

OUR GOLDEN-GREEN HARVEST

STORY AND PHOTOS BY CHERYL KOEHLER

Like many avid cooks with a penchant for the cuisines of the Mediterranean, I use buckets of olive oil in my kitchen. Being a thrifty sort of gal, I'm invariably swayed toward that bargain bucket among the extra-virgin olive oils on the grocery store shelf. (Of course, I shun the even-cheaper lower grades, which I understand are extracted in a second pressing using solvents.) Looking closely at the label, I'm sure to see the words "Product of Italy" on most of the lower-cost brands, and until recently, I thought that was some assurance that my extra-virgin olive oil was of reliable quality.

The first inkling that I was in error came during a conversation with Patricia Darragh, Executive Director of the California Olive Oil Council (COOC). She informed me that exports of olive oil from Italy are unregulated, and that my cheap extra-virgin olive oil might not really be a product of Italy, but rather of Spain, Turkey, or Tunisia (repackaged in Italy), and that it might not even be olive oil at all, but possibly soy, canola, or hazelnut oil doctored to look and taste like olive oil. (Visit the COOC at www.cooc.com.)

Another wake up call came via a recent issue of *The New Yorker*. Tom Mueller's *Slipper Business: The great olive-oil scam* gave the whole sordid story, complete with a cast of shady characters, such as a blustery former olive oil producer named Leonardo Marseglia, who is quoted as saying, "Oil doesn't have an identity card; it just goes." It was a great read, but still, I wanted to doubt. Did I really need to double my olive oil budget?

I was finally convinced while reading the introduction to Peggy Knickerbocker's *Olive Oil: From Tree to Table*, just reissued by Chronicle Books. Knickerbocker admits to having 24 bottles of extra-virgin olive oil in her pantry—bottles representing her travels through olive producing countries, where the particular flavor of each locally-produced oil melds with the traditional dishes of that place. She advises buying bottles of extra-virgin olive oil as you would wine, pointing out that they'll last longer than one meal. "Incorporate them into your recipes, fall in love with them," she says.

Suddenly, it seemed reasonable to plunk down \$30 for a revered Italian label, such as the Frescobaldi Laudemio or Tenuta di Cape-



Livermore olive groves

zzana I see at The Pasta Shop, but I noticed that I was still wavering over paying that much for a premium local olive oil. Shouldn't California olive oil cost less than the imports?

Knickerbocker explains that in the late 1800s, California olive oil was both plentiful and competitive with the imports. But before long, subsidies (combined with lack of regulation) in Europe sent prices down, and California growers found they could no longer make a profit, and the olive frees became a forgotten part of the landscape.

Today, throughout California's wine regions, wine growers are diversifying by planting olive trees and reviving the old forgotten orchards. It's

increasingly common to find locally-produced extra-virgin olive oils for sale at tasting rooms, farmers' markets, and specialty food shops—tastes are even offered at a few places upon request.

If you go to www.elivermore.com/olive_oil, you'll find that there are many producers in the Livermore Valley. Eastern Contra Costa County is growing as an olive region as well, but the producers are a little harder to track down. The following are producers in Alameda and contra Costa counties that offer extra-virgin olive oil that has been awarded COOC certification:

Crooked Vine Vineyards, Livermore, www.crookedvinewinery.com

Olio Bello d'Olivo, Byron, www.belloolio.com

Olivina Ranch, Livermore, www.theolivina.com

Wente Vineyards, Livermore, www.wentevineyards.com

Wood Ranch Estate, Livermore, www.woodranchestate.com





Olive Oil
From Tree to Table
By Peggy Knickerbocker
Chronicle Books, 2007

BAGNA CAUDA

Adapted from Olive Oil: From Tree to Table

Bagna cauda, literally “hot bath,” is a 16th-century Piemontese dish that is traditionally eaten to celebrate the end of the grape harvest and the new wine for the coming year.

1 head garlic
1 ½ cups extra-virgin olive oil
10 salt-cured anchovies, filleted and rinsed, or 20 oil-packed anchovy fillets, rinsed
Freshly cracked pepper to taste
Breadsticks
Assorted trimmed vegetables
(for a good autumn selection, try things like artichokes, steamed Brussels sprouts, cardoon, carrots, cauliflower, celery, chard, endive, fennel, leeks, mushrooms, bell peppers, boiled potatoes, radicchio, and radishes).

Separate the head of garlic into cloves, peel, and chop. In a heavy cast-iron skillet, combine the olive oil and garlic. Place over very low heat and cook until the garlic is translucent, 30 to 45 minutes. Watch very carefully; the garlic must not brown or the sauce will be bitter.

Add the anchovies to the garlic-oil mixture and stir with a wooden spoon until the anchovies melt, about 15 minutes. Add pepper to taste. Transfer to individually warmed pots or keep warm on a hot plate. The sauce should remain hot, but should not boil. Serve with breadsticks and vegetables for dipping.

Serves 6 to 8

OIL-CURED FISH

Adapted from Olive Oil: From Tree to Table

½ pound swordfish, salmon, or tuna fillet or cleaned whole anchovies or sardines
¼ cup fresh lemon juice
¼ cup dry white wine
Salt
Mild extra-virgin olive oil to cover
2 or 3 paper-thin slices white onion or shallot
Freshly ground pepper to taste

Thinly slice the fish fillets into slender strips about 2 inches long. If you are using anchovies or sardines, fillet them and cut in half lengthwise. Do not slice.

In a measuring pitcher, combine the lemon juice and white wine with enough salt to make the mixture pleasantly salty. Place the fish in a single layer in a shallow dish and pour the wine mixture over it. Allow to rest until the fish turns almost opaque, 30 minutes to 1 hour. The lemon juice and wine will “cook” the fish slightly.

Line a wire rack with a clean kitchen towel. Remove the fish from the marinade, place on the towel-covered rack, and top with a second towel. Allow to drain 10 minutes, then press down on the towels to remove any moisture. Transfer to a serving platter and add olive oil just to cover. Sprinkle with the onion or shallot slices and pepper and serve. Or pack the fish and the onion or shallot slices into a clean 1- to 1½-cup jar, add olive oil to cover completely, and store in the refrigerator for up to 2 days.

Makes 1 to 1 ½ cups

