish – twice as long as a vine – but can produce for hundreds of years (at La Vialla, the average age of the trees is between 30 and 80 years). It takes the produce of half a mature tree – 5kg–6kg – to make one litre of oil. No wonder the good stuff is so expensive.

Tuscany is considered one of Europe's finest spots for olive oil, and in Italy it is rivaled only by Sicily (though purists say the Tuscan oil is more refined). So what makes the region so good for olives? 'They generally grow well in the same areas as vines, especially on south-facing slopes, but we're 400m–500m above sea level, which is about as high as you can go,' says Bandino. 'The old men say the best olives come from the top of the hill.'

The La Vialla estate is run on organic and biodynamic principles – again, an



innovation of Bandino and Antonio's father, who wanted to farm by traditional methods. 'He worked alongside our grandfather in the vineyard, and he never used any pesticides or fertilisers. Our father wanted to continue the same way,' says Bandino. The family prefers not to flaunt its biodynamic credentials, however, as other significant factors come into play when deciding harvest

HOW TO TASTE OLIVE OIL

If you fancy yourself as a wine taster, try evaluating olive oil. We must have tasted about 10 (in small paper cups, without bread) and it's tough going. The oil is very viscous, and the young oils, even while appealingly fragrant, can leave a biting bitter backtaste. I was put through my paces by Bandino Lo Franco, a member of the local olive oil assessment panel. First of all, you must establish whether the oil has any faults, which range from *riscaldato* (fermenting) to the self-explanatory *rancido*. If it does, it immediately fails to classify as extra virgin (though that also depends on the level of acidity). Then it has to be marked for *fruttata* (fruit), *amaro* (bitterness) and *piccante* (spiciness). Tasters must further specify whether the fruit is *verde* (green) or *matura* (ripe) and what sort of flavour profile it has – *erbe* (grass) and *carciofo* (artichoke) being typical descriptors. The younger an oil, the more intense its characteristics, but I found it very hard to gauge how grassy an oil was (marked out of 10) – what I found bitter, Bandino called 'spicy'. To release the flavour, cradle the cup in your hand to warm the oil then tip it around and smell. When buying oil, avoid any bottle that has been kept under bright lights, or which looks as if it has been there for a long time, and always keep your oil in the dark at an even temperature.

date – how hot the summer has been and how much rain there is during the picking period... 'We can't pick when the olives are wet,' says Bandino.

Although some of the olives are harvested by machine, much of the harvest is still carried out in the traditional way with pickers up ladders, pulling the olives off each branch with a small plastic rake. They fall onto a net underneath the tree before being transferred to boxes and taken straight up to the press.

After a light morning's harvesting, we gather together round the kitchen table of La Lignana, the farm where the press has been installed. The new oil is freely poured on every course – *bruschetti*, pasta and salad. I'm starting to wonder about my cholesterol levels. 'It's healthy,' Bandino assures us. 'New oil contains 45% more polyphenols!' Oh go on then, one more pour... **D**

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