



THE *Pornanino* OLIVE OIL NEWSLETTER

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The heat of summer makes you lazy, don't you think. Close your eyes and feel the fiery kiss of the sun on your skin. Imagine the singing of the cicadas, and the dry smell of hot stones. Watch storm clouds gather in the distance, as sudden cool gusts that promise rain ride in with a thunderclap. Welcome to a typical July afternoon in Tuscany, dear friends. Baking hot one minute, bathed in the fresh scent of wet grass the next, blessed with glorious sunshine and the promise of a shining canopy of stars to light up yet another al-fresco dinner. Now open your eyes and promise you'll come to see us in person next year! Meanwhile you'll have to make do with our Newsletter. Not exactly like being here, granted, but hopefully the second best alternative. Enjoy!

Pure.
Natural.
Pornanino
Extra Virgin
Olive Oil
Quite
simply,
the best.

Get it
here ...



Franco's olive grove diary



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but at least you get lots of fresh air and exercise – well away from the boardroom! Here's the diary of a typical July day at Franco's open-air headquarters. [Read more](#)

All about YOU

Davi tells us how Tuscany changed her life. "It was September 1999", she recalls. And if you want to find out what happened on that fateful day read on. Who knows, you might decide to follow in her footsteps! [Read more](#)

Canola vs. olive oil?

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Is it really, *really* true. Let's have a closer look. [Read more](#)

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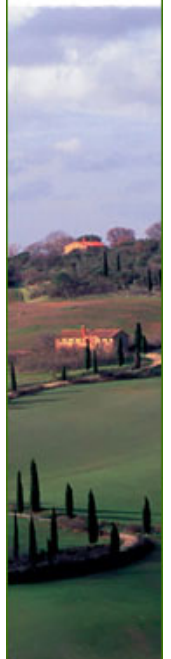
Ward off the heat of summer with the fresh flavor of sun-ripened tomatoes and fabulous

eggplant *parmigiana*. So tasty, so healthy, the perfect way to eat your vegetables – and thoroughly enjoy them! [Read more](#)

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Editor and copy: Francesca Boggio Robutti

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Franco's olive grove diary

Olive growing is not your typical 9-to-5 job. Sometimes it's more of a 24/7 affair, but at least you get lots of fresh air and exercise – well away from the boardroom! Here's the diary of a typical July day at Franco's open-air headquarters.



Franco is an early riser. In part this is a legacy of twenty years spent running construction sites all around the Mediterranean and even further afield, in

Russia and Iran to cite but a few. In summer building crews start at dawn, to get at least a few hours of respite from the sun. Well, it makes sense, doesn't it. Once upon a time you'd see them doze in the shade at noon, when it was deemed too hot to work. Here in the Italian countryside things are still very much the same.

Early birds should really appreciate a Tuscan summer. On a typical July morning Franco is up at 6 AM, which is actually no big deal since the sun is up and all matter of winged creatures have been chirping long before that. Not to mention that the air has that wonderful crisp texture that really shouts out "hey, come on out to play!". You can bet Franco is off to his beloved red tractor's garage with a spring in his step. Inspecting the troop first thing in the morning is another leftover of his former life – he actually finds olive trees a lot more disciplined than his human crews ever were, although the task of seeing to olive groves is not always smooth sailing either.

This time of year there's no particular task to be seen to. But trees, just like kids or builders, must be kept on a tight rein or they might get themselves into trouble. This is why Franco patrols the slopes to check that weeds are under control and the earth around the trunks is loose to allow water to seep underneath. Olive trees need water in order to develop nice, plump fruit, but risk root damage if it stagnates. On the other hand the clay soil baked by the fierce Tuscan sun tends to harden to the point where rain, when it comes, cannot get through. So you have to be careful, and also on the lookout for tell-tale signs of malaise which shouldn't be there but you never know – better safe than sorry. As you should know by now, it takes perfect olives to make perfect oil. And Franco strives for perfection.

Country life may not always be as idyllic as it sounds, but it doesn't have to be hectic! Olive farmers are entitled to their coffee break like any other worker. Franco likes to get his at his daughter Francesca's home, which is conveniently located just across one of his sloping olive groves, a few minutes' drive from his own house. He can actually visit without even getting off his red tractor.

Of course from time to time you have to have meetings – there's no escaping them. But it's sort of nice holding them round an antique kitchen table over coffee, swapping pieces of news and the occasional gossip with the other members of the Board: your daughter and son-in-law. And if tempers rise, as they are sometimes bound to, you can count on the little ones to bring back a smile on Granpa Franco's face. His granddaughters Veronica and Beatrice are growing up fast, being nearly 13 and 11. But little Ettore is 3 and his baby sister Lavinia barely 8 months old and they live next door with their father Stefano, who is Franco's younger son, and mother Erica. You know Italians are real suckers for family, and the Lombardi clan is no exception!

Having tackled both the coffee break and the first meeting on the morning agenda at one stroke, Franco trundles back to the olive groves on his red tractor. At noon sharp he heads for home, or risk Lia's anger for being late for lunch (but he may brave her fury and stop to tease Veronica and Beatrice if the girls are home from school and playing in the swimming pool). And then it would be too hot to go out again, as tradition very clearly mandates. Until at least 3 PM, but maybe 4 would be safer, any wise Italian would be well advised to take a nap – it's siesta time.

After all where's the hurry. Daylight at this time of year will extend at least until 9 PM, so there's still plenty of time to toil when the sun is a little less fierce. There might be other meetings, and perhaps some maintenance work around the estate but one thing you can count on – at Franco's headquarters there are no buzzing phones, no wall-to-wall carpeting, plastic cubicles or air-conditioning. There's nothing phoney or artificial. Just nature, in all her grace and awesome might.

All about YOU

Davi tells us how Tuscany changed her life. But remember: next time we want YOUR story! Just drop us a mail and we'll be happy to publish it.

It was September, 1999, when I met Franco Lombardi. My sister and I had an appointment to meet with him at his olive farm, Podere Pornanino, out in the middle of the rolling Chianti hills. We wanted to meet him because we had been told that his olive oil was the best in Tuscany and we wanted to import it to our shop in America. I was impressed with this man, a retired civil engineer, who was absolutely passionate about his olive oil. The fact that he employed the rather "old world" method of picking the olives by hand was indeed impressive. The fact that his operation was small but held to a very high standard was not at all surprising. The more we talked that afternoon, the more I learned about his passion and his goal towards excellence.

That meeting was the start of a beautiful friendship and the start of my tour business. During that meeting, while we sat and visited, Franco said to me, "Since you enjoy coming to Tuscany so much, why don't you bring people with you?" At that time, I was a Director of Nursing. In my years of travel to Tuscany, I had made many friendships and developed business contacts, but had never considered becoming a tour operator.

During the next few months following our meeting, the idea of taking fellow travelers with me became more enticing. The "seed" that Franco had planted was growing. I asked several of my friends if they would be interested in volunteering for a "guinea pig" tour group, which would allow me to experiment in the role of tour guide. I was delighted with the positive response and, from this initial experience, my dream job was created. Needless to say, being a Tuscan tour guide is a lot more fun than being a Director of Nursing! However, the skills acquired from my administrative job gave me insight into the organization of my new business.

I focus with Tuscany, because that is what I know best, with groups limited to no more than eight travelers. This is necessary to maintain the unique, intimate nature of the tour. Travelers get to do many things that the big tour groups just cannot do. Of course, we also experience some of the "touristy" places such as Florence, Siena, and San Gimignano, which I feel is an absolute "must". Part of the uniqueness of the tours is that the travelers meet my friends who actually make the olive oil, the wine, the cashmere items, the leather products, and are given an opportunity to live in Tuscany as authentically as possible.

We discover Florence visiting the Academia (Michelangelo's "David" is there!) and the Uffizi (the world's best collection of Renaissance art!), plus much more in this magical city. Then it's out into the Chianti hills where we live in a Tuscan country house. Each day adventuring to beautiful hill towns, villages, castles, wine tastings, etc...all under the Tuscan sun.

I have Franco Lombardi to thank for my tour business, which is my passion. I am defining a life experience by living it. To some, taking people on tour is a business. To me, it's a passion. The way I see it, there are two approaches to the tour business. You can be the biggest or you can be the best. I've learned this from Franco Lombardi. My goal is to provide the best, most unique small group tours to Tuscany. Like Franco, I have as much passion now as I did in the beginning and that's what sets our businesses, our passions, apart from others.

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Canola vs. olive oil?

Why should you invest in extra virgin olive oil when Canola is cheaper and just as healthy? That's what the sales people claim, but is it really, *really* true. Let's have a closer look.



You know how from time to time there comes a food rave, some new fad destined to ebb and flow as inevitably as the tides. It's a treacherous side-effect of our affluent times that we can pick and choose – there's such a huge range of foods widely available that it gets really difficult to eat "right". And the media are not very helpful either, with their biases and slanted information.

The case of Canola is rather interesting. In the 80s it seemed that the answer to heart disease was to be found in polyunsaturated oils, i.e. most seed oils such as cornflower or soybean to cite but two, while traditional fats like butter or lard were banished forever as killers guilty of clogging up arteries with "bad" cholesterol. The food industry cheered, because seed oil was the cheapest of the lot and, as it turned out at the time, healthy to boot. Wow!

Celebrations had to be hastily suspended just a few years later, when science made a U-turn and declared that polyunsaturated oils were rather a case of the medicine being more harmful than the illness it was supposed to cure, since it removed both kinds of cholesterol – the "good" as well as the "bad" – which was a definite no-no.

The food industry found itself in a bind. It could no longer advertise its use of polyunsaturated fats, and it couldn't go back to good ol' animal fats either, as saturated fats were still frowned upon as well as being more expensive. There remained olive oil, which as a monounsaturated fat didn't have any particular effect on cholesterol, but the problem there was that world supply was limited and the cost far too high for the average supermarket brand.

Researchers got busy looking for a cheap source of monounsaturated fatty acids and soon hit on rapeseed, which had roughly the same amount as olive oil plus a nice percentage of omega-3 fatty acids, which are very much in demand these days. On the down side, rapeseed was unfortunately loaded with a poisonous compound, despite the fact that its oil has been used in Asia for millennia (wide use of saturated fats in those same traditional cuisines apparently mitigated to some extent any noxious effects).

It was just a matter of time before clever hybridisation by plant geneticists got rid of the offending erucic acid. Having been born in a Canadian laboratory, the oil from the new strain of rapeseed was christened "Canola" but didn't really catch on until the early 90s, thanks to a subtle marketing campaign aimed at health-conscious, upscale consumers.

Many ridiculous allegations have been made since then by scaremongers of different stripes, none of them ever confirmed. There is no reason why Canola shouldn't be what it claims to be: the next-best source of monounsaturated fatty acids after olive oil, besides being rich in omega-3 fatty acids. Unlike olive oil, though, it is far from natural.

Industrial rapeseed oil extraction involves both high temperatures and solvents (usually hexane); the oil then goes through caustic refining, bleaching and degumming, which all involve chemicals and heat. Some sources maintain that the standard deodorization process causes the transformation of omega-3 fatty acids into trans-fatty acids – which are anathema nowadays!

Be it as it may, let us just say that it's a far cry from the way we make our own extra virgin olive oil. Do you think we can compare our pure, unadulterated, wholly natural olive juice with *that*? You must be joking. They can keep their test tube surrogate. We have Nature on our side.

Siena, where the horse is king

Siena is obsessed with a centuries-old tradition that pits the town quarters against each other in a bitterly contested race. Don't be fooled by the crowds and colorful trappings: there's nothing touristy about the Palio.

Just to put things in perspective, consider that the first Palio we know of in Italy took place in Siena in 1238. Of course the kind of race going under the name of "palio" was rather common in medieval Italy, either with horses, buffalos or donkeys, and the tradition was kept up until the 18th century when it declined. There are other cities in Italy where Palios have been revived, mostly in the 20th century. Asti, in Piedmont, has a famous one and, locals maintain, older than Siena's. But nowhere is it as deeply enmeshed in the spirit of the town as in Siena.



It must be said that Siena has been running Palios in the modern form, with horses as we can see them today, ever since 1644 without ever missing out a year. Having been perfected over 4 centuries and a half, the rules are quite complex and were most likely evolved in the desperate attempt to keep things as civilized as possible, which is to say with the least bloodshed and mayhem. In Siena they definitely disagree with M de Coubertin's maxim that taking part in the competition is more rewarding than winning it.

Since winning is what this is all about, the Palio rules allow for a reasonable amount of utterly unfair play. The jockeys can push and shove each other and if they fall off, as they are likely to do since they ride bare-back, it doesn't matter all that much, because what counts is the horse cutting the finishing line. It's also very much done, although possibly a tad illegal, to bribe a rival jockey, try to steal him away from the Contrada that signed him up, and even kidnap or dope a rival's horse. And there's a lot of money involved as well, literally hundreds of thousands of euros. Funds well spent, according to the Senesi, if they serve to bring one's Contrada to victory.

Since the Contradas are 17 and the Piazza del Campo, where the race is run, can accommodate no more than 10 horses, two separate Palios are held each year – one on July 2 and the other on August 13. Of the 10 contestants, 3 are drawn in a lottery and the other 7 are the Contradas that didn't get a chance to run the previous year. The horses are assigned to each Contrada a few days before the race and there's no swapping them or refusing Chance's choice, whereas it's the Contrada's right to sign up a jockey of its liking. The best of them are paid their weight in gold, as it were.

After the drawing of lots, there follow a few days of frantic plotting and scheming to form alliances and devise ways of tripping up rival Contradas. Remember, the race is not fair and it's perfectly all right to hit below the waist, particularly since some Contradas are divided by rivalries and obscure feuds dating back to the Middle Ages. To spite the enemy is almost as important as winning.

All in all, preparations for the Palio take months and involve every member of the Contradas, as the Palio itself is just the centrepiece of a whole series of events which include solemn celebrations in the Contrada's own church, costumed parades, lavish dinners and sundry other ceremonies happening at different times both before and after the actual race – all multiplied by 10, since each contesting Contrada runs its own lot of festivities. If you ever thought the Palio was a tourist stunt think again – barely a minute in the year goes by in Siena that is not busy with Palio preparations. And there is no best-loved topic of conversation for Senesi than talking about the Palio – past, present and future. The really knowledgeable know the scores by heart, Contrada by Contrada down to 1644.

Can you imagine, year-long preparations that peak in the barely 2 minutes of pure adrenalin it takes to run the mandatory 3 laps around Piazza del Campo, a treacherous and very dangerous 1,000 mts in all. That's it: less than 2 minutes and it's all over - or so we think. To the winning Contrada it marks the beginning of a year of proudly wearing the badge of Palio winner, as well as being able to add yet another standard (that's what the Palio is, a banner) to the Contrada's collection. This is pure bliss to a Senese. Does it sound a little weird to the rest of the world? Well, that's Tuscany for you!

Grandma Lia's olive oil recipes

Ward off the heat of summer with the fresh flavor of sun-ripened tomatoes and fabulous eggplant *parmigiana*. So tasty, so healthy, the perfect way to eat your vegetables – and thoroughly enjoy them! Tomato *salsa* is a staple of Italian cuisine, and you'll need it to cook eggplant *parmigiana*. Of course you could use canned tomatoes, but the end result would be nowhere near as delicious. Our low-calorie version of eggplant *parmigiana* would make many Italian mammas cringe, but then it's much lighter and quicker to make than the traditional recipe.

Tomato *salsa*

Tomatoes, ripe but still firm

Onion

Garlic (optional)

Sugar

Basil

Parnanino extra virgin olive oil

Quantities of course depend on how much you plan to make. As a rough measure, 1 lb tomatoes and 2 oz onion (half a medium-sized one) will yield enough for a pasta sauce serving 4 to 6. Wash and peel the tomatoes. If you have a large amount it might be best to dip them briefly in boiling water, so that the skin will peel more easily. Halve them, remove the seeds and coarsely chop them.

Finely chop the onion and peel the garlic, if you are using it. Heat some extra virgin olive oil in a large saucepan and cook the onion and garlic until tender and golden, but don't let the garlic brown as that would spoil its taste. Remove the garlic and put the tomatoes into the pan, together with a little sugar. Boil until all the liquid has evaporated (it will take some time), turn off the heat and add plenty of shredded basil leaves and extra virgin olive oil. Tomato sauce will keep for up to ten days in the fridge in an airtight container.



Eggplant *parmigiana* (Serves 4)

1 ½ lb eggplants

2 lb ripe tomatoes

1 small onion

1 garlic clove

15 oz mozzarella cheese

6 tablespoons grated Parmesan cheese

4 tablespoons dried breadcrumbs

1 bunch of basil

Parnanino extra virgin olive oil

Rinse the eggplants, slice them about ½ in thick, sprinkle with salt and leave to drain for 20 minutes. Make tomato salsa and boil until all the liquid has evaporated. Season with salt and a pinch of sugar. Rinse and pat-dry the eggplants. Tradition would require that you fry the eggplants in plenty of olive oil, which is tasty but also heavy on the stomach. For a lighter version just grill the slices, slightly brushed with olive oil. Set the oven to moderate, about 350° F. Grease a baking tray with olive oil and arrange a layer of eggplant slices on it. Season with a pinch of salt, cover with a third of the tomato sauce and a third of the mozzarella cheese, sliced. Sprinkle with 2 tablespoons of grated Parmesan cheese, 1 tablespoon of dried breadcrumbs, shredded basil leaves and finish off with a drizzle of olive oil. Make another two layers on top of the first. Bake for 30 minutes, or until it's crusty and deep golden on top. Serve either warm or cold. It actually improves if left standing for a few hours.

Tell us if you like our recipes! Is there a recipe you'd like Grandma Lia to work out for you? [Let us know](#)