

“All for the Love of Olive Oil”

Michael Anstendig (October 07, 2007)



“This is my heart. We put so much into this,” said Matthew Battaglia, as he proudly held up a 750 ml bottle of his much-prized olive oil, called Olio D’Oliva Extravergine dei Fratelli Battaglia.

“This wasn’t anything that a sane person would say to you you’d be making money off of. You’d do it out of passion and maybe, long-term, everything would work out.” Things definitely seem to be working out for the budding producer, whose 3,500-bottle production last year sold out quickly to demanding chefs and retailers across Italy, France, Switzerland, Germany, Ireland and the U.K. It is marketed exclusively in the U.S. in New York City’s acclaimed Fairway Market for \$26.50 a bottle.

Battaglia describes his olive oil as “fruity, with hints of artichoke and celery. It’s yellow with hints of green. It has typical Tuscan characteristics, but it’s slightly milder than the Chianti one, which fanatics love, but which can be overbearing, for example, you can’t use it on fish. Ours you can use on fish, too.” He recommends incorporating it in big, hearty Tuscan soups, in bruschetta, drizzling it



liberally on a charcoal-grilled steak topped with arugula and in pinzimonio, the Italian take on crudités. Olive oil, he notes, should be kept away from light, heat and oxygen, and as such, storing it by the stove isn't a good idea. Moreover, once the bottle has been opened, plan to consume its contents within a month.

He plans to eventually produce 10,000 bottles a year, but this ambitious visionary also has plans to share this pastoral lifestyle with others by creating a rustic bed and breakfast that will accommodate 20 lucky travelers, a yoga retreat, as well as a small restaurant serving local delicacies like grilled sausages, all situated at 1,500 feet above sea level with panoramic views of the picturesque valley below. “It’s beautiful,” beamed Battaglia. “Even Swiss people say this is one of the most beautiful valleys they’ve ever seen. And for the Swiss to say it...”

It’s been seven years since Battaglia, 45, a Buffalo, N.Y. native with Sicilian roots, together with his brother, Luke, purchased an olive grove with 450 trees on a rocky, terraced hillside in Camaiore near Lucca in Tuscany to pursue a dream. Much of the land is at a steep, 45-degree incline, rendering tractors useless. “For the first two years, we were taking 50-pound bags of fertilizer up on our shoulders because the tractor couldn’t make it up to the grove and there are 30 terraces up to the top, too,” said Battaglia. “When I took the first bag up the first day, I said, ‘This isn’t that bad, I’ll be able to do one bag in 10 minutes, so I’ll be able to take 12 bags, enough for the whole olive grove, in about two hours.’ I ended up doing the whole thing in two-and-a-half days.”

The brothers have since expanded their holdings to four hectares with 1,500 trees. The charismatic entrepreneur was able to charm friends and family to help out. “I was going down every weekend to work in the olive grove and I’d try to bring friends down, get 10 people to help, sort of Tom Sawyer, ‘Oh, it’s fun!’” To help with the immense chore of cutting the grass between the terraces, the resourceful Battaglia now use two donkeys, dubbed “Truck” and “Bulldozer” by his four-year-old son, Tommaso. (Battaglia’s wife, Laura, a native of Lucca, recently gave birth to their second child, Ettore.) “The donkeys eat the grass. All they need is water. They don’t even want a shed. They’re great.”

Battaglia’s first exposure to Italy began in high school, when he studied at The American School in Florence. His mother, an Italophile, won a Fulbright Scholarship to study the artist Giorgio Morandi, so he was able to stay with her there for two years. He returned to the U.S. to attend college at the University of Buffalo, where he studied European history. Missing Italy, he went back after school and took a \$2 an hour job at Tenuta di Forcia, one of the largest olive and grape farms in Tuscany. In addition to living in a 17th century farmer’s house without heating, aside from the fireplace, Battaglia was gored in his thigh by a bull and needed 72 stitches. That didn’t discourage him. Indeed, he became enamored with olives. “I always loved everything about olives and olive oil, especially the warmth that it gives the house when you burn the wood.”

After working on the farm for two-and-a-half years where, among other things, he perfected his Italian, Battaglia began specializing in translation work in Milan. He met a Japanese businessman who was launching a brokerage house, Okasan, and began working in the stock market. After the collapse of Japanese equities, he then went on to work at financial companies, including BNZ, Monte Paschi, Banca Intesa and Banca Intermobiliare, where he continues to trade. It was Battaglia’s financial acumen, along with a modest inheritance, that allowed him to amass the capital necessary to bankroll his agricultural dream, as well as a job that provided constant international telephone access and the Internet to help sell his “liquid gold.”

Battaglia credits his brother Luke, who works full-time at the olive grove, with mastering the art and science of olive growing and olive oil production. Luke apprenticed with local farmers, but also read extensively about the latest cultivation and manufacturing techniques in books and on the Internet. The brothers are strident believers in pruning their trees. They keep them relatively small and branching out in the shape of a hollow inverted cone. This allows air and light to come in and facilitates harvesting, since they are relatively low to the ground.

While some of Battaglia’s neighbors have trees that give 200 kilos of olives each, his aim is for just 20-30 kilos, which means about four to five bottles per tree maximum. He observed, “By keeping the trees well-pruned, you maximize the flavor, reliability, consistency and flavor. The oil’s



characteristics are strengthened, it has a stronger taste. It all gets concentrated.”

In addition to pruning, proper fertilization (three different kinds at three times of the year) and beating back the olive fly menace, picking and pressing the olives at the optimal moment is critical. “To make very high quality virgin olive oil, the olives have got to be picked at just the right time, just before they turn from green to purplish. It’s called the *invaiaura*.” Once the olives have been shaken off the tree, he explained that there is a window of between 24 and 48 hours to press them into oil, because at that point, they begin to ferment and the acidity overwhelms the subtle flavor characteristics.

Olive oil production has a long history in the Camaiore area dating back to Roman times. However, it was in the 15th century that it was a matter of life and death. At that time, Camaiore was feuding with its neighbor, Pietrasanta, which tried to enlist the help of a Bolognese soldier, Capitan Frediano, for a bloody sneak attack. The good captain was appalled and instead informed the leaders of Camaiore. Without the element of surprise, the assault was called off and a long cease-fire ensued. For his service, the captain could have requested anything, but he wrote, “I would ask to be paid, not in gold ducats, but in as much of your excellent olive oil as I can carry on my mule once a year, as an annuity.” Perhaps if Camaiore’s olive oil had not been so attractive, the captain’s loyalty and the outcome of this battle might have been different. A video movie of this romantic story can be viewed at the company’s website, www.buchignano.it/frediano.html.

In this historical vein, Battaglia sees the olive grove and its businesses as an integral part of his destiny. “My father died about four years ago. His money, what he left us, is what permitted my brother to buy his piece of olive grove and we like to think that it happened because he always wanted us to do things together, like good Sicilians.” He also learned that his roots in the olive oil business were deeper than he ever imaged. “We found out that our old ancestors worked in olive oil in Sicily. We have photographs of them on horses in the olive groves. It’s in our blood.”

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