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DINING & WINE

In Umbria, an Italian Olive Oil Worth the Accolades

By ELAINE SCIOLINO OCT. 6, 2014

SPELLO, Italy — Most people go to the Enoteca Properzio wine shop and restaurant in this medieval Umbrian hill town to sample its fine selection of wines.

But we were a pretty sober group. The Thai artist was a teetotaler; the American novelist was the designated driver. The Iranian-American painter and the Mongolian poet were amateurs when it came to drink. Only the Brazilian-American sculptor in our touring group of six had an unquenchable thirst.

So after downing three wines that had been matched up with three courses, we moved on to another liquid: olive oil. And that's where Nadia Antonelli Franceschini came in.

Ms. Antonelli Franceschini and her husband, Augusto, make an extra-virgin olive oil called Cuore Verde, using only young moraiolo olives that they grow on small plots of land on the gentle hills around Spello. The enoteca sells and serves it.

Ms. Antonelli Franceschini poured some of the thick green-gold oil into a glass shaped like a large blue marble with an opening on top. She warmed the glass in her hand and tapped it three times to release the oil's perfume, then passed it around.

"You should feel piquant on the tip of your tongue and bitter deep in your throat," she said. "It is full of antioxidants that make it aggressive. You are not in the sweetness of Tuscany here."

Ms. Antonelli Franceschini, a retired Alitalia flight attendant, and her husband, a philosopher by training, are militant defenders of Umbrian olive oil. At a time when much of the "extra-virgin Italian olive oil" flooding the

world's markets is neither Italian nor virginal, Mr. Antonelli Franceschini presides over a consortium of the region's olive oil producers that recognizes authentic Umbrian organic oil with a stamp of excellence: D.O.P., for "protection of origin." Every D.O.P. bottle is numbered, with a recommended deadline date for consumption.

I thought I knew from olive oil. My father sold a dozen brands of imported extra-virgin olive oil at his Italian grocery store in Niagara Falls, N.Y. Long before the Mediterranean diet became chic, he told his customers that olive oil trumped butter on pasta, bread and green vegetables and even in most pastries. The best Christmas present he could give me, once I grew up, was a case of four one-gallon tins of his best brand.

When I was posted to Rome as Newsweek's bureau chief in the 1980s, I lived in an apartment that had belonged to the film star Anna Magnani. Her son, Luca, was my landlord, and every winter the Magnani family housekeeper brought me enormous dark green glass jugs of the sweet olive oil that had been produced on the family estate near Rome. I became so addicted to it that I shipped several jugs when I moved back to New York.

But here I was in Spello, confronted with an oil that was not for the timid of tongue. If Cuore Verde were a movie star, it would be Marcello Mastroianni as Guido in Fellini's "8 1/2" — intense, biting and dark. It should be poured with gusto on a rich legume soup, or maybe on bruschetta topped with a generous slice of pecorino Romano. It would never work on black truffles or sole.

Umbrian oil makes up only about 2 percent of Italy's olive oil production but wins a far larger proportion of awards. It begged for further investigation. So when I drove an hour southwest to visit a friend in Acqualoreto, she took me to meet Pietro Marruco, 30, who with nine other investors had built a state-of-the-art olive oil mill for \$1 million to service olive growers from all over the region.

Mr. Marruco is determined to keep his oils, which are sold under a number of names, traditional, local and pure. All of his olives come from within 20 miles of the mill. He curses the companies that have given Italian olive oil a bad name.

"The big groups have killed our market and our reputation," he said. "My passion is making beautiful oils that very few people make."