

Extra VIRGINITY

THE SUBLIME AND SCANDALOUS
WORLD *of* OLIVE OIL

'An eye-opening and brilliantly researched exposé' *Sunday Times*



TOM MUELLE

EXTRA
VIRGINITY

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For Gino and Rosetta Olivieri

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When a native of the Mediterranean had to leave the shores of the sea, he was uneasy and homesick; like the soldiers of Alexander the Great when he left Syria and advanced towards the Euphrates; or the sixteenth-century Spaniards in the Low Countries, miserable among the ‘fogs of the North’. For Alonzo Vázquez and the Spaniards of his time (and probably of all time) Flanders was ‘the land where there grows neither thyme, nor lavender, figs, olives, melons, or almonds; where dishes are prepared, strange to relate, with butter from cows instead of oil.’

—Fernand Braudel, *The Mediterranean and the Mediterranean World in the Age of Philip II*

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Preface

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A few decades ago, to obtain one of their birthrights, Mediterraneans living in Britain had to troop to a pharmacy, where in an atmosphere redolent of rubbing alcohol, camphor and cough syrup, they would buy small brown bottles bearing the seal of the British Pharmacopoeia. These bottles contained olive oil, which to most self-respecting Britons was medicine, not part of a meal.

The Romans decamped from these shores 1600 years ago, taking their beloved olive oil and wine and leaving Britannia awash in barbarian butter, lard and beer. The resulting culinary-cultural divide between the Roman-dominated south of Europe and the barbarian northlands persisted to the present day. Southern Europeans, who at table continued to do much as the Romans had done, cherished olive oil and shunned butter as unhealthy, even unnatural. Members of the Gonzaga

family, Renaissance lords of Mantua, brought ample supplies of “good oil” when they traveled to England, as did the Cardinal of Aragon on his voyage through the Low Countries in 1517: “Due to the butter and dairy produce that is so widely used in Flanders and Germany,” the cardinal observed warily, “these countries are overrun with lepers.” Most northern Europeans, for their part, prized olive oil for its medicinal properties and sacred symbolism—olive oil was, after all, the main ingredient of Christian holy oils—but disliked its bitterness and pungency, so unlike the sweet animal fats of their native comfort foods. Hildegard of Bingen, an abbess, mystic and poet-philosopher born on the Rhine, spoke for many when she stated that olive oil was fine physic but foul provender, which “causes nausea when eaten, and ruins other foods when cooked together with them”.

No wonder the saintly Hildegard took such a dim view of oil. From Roman times through to the late twentieth century, nearly all olive oil that arrived in Britain wasn’t something you’d want near your nose, much less in your mouth. Thomas Platter, a Swiss traveler of the sixteenth century, said that only low quality, second-pressed olive oil reached northern Europe—and an expression current in England in his time, “as brown as oil,” suggests he was right. In many cases, imported olive oil wasn’t just poor quality, but counterfeit. British consuls in Livorno reported that local oil merchants frequently topped up olive oil containers with cottonseed oil, and industrialists in the cloth trade complained that olive oil imported as a fabric softener was being adulterated with rapeseed oil, causing worm infestation in their wares. As recently as

last year FOSFA, the storied organization based in London that facilitates international trade in oils and fats by writing contracts between buyers and sellers worldwide, wrote no contracts in olive oil because, it was rumored, the olive oil trade was too slippery.

IN THE LAST THIRTY years, however, the UK has started to discover olive oil. Though still sold at Boots in little brown bottles approved by the British Pharmacopoeia, olive oil is now a staple in many British households, and is widely available in supermarkets (Waitrose has the standout selection of estate oils, though Morrisons' own-label oils can be good, too). As Italian, Greek and other olive oil-based cuisines have grown in popularity in the UK, and the Mediterranean diet has gained credence for its healthfulness, olive oil consumption has skyrocketed, increasing nearly eight-fold in the last two decades. There is an olive grove on the Isle of Oxney in Kent which, weather permitting, will yield its first oil next year, and in 2011, FOSFA finally began working in olive oil. The country boasts skilled olive oil sommeliers like Judy Ridgway, expert oil importers and consultants such as Charles Carey, oil aficionados and advocates like Michael North, even oil expats like Johnny Madge, whose olive oil bar near Rome and tours of the groves and mills of Sabina are becoming legendary. A few top chefs now speak of olive oils in the plural, understanding that there are 700 different types of olives, and thousands of different styles of oil—they've begun to explore a culinary continent as complex in many ways as wine.

Yet though encouraging, these developments are merely minor victories in a larger battle for British oil, part of a world war being waged between good olive oil and bad. Much “extra virgin” oil that Britons eat is actually another substance, of dubious virginity indeed. Massive quantities of this low-grade oil, the lipid equivalent of rot-gut, pour into the UK sporting jaunty labels with happy peasants and orotund Italianate phraseology, and the all-important, incantatory words “Extra Virgin” on prominent display. By EU law, extra virgin olive oil must be free of sensory defects, yet many supermarket oils teem with them—rancidity, mustiness, fustiness, worm, dirt, et cetera ad nauseam. Some of these ersatz extra virgins are actually *lampante*, or “lamp oil,” which legally cannot be sold as food, only as fuel. Others aren’t made from olives at all, but from cheaper vegetable oils: sunflower, soybean, rape. The distinction between real and fake extra virgin isn’t mere culinary coquetry, but connect with taste and with health: fresh, bright, aromatic extra virgin olive oils enhance and improve the flavor of foods, while rancid faux virgins taint it. Good olive oil is a cocktail of health-promoting microelements that make it the keystone of the Mediterranean diet; bad oil, seething with free radicals, peroxides and other nasties, can hurt you. Companies that sell bad oil behind good labels are swindling consumers out of the remarkable flavors and health benefits of good olive oil. They’re also driving many quality producers out of business, because their inferior product costs much less to make—and has a much lower price tag—than quality olive oil, though both sorts are labeled “extra virgin.”

THIS BOOK TELLS THE story of olive oil, and how this marvellous food got itself in such a pickle. It shows how oil has glistened for millennia in the religious rites, industry, sex and society of the Mediterranean, and how oil-eating, olive-growing and oil-making followed traders, soldiers and missionaries to the four corners of the world. My book also explains why fraud has plagued oil since people first started pressing it from olives, and why today it threatens the survival of the industry (though as you'll read, fraudsters can be superb company). Perhaps most important of all, *Extra Virginity* introduces the many people who, for all the hardships of the trade, stubbornly continue to make the best olive oil in history. Together with an appendix on Choosing Good Oil and a companion website, www.truthinoliveoil.com, this book aims to help readers see through the fraud, and home in on skilled oil-makers and their precious nectars. Which I think you'll find is well worth the trouble: as an oil-making lady in the deep south of Italy once told me, "Try real olive oil once, and nothing in life is ever quite the same again."

Tom Mueller, 2013

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Prologue

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ESSENCES

When the olive oil reached 28 degrees Celsius, the temperature at which its aromatic substances become volatile, the eight tasters removed the lids from the glasses that contained the first sample of oil, inserted their noses, and began snuffling loudly, some closing their eyes. These were members of the tasting panel of the *Corporazione Mastri Oleari*, in Milan, one of the most respected private olive oil associations; they sat in individual cubicles of white formica, each equipped with a sink, a pen and a stack of tasting forms, and a yogurt maker with a thermostat, on which sat six tulip-shaped tasting glasses containing samples of oil. They were a diverse group, which included a thirty-three-year-old farmer from Lake Garda, a forty-seven-year-old Tuscan *marchesa* who worked as a personal motivation coach, and a sixty-six-year-old Milanese businessman. They'd begun trickling in around 9 am, grumbling about being

deprived of their morning coffee and cigarettes, which are forbidden before a tasting because they dull the senses; now they sat silently in their cubicles in attitudes of attention and reflection, like chemists in a lab, or scholars in a library. On shelves around the walls were several hundred bottles of olive oil, as well as sixteen brown laboratory bottles with neat white labels on which were printed “musty,” “fusty,” “rancid,” “winey/vinegary,” “cucumber,” “grubby,” and other unpleasant smells—the official taste flaws in olive oil, which these eight people had trained their senses to detect in the faintest degree.

The panel tasted the six oil samples according to a strict protocol, which, like each feature of the panel test room itself, was prescribed by Italian and European law. Cradling the glasses in their palms like brandy snifters to keep the oil warm, they smelled it carefully, jotting down the fragrances they perceived. They took a mouthful of oil. And then, as if they’d all been stricken by an oil-induced seizure, they began sucking in air violently at the corners of their mouths, a technique known as *strippaggio*, which coats the taste buds in an emulsion of oil and saliva, and wafts the oil’s aromas up into the nasal passages. After the first volcanic slurps, the *strippaggi* grew softer and more meditative and took on personal notes, the *marchesa*’s wheezy and almost wistful, the businessman’s deep and wet, as if he were gargling Epsom salts. After tasting and retasting each oil for ten to fifteen minutes, and periodically cleansing their palates with mineral water, they recorded its flavor,

aroma, intensity, texture, and other characteristics on a scoring sheet.

The tasters potted in their cubicles for the next ninety minutes, snuffling and slurping and musing over the oils. Finally, after evaluating the last of the samples, they stood and stretched like people rising from sleep, and moved to the conference table in the middle of the room. Here they enjoyed their long-awaited cigarettes and coffee, while the panel leader, Alfredo Mancianti, collated their scoring sheets. “The tasters themselves don’t score an oil,” Flavio Zaramella, the Milanese businessman and president of the Matri Oleari, told me. “They just identify and quantify the sensations they perceive in it. It’s the panel leader who actually assigns a score to the oil, by making a composite of their eight assessments using robust statistical methods.”

Looking over the panel leader’s shoulder as he worked, I saw that the eight tasters had been remarkably consistent in their appraisals, describing the texture and personality of each oil in similar ways, and identifying the same subtle flavors and fragrances in each—artichoke, fresh-cut grass, green tomato, kiwi.

“The *tonda iblea* from southern Sicily was memorable, with those afternotes of artichoke and green tomato,” Zaramella told the other tasters. “But all in all, I think the best full-bodied oil was the Marcinase DOP Terra di Bari from Puglia.” The others nodded, though one taster said she preferred the Villa Magra Gran Cru from Tuscany because it was more balanced and harmonious.

By now I found it hard to sit still. Artichoke? Fresh-cut grass? They hadn't been tasting first-growth Bordeaux, for heaven's sake, but liquid fat. No doubt these oils had been made with great skill, "cold-pressed" and all that, but artichoke? Green tomato? Kiwi?

Something in my face must have alerted Zaramella to my skepticism. He stubbed out his cigarette, hopped to his feet, took my arm, and steered me into one of the tasting cubicles. "Oil talk sounds like effete nonsense, until you actually put a good oil in your mouth," he said. He began pouring samples of oil into tulip glasses and placing them on the warmer beside me, capping each with a glass wafer to hold in the aromas. When the thermostat light went out, indicating that the oil had reached twenty-eight degrees, Zaramella showed me the approved oil-tasting technique: how to smell the sample deeply several times, trying to clear the mind between sniffs; how to take a small sip and to roll the oil around with my tongue to coat the inside of my mouth; and how to perform the loud, slurpy *strippaggio*. From time to time he reminded me to clean my palate with mineral water, or with a bite of a Granny Smith apple.

For the next hour, under Zaramella's direction, like someone beginning to study ballet or yoga or violin with a master, I made my first brief foray into the vast, largely uncharted continent of extra virgin olive oil. I learned that oils made from different olive varieties, or from the same varieties grown in different places, can be every bit as diverse as wine from different grape varietals: the straw-colored *casaliva* oil from Lake Garda was almost

sweet, with hints of pine nuts and almonds, while the emerald green *moraiolo* from central Tuscany was so peppery it left tears in my eyes and a lovely sear at the back of my throat. And sure enough, the *tonda iblea* from the hills of southeastern

Sicily had distinct green tomato and artichoke overtones, just as Zaramella and his colleagues had said. Tasting these oils was like strolling through a botanic garden, touring a perfume factory, and taking a long drive through spring meadows with the windows down, all at the same time—equal parts scientific analysis and lingering, attentive hedonism.

I raised the last sample Zaramella had poured for me, sniffed it perfunctorily, and sipped. Then, after a swirling moment of bewilderment and dawning disgust, I spat it into the sink. Something was wrong with this oil: after the tart, intensely fresh-tasting essences I'd been trying until now, it felt flabby and coarse in my mouth, and tasted like spoiled fruit.

Zaramella laughed his gruff laugh. “I brought the supermarket oil last,” he said, “because it would have ruined your palate for the good ones, as surely as if you'd gargled cat piss.”

He pulled down the brown lab bottles from the shelf on the wall, and set them in a row on the conference table. “Now comes the fun part,” he told me. “You have to figure out precisely what's wrong with this last oil. It's like being a detective. Or a coroner.”

He opened the bottles one by one and handed them to me, telling me to try to memorize each scent. The bottles contained a stunning range of reeks, stenchs, and pongs, to which their labels—"rancid," "fusty," "winey/vinegary," "muddy sediment," "metallic," "esparto," "grubby"—hardly did justice. Then, after several bites of the apple and a lot of deep breathing to cleanse my palate, I sampled the oil again, sniffing and tasting and trying to put names to its flaws. I thought I recognized several, and jotted them down on a profile sheet.

When I'd finished, Zaramella drew me out of the cubicle and sat me down at the conference table, seated himself across from me, lit another cigarette, and took a voluptuous drag. He scanned my sheet. "Pretty good," he grunted, exhaling a cloud of smoke that briefly darkened the room. "'Rancid' and 'fusty' are both there. But you missed a few. The winey/vinegary is strong, and there's noticeable muddy sediment, too." He picked up the bottle of supermarket oil I'd been tasting. "You know, according to the law, if an oil contains just one of these defects—one hint of fusty, a trace of brine—it's not extra virgin grade. *Basta*, end of story. In fact, with the flaws this oil has, it's classed as *lampante*: 'lamp oil.' Which can only be legally sold as fuel: it's only fit for burning, not eating. Trouble is, the law is never enforced."

Suddenly he banged the bottle down on the tabletop, making coffee cups and ashtrays hop and rattle. "*This* is what nearly everyone in the world thinks is extra virgin olive oil! *This* stuff is killing quality oil, and putting

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