

FOCUS ON WINE



RAY & ELEANOR HEALD

Innovation marks Ceretto wines from Piedmont region of Italy

Mention of Italy's Piedmont region conjures up tastes of robust red wines such as Barbaresco and Barolo, both made from the nebbiolo grape. Mention also brings to mind Ceretto, the region's innovative producer.

Why Ceretto? To answer this, let's step back in time about 30 years when the Ceretto brothers Bruno and Marcello became the source of Piedmont winemaking innovations. Back then, they were the first to introduce stainless steel tanks for fermentation of red wines. They pioneered what is now considered the modern style of Barbaresco and Barolo, featuring shorter maceration time and less wood aging.

Long macerations exaggerated naturally high acidity and made tannic wines that took 10 to 20 years to achieve optimal drinking. Shorter macerations created wines with better balance that age well and are more enjoyable at an earlier age.

Additionally, the Ceretto introduced the first single-vineyard Barolo, and planted the Piedmont's first multi-French variety vineyard. Along with the French grape varieties, Ceretto developed a French chateau-style of winemaking, establishing a different winery for each style of wine, made from 250 acres of estate vineyards.

As expected from a top-quality producer, Ceretto's single vineyard wines are produced only in the best years. In the decade of the 1990s, the best vintages are 1996, 1997, and 1999. If you wish to cellar some Ceretto red wines, it's good to remember this.

WINE PICKS
Italian wines are experiencing a hey day. Yes, some are expensive, but you'll find terrific values among the following.

- Red wines: 1998 Monte Verino Riserva \$67; 1995 La Gioia, Brunello di Montalcino \$50; 1996 Spori Amarene \$47; 1998 Blondi Santi Sassocolloro \$37; 1997 Montebello Classico Riserva \$25; 1997 Cappelletto Carmignano \$22; 1997 Montebello di Barba d'Alba \$19; and 2000 Cappelletto Barco Reale \$15 (a real deal).
- White wines: 2000 Jermann Pinot Grigio \$30 and 1999 Santa Anastasia Zuffa (from Sicily) \$11 (very dry and crisp).

New generation
Ceretto continues as a family operation. At age 24, Federico Ceretto is now following his father Bruno's footsteps in worldwide sales and marketing.

His 25-year-old cousin Alessandro, Marcello's son, has assumed the role of his father as winemaker. At age 29, Federico's sister Roberta is in charge of public relations and Alessandro's sister Lisa serves as company administrator.

Sampling Ceretto wines recently with Federico during dinner at Fonte d'Amore in Livonia, we experienced the vibrant energy of young wines and the enthusiasm of a new generation settling comfortably into roles within a family business.

"With the 1998 vintage," said Federico, "my generation has launched a new Ceretto wine called Monsordo Rosso (\$39). It is our first blend of cabernet sauvignon, syrah, pinot noir, nebbiolo, and merlot. As a blend of French varieties and nebbiolo, all vinified separately, it is a new-age concept for the Piedmont, making the statement that the Cerettos are continuing their innovations with the new generation."

Served with meat ravioli with roasted demi glace prepared by Fonte d'Amore's chef-owner Luciano del Signa.

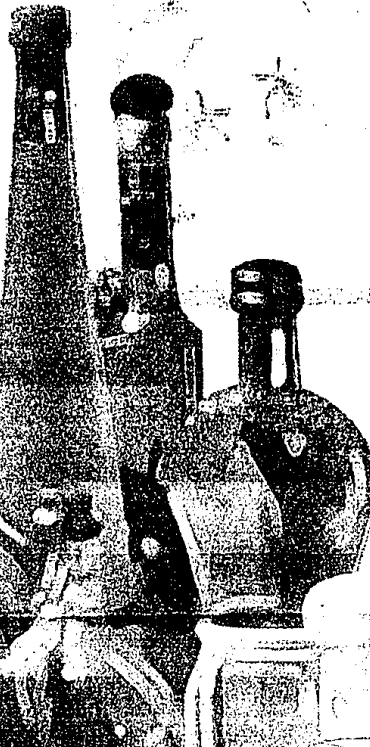
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LOOKING AHEAD

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- Focus on Wine

THE MAGIC OF OLIVE OIL

By Renée Skoglund • Staff Writer



From the sun-drenched orchards of the Mediterranean comes one of nature's perfect foods, the olive. And from the olive comes one of man's greatest culinary creations, olive oil.

"Besides being polyunsaturated and good for you, it's one of the best foods in the world," said Chef Bob Gascoigne of Ernesto's restaurant in Plymouth. "It is amazing that you get out of olive oil. There is no substitute in my book."

Olive oil is one of the world's oldest foods. According to *A Guide to Good Olive Oil*, written by Ari Weinzwieg, owner of Zingerman's in Ann Arbor, a carrier of select oils, olive oil was first cultivated in the Eastern Mediterranean about 6,000 years ago.

Leave it to the industrious Greeks to have raised the oil to new commercial and culinary heights, followed by the Romans, whose cooking culture — at least for Americans — remains most associated with the golden-green liquid.

Today, olive trees are grown in many places where sun and soil marry in harmony — from South America to Mexico to the California Coast. Zingerman's even carries an olive oil from New Zealand.

"Unless you are in New Zealand, there is no other place to get this olive oil," said Todd Wickstrom, a managing partner at Zingerman's. "We got some in last year and loved it. It sold so well we bought the entire harvest."

Taste

The taste of olive oil is influenced by many factors: soil, climate, variety of olive, vintage, harvest time and method of process, such as "cold pressing," which uses stone wheels and generates no heat. In addition, each growing region — Tuscany in Italy, Catalonia in Spain and Provence in France, to name three — imparts its own flavor characteristics.

Choosing a good olive oil is simple: Taste a few, and pick the one you like. But taste often, said Weinzwieg. "Anybody who is interested in learning about olive oils can taste the difference. If you don't taste regularly, you don't have enough taste memory."

If you're an olive oil neophyte, keep in mind that the traditional Mediterranean oils have a stronger flavor than seed oils, such as corn and soy. Newly pressed oils especially have a

more peppery or bitter finish, a good trait in moderation but bad if overpowering. These oils are sometimes referred to as "one or two cough" oils. After the oil has slipped past your palate and hits the back of your throat, you cough.

As olive oils mature, they soften.

Chef Marco Conte, owner of Mauro's Restaurant in downtown Farmington, prefers the mellow, buttery taste of a mature olive oil that enhances rather than overwhelms a dish like grilled eggplant, roasted peppers or a delicate tomato-basil salad. The newer, more peppery oils are best left for heartier fare, such as a grilled lamb chop.

Conte has his favorites, San Gulliano and Olio d'Gaeta, both extra-virgin, cold pressed and Italian, of course. About the San Gulliano, he said, "It's absolutely wonderful." The Gaeta is named after his father's birthplace near Rome. "It's a classic olive oil, not too bitter, not too buttery. It's right in the middle. It doesn't overpower. It just adds flavor."

While color is not always the prime indicator of taste, the greener oils do tend to be fruitier and full-flavored, said Weinzwieg. He warns that there are ways for processors to make low-grade, flavorless oil greener in color. Just throw in some olive leaves during pressing and the chlorophyll in the leaves imparts color but not flavor.

Grade

The term "extra virgin" has nothing to do with an olive's behavior, nor is it a redundant term. "Extra virgin" refers to a grade of olive oil, usually indicating the highest quality. Extra virgin olive oils are naturally low in levels of free oleic acid, less than 1 percent.

The higher the free acid level, the lower the grade of olive oil, writes Weinzwieg. "Virgin" olive oil has two to three times the free acid of an extra virgin oil. "Pure" olive oil — the chemically refined stuff they sell at the supermarket — is the lowest grade, with the most free acid and by far the least flavor.

Once again, Weinzwieg issues a warning: In today's high-tech world, it is possible to chemically remove or reduce free acidity from low-grade oils to give an "extra virgin" classification. The antidote is simple, he said. "Buy from a reputable olive oil seller and taste before you buy."

Chefs agree you don't have to use a \$57 bottle of Moulin de Bedarrides from Provence (available at Zingerman's) for sautéing onions and garlic. Chef Gascoigne uses Calovita and Chef Conte prefers Philippe Bario, both extra virgin oils, but quite affordable. The higher-priced oils are used for imparting flavor and for dipping breads.

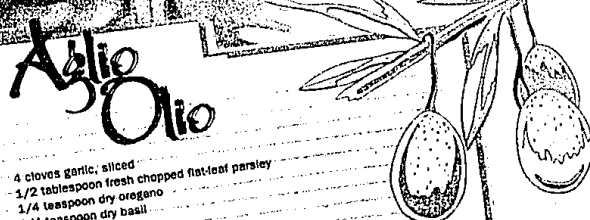
Storing

Unlike wine, olive oil does not age well. A peppery oil might mellow a bit after a few months, but olive oil goes bad after a few years even under the best storage conditions. Extra virgin oil can be stored in a cool, dark place for up to a year after opening, said Weinzwieg. Just keep it away from window sills and stoves sides.

Storage in the refrigerator is fine, but the oil will turn solid and opaque and must be warmed up before using.

Because it's so low in free acidity, extra virgin olive oil is less likely to go rancid than lower grade oils. But, as your knowledge and appreciation of olive oil grows, it is unlikely a bottle of luxurious extra-virgin, cold-pressed olive oil will last a year.

And price? Forget about it, said Weinzwieg. "You can easily spend that on a good bottle of wine, and then it's gone."



Agiu Olio

- 4 cloves garlic, sliced
- 1/2 tablespoon fresh chopped flat-leaf parsley
- 1/4 teaspoon dry oregano
- 1/4 teaspoon dry basil
- 1/4 teaspoon dry thyme
- 1/8 teaspoon crushed red pepper flakes
- Salt and pepper
- 3 tablespoons extra virgin olive oil
- 1/2 cup chicken stock

Sauté garlic chips in a little extra virgin olive oil until lightly browned. Add parsley and dry herbs. Add pasta of choice, stir in the 3 tablespoons of olive oil, then add stock until oil binds to the pasta.

Recipe courtesy of Chef Bob Gascoigne of Ernesto's in Plymouth. Please see more olive oil recipes inside Taste.

"A continuum of taste, from light and buttery to spicy and peppery and everything in between." "The ones we really like taste like olives," said Todd Wickstrom, managing partner.

Zingerman's specializes in oils from smaller growers, who harvest, crush and bottle the oil at the same location. Such oils are known as "single estate" oils and are invested with human passion. Zingerman's also carries a few flavor-infused oils, such as *Limonato* from Italy, which owner Ari Weinzwieg describes as the "oil of angels."

However, most of their olive oils are of such a high quality they can stand alone. Staff member Allison Schraf provides this taste tour:

Lecci — This light golden oil comes from the Lake Garda region near the Alps in northern Italy, which is not generally known for its olive oil. The harvest is small, and Zingerman's buys one half of it, a few thousand liters. The taste is buttery, with some interesting fruity flavors. Priced at \$44.99.

"This is what we would call a light and elegant oil. It has plenty of flavor, but is not aggressive," said Schraf. **Nicolas Alziari** — Fewer than 10 percent of the world's olive oil production comes from France. The golden-green Nicolas Alziari is one of the finest. It has a

"It took me 10 years to get this in the store," said Schraf. "We had to convince them that we will respect the food. Almost everybody will like this olive oil."

Mauvaise — Another fine olive oil from Provence. France has a serious cult following. It is greener than other oils, with a long flavor profile, more enduring mouth feel, and a very complex, longer finish, said Schraf. Mauvaise starts with a grassy taste, followed by a fruitiness or nuttiness, then ends with a peppery finish. Priced at \$59.99 for a liter, \$28.99 for a half-liter.

"If you love olives, this is your olive oil. It's all about sun-drenched olives," said Schraf.

Mariano's — This unfiltered olive oil comes from central western Spain, where its producer is very involved in the traditional food movement. It has a grassy, apple taste that personifies spring. Zingerman's buys the entire harvest. Priced at \$29.99.

"The cloudy sediment on the bottom is a good thing. This oil is not overly processed," said Schraf.

Castello della Paneretta — Produced near Florence, Italy, this single-grove produced oil has been described as "assertive but smooth, followed by a peppery kick." It is full-flavored and deep green with golden highlights. Priced at \$24.99 for 500 ml.

San Vito — A deep gold oil. San Vito is produced in the Marche region. It has a stronger, more peppery finish that could stand up to strong greens, such as arugula, radicchio and escarole, or sit nicely on top of a hearty bowl of minestrone. Priced at \$29.99 for 750 ml. "This is a stop-and-take-notice oil," said Schraf. Zingerman's is located at 422 Detroit Street, Ann Arbor, (734) 663-9304.

