

WILMA VAN GRINSVEN-PADBERG

— OLIVE OIL SOMMELIER —



THE
OLIVE OIL
MASTERCLASS

**LESSONS FROM A PROFESSIONAL
OLIVE OIL SOMMELIER**

 | LANNOO



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INTRODUCTION

I was dining in a good restaurant years ago, when the sommelier came to tell us something about the wine, water, and salt on the table. Nothing was said of the olive oil, also present on the table. I asked which olive oil it was and the sommelier went to examine the label in the kitchen. It turned out to be Arbequina, which I now know would be the olive oil of choice in almost all of the finest restaurants. Arbequina is, by the way, not only a delicious olive oil variety, it is also everyone's favourite: it comes in such a large, undiscovered number of varieties. Chefs and kitchens of this age devote much care and attention to products, so devoting more attention to this product can only enhance culinary awareness. The same thing happened in every succeeding restaurant that I visited, anywhere in the world. At the time I was already buying olive oil for an international retail chain specialized in selling the best extra virgin olive oil in the world. I travelled the world and had already tasted a lot of olive oil, but only at that moment and in that restaurant did I realise how little attention is given to the product - even by professionals.

I then realized that there was a lot to be gained here. Not only because the choice of particular olive oil determines the taste of your dishes. Anonymous placement of this valuable product on the table of top restaurants will never help it achieve the value and recognition it deserves. And if this anonymity persists, most producers will continue to

What I really would like to see is that everyone is able to taste the olive oil before he or she buys it.

work as they do without further investments in the production process, which would otherwise improve the quality, taste, and health benefits of olive oil. Contrary to what most consumers know, the lion's share of olive oil that is sold is simply of bad quality.

Looking back, that was the moment when I embarked on my mission. I started giving olive oil master classes to the “black and white brigades” in top restaurants, something that is utterly cool to do. Seeing people fall in love with the richness of this product gives incredible satisfaction. The producers that devote their time, energy, and love to this product deserve a podium, just like the best wine makers.

It is, by the way, logical that knowledge of this product is not widespread in western countries. The only training that has been in existence for a long time is the “O.N.A.O.O.” given in Umbria, Italy - for many years only in Italian. In addition, the course lasts a few years and there is no admission unless one is blessed with a proven “good nose”.

With this book I can share some of my knowledge and introduce you to people I have met in the last eleven years. I have tried to find answers to questions that have kept me occupied, questions which I suspect have also been asked by people interested in olive oil.

What I really would like to see is that everyone is able to taste the olive oil before he or she buys it, and that it is legally mandatory to print the harvest date on the label. That would significantly reduce the chance of you buying olive oil of poor quality.

With this book and my olive oil master classes I hope to contribute to a future in which more and more people recognize the benefits of this wonderful, honest, and healthy product!

Enjoy your reading,

WGrinsven

Wilma van Grinsven – Padberg





1

**Since time
immemorial:
the history
of olive oil**





The olive tree of Vouves symbolises the rich history of its kind like no other.

In January 2017 I went to visit a new olive oil producer in Crete. He took me to a special place: the olive tree museum of Vouves. Right beside the museum rises – in all its glory – the tree considered to be the oldest olive tree in the world. Its precise age cannot be definitely established, but is probably around 3000 years old, and it still produces olives. I became completely silent [as if spell-bound]: it was so beautiful! I remember having taken many photos. The trunk is hollow and the spaces where you can see through resemble creepy, gnarled faces. The museum was closed but opened specially for us. Inside I peered at a photo of the 2004 Olympics in Athens, the winners crowned in wreaths made with the olive branches from the tree in Vouves. I thought that was quite special! The Vouves tree is also called the Olympic tree and winners at the Olym-



— The olive tree of Vouves

pics are given these wreaths every four years. This one tree symbolises the rich history of its kind like no other.

Olive trees are ancient plants. They have existed for thousands of years. Civilizations rose and fell, but these plants grew and bloomed undisturbed.

The first traces of olive trees are difficult to find, buried in the depths of time. Pollen fossils and leaves of the wild olive tree, the *Olea oleaster*, had been found on the Greek island Santorini. They are no less than 50,000 to 60,000 years old and are proudly displayed in The Museum of the Olive and Greek Olive Oil in Sparta. The wild olive tree - which is, by the way, more of a shrub than a tree - grew prosperously in the warm, dry climate of the entire Mediterranean area. Archaeologists have dug up heaps of olive pits in this area, which means that prehistoric people already gathered them to eat or press oil from them.

Our *Olea europaea* is the domesticated variety of the wild olive tree. It is uncertain when and where humans first improved the breed and planted the first olive groves. This probably occurred in the Fertile Crescent – the mythical area between the Tigris and Euphrates – and along the Nile, where people practised agriculture for the first time. The earliest traces of agriculture date back to 8500 B.C.

Not long ago, archaeologists discovered the oldest olive oil amphora, as reported by a *Daily Mail* article. It was dug up in Zippori, near Nazareth, Israel and it is 8000 years old. Researchers could not prove that prehistoric oil was squeezed out of domesticated olives, but do not rule out the possibility that also olive trees were cultivated then in

addition to wheat and vegetables. Other more recent written sources report that plenty of olives were grown along the sunny eastern shores of the Mediterranean sea, in what is now Turkey, Syria, Lebanon, Israel and Palestine.

The cultivated olive tree travelled from there further west. It is said that on the Greek island of Crete it was a special favourite. Many believe that the blossoming of the Minoan civilization (about 2600-1200 B.C.) could be largely attributed to the wealth created by olive oil. Clay tablets dating back to 1700 B.C. in the palace of Knossos record the trading in olive oil done with a large part of the Mediterranean area. Also Egypt was an important customer even though the Egyptians also had their own plantations. Olive oil acquired an important place in rites, among other things, as a sacrifice to the gods.

A GIFT OF THE GODS

Also in Athens were the people and the gods fond of the pure oil. According to Greek myth, Athena and Poseidon fought over the dominion of Athens and Attica at a certain moment. Whoever bestowed the most useful gift to the city would be the winner. The jury consisted of the entire pantheon of gods. Poseidon thrust his trident into the Acropolis to open up a salt water source. Athena stamped her feet on the ground and made the first olive tree sprout. Guess who got the most votes.

From that moment on the goddess was the patron saint of the city and the olive tree was favoured by the gods and

ordinary mortals. The olive tree was a holy tree that symbolised peace and prosperity. Olive trees adorn Greek coins. The winner of the Olympic games received an olive branch wreath and litres of olive oil squeezed from the olives of holy trees. Olive oil featured prominently in the tales of Homer – the poet who described olive oil as liquid gold – as in the tale where Odysseus washes ashore after a shipwreck and was found by the beautiful Nausicaa, daughter of the king. As haggard as he looked at first, he looked divine after he had washed and anointed himself with olive oil.



Olive oil was not a staple in the kitchen, but rather a luxurious taste enhancer. The richer the Greek, the more fat he ate. Hippocrates considered the oil to be healthy, as long as used moderately. Olive oil played an important role particularly in body care. Olive oil was the only thing worn by Greek athletes when sporting. It enhanced the display of the nude body and was useful for cleaning up afterwards: the athletes scraped the oil together with sweat and dirt away. Olive oil was the basis for costly perfumes and was also used as lamp fuel.

The olive tree proceeded with its advance around 1000 B.C. The Phoenicians with their slender, fast, merchant ships, and the Greeks spread the tree westwards towards the Italian coasts, Sicily, Sardinia, France, Spain, Portugal, Algeria, Tunisia, and Morocco. When the Etruscans ruled Italy (around 700-500 B.C.), olive trees were also planted in central Italy. The mighty Romans thus learned all about olive cultivation from their predecessors, the Etruscans.

SOLDIERS AND OLIVE TREES

The unstoppable conquering urge of the Romans overwhelmed Europe, and in their wake the soldiers also took olive trees with them. Olive groves were planted wherever conditions were favourable for the trees.

Rome grew to become a world metropolis with more than a million inhabitants, and local produce could no longer supply the massive demand for olive oil. Olive oil was thus imported from conquered areas, whether or not in the form

of taxes. The scale of one of the Roman rubbish tips gives us an idea of the scale of the import. Monte Testaccio is a hill in the city consisting of an estimated 53 million discarded olive oil amphorae. Together they contained six billion litres of imported olive oil. For the Romans olive oil was a precious commodity that generated wealth and power. It is not for nothing that the ancient olive oil merchants are sometimes compared with present day oil sheiks.

BUTTER VERSUS OLIVE OIL

The fall of the Roman Empire dragged the cultivation of oil along with it. Many olive groves that were the pride of the land were overgrown with forests. The “barbarian” conquerors of the Italian peninsula had [instead of olive oil] butter and bacon fat on the menu.

Only behind the monastery walls were olive trees still cherished by Christian monks. Olive oil suited their sober diet better than animal fat, and in the constantly lit churches the oil lamps were fuelled with olive oil rather than with smelly, stinking pork fat.

Following the Middle Ages, the emerging soap and wool industries became a major new consumer of olive oil. In Marseilles, the production of the famed Marseilles soap went into full gear. Olive oil was – and still is – made into soap with soda. Wool weavers used olive oil to soften the wool before it was spun (washing and combing removes lanolin, wool’s natural lubricant). Although Puglia, the heel of Italy, has been the largest producer of olive oil since the

Middle Ages, it was the shrewd merchants of Venice who capitalised on this trade.

OUT IN THE COLD

In 1709 the entire olive tree population of Europe suffered a severe blow. The winter of 1708-1709 would go into history as the *Great Frost*. Most olive trees did not survive the deep, persistent cold. Only the production in Tuscany survived, albeit at a lower ebb. Italy would again be filled with olive trees only near the end of the eighteenth century. The production of olive oil underwent a revival thanks to the Industrial Revolution and all those machines that needed oiling.

Thereafter, the centuries old Italian tradition went into decline. From the middle of the nineteenth century the weather became colder, with a harsh winter in 1929, forcing Italians to emigrate in droves to America, Australia, and New Zealand. Back in Italy, the olive trees were left to their fate, but the emigrating fortune seekers did introduce the cherished tree in their new homelands.



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