

Old Modern Olive Oil in Provence

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In the previous episode, Carl Ipsen talked about the rise and rise of extra virgin olive oil in Italy. So I was surprised to read an article in *The Art of Eating* about mills in Provence producing what was described as an old-fashioned oil. The oil is modern, in that it has very low acidity, but it cannot be marketed as extra-virgin because, according to the EU, it is deeply flawed.

Carl Ipsen: Extra virgin olive oil has to have no flaws. It can't be stinky, rancid, musty, mouldy, vinegary, putrid. These ... Many of those terms are actually in the legislation.

Jeremy: And the way modern olive mills avoid those flaws — stinky, rancid, putrid, et cetera — is by using a high tech, continuous process to get the oil out of the olives.

Carl: The olives are brought to the mill, hopefully within hours of being picked. They are milled, so they go through a mill that chops them up almost instantaneously. From there it goes into a malaxer where it's stirred and the olive globules are formed. Many of the aromas are formed in the mill at the beginning. From there the oil goes into what's called a decanter, a horizontal centrifuge that separates the oil from the pomace and the water. And from there it's filtered.

All along that process, you can adjust temperature. And there are now mechanisms that I saw last week, something I'd never seen before, which is a tube within a tube that takes the olives — because the problem with climate change is it's warmer and warmer when harvesting takes place, and harvesting is earlier. To make a better quality oil, the olives arrive there too warm — so the olives are washed, maybe in a cool water, but then they go into a pipe that's surrounded by a refrigerant before they get to the mill that cools them down. So it goes through several metres of piping. So you bring the temperature of the olives down to the temperature you want. If

you can control the temperature of the olives before the mill in the malaxer, you can adjust the quality of the oil. And it depends on what olives you're using. Some like to be warmer, some like to be cooler. The speed of the mill can change the quality of the oil. The amount of time you malax the oil and the temperature of the malaxer affects the quality of the oil. So there's a whole, you know ... The expert miller knows what tools to use to get the maximum quality out of this particular olive.

Jeremy: OK. That's the background. Now to the point. Today I'm talking to Ed Behr, the founder of one of the great food newsletters, the Art of Eating. In a recent article, he wrote about what he called old fashioned olive oil from Provence. And I had to know more.

Ed Behr: That was the oil I first knew, or at least I first first focused on. There was this mill, the Moulin Jean-Marie Cornille in Maussane-les-Alpilles, and it had very thick texture and a very strong definite olive flavour. I didn't at that time particularly have adjectives for it. Now the French have applied various adjectives to it. But that was what I first came to know. And then I went to Italy and found all kinds of great olive oil being made at a time when in France it was hardly being made like that, meaning fresh from early picked fruit, really delicious complementary flavours to a modern kind of cooking, which would be, you know, exalting fresh vegetables, fresh seasonal produce, all that sort of thing. And actually, by comparison, the old fashioned Provence oil really has a heaviness, an earthiness that perhaps is less contemporary. The French, however, came very late to this.

Jeremy: Which is odd because, as Carl Ipsen said last time, it was French entrepreneurs from Provence who started Italy on the path to high quality food oils. So why didn't the French in France pursue those high quality oils?

Ed: All right. It is a bit complicated. First of all, France is not really an olive country, although there is obviously plenty of production, or quite a bit, some production in the south of France; used to be a lot more. And I don't think they had a culture of appreciation, so that when the new machinery came along, they were very slow to embrace it. So around 2000, hardly anyone was producing what is now called in French, green fruity, *fruité vert*, oil as opposed to black fruity, *fruité noir*, which is the old fashioned kind. So the French, though, being analytical, when they did finally start to pay attention,

they began to to analyse what distinguished the old kind of oil. What it was was a fermentation.

Jeremy: And that's why the EU requires extra virgin to be processed within 24 hours of being picked, because if you leave the olives longer they ferment and bad things can happen.

Ed: They would heat and ferment and the outer olives were exposed to oxygen, and that, those, were the ones that tended to turn rancid, to get flavours of rancidity, of vinegar and mould, because the mould needs air to grow. But the olives in the centre gave off CO₂, so they did not have the rancidity, the oxygen, and those had a different flavour. So the French analysed all this and decided, okay, well, let's do a controlled anaerobic fermentation. And that's the way they now produce the oil. So they don't have the the particular off flavours of mouldiness. This old fashioned oil that qualifies as extra virgin because it's under 0.8% free acidity, it has an oilier texture, not little or no — very little, let us say — bitterness or pepperiness. And it has at least two of these aromas cured olives, black olives, olive paste, cacao, mushroom, cooked artichoke, truffle and sourdough bread.

Jeremy: And this is the paradox. Those flavours must be absent in an extra virgin olive oil. But they're exactly what some people in Provence are looking for. And the mills there can provide it by controlling the fermentation of the olives. That way they get the good flavours they want with none of the mustiness or rancidity.

Ed: They fought the EU, and they only could get so far as getting it recognised as near virgin, even though it does qualify in terms of that free acidity. The point is, is to kind of ignore perhaps from a marketing point of view whether it's virgin or extra virgin or whatever it is, and just sell it as something unusual and special and having a kind of, for lack of a better word, a gourmet appeal, you know, to really people who are really informed and looking for variety. So, centred on chefs and really amateur people who are olive oil lovers, but have a particular interest in it, and people who just like to try interesting flavours. And I should also add that, uh, it costs more. *Fruité noir*, the old fashioned oil, actually costs a few euros more per bottle.

Jeremy: In the old days, the olives were picked late and fermented and went rancid while they were waiting to go to the mill. Today, places like the Moulin Cornille take olives that have been picked early and ferment them carefully for 3 to 7 days before pressing. And that's

one reason the oil costs a bit more. So both green oil, *fruité vert*, and black oil, *fruité noir*, are made from olives picked at roughly the same time. It's the different processing that creates the difference. But the story is actually even more complicated than that.

Ed: Now, just to make things messier, there's a third kind of oil which is not officially recognised, which is from *fruité mur*, ripe fruit. So that is picked late. So the point of comparison, especially with the oil from *fruité mur*, in around Nice, the kind of olive, the Cailletier, which is the same as the Taggiasca across the border in Liguria in Italy, and that olive is not subjected to the fermentation, but in Liguria it was always picked traditionally super late. This oil is extinct. It's the *Biancardo* oil and it's no longer made. But it was the most prized oil. It was picked as late as March, April, even June. And that was told to me by Franco Boeri in Liguria. His grandfather made it, and that was the oil that was most prized. And each generation has liked a fresher, fresher greener taste, even in Liguria. But that was a huge tradition in the world. And I think it's because there was ... It had a light texture and a lightness of flavour. And just as, I don't know, you know, white sugar was prized and white flour was prized, I think the lightness of that oil made it special.

Jeremy: Quite a contrast with the very tasty modern oils, which we're encouraged to be so careful with and to match to the food they're dressing. But back to the old fashioned oil. You've paid a bit more for it, and you've got this oil that deliberately lacks the pepperiness and the freshness of modern oils. What's this old fashioned but modern oil, what's it good for?

Ed: Number one ratatouille. I think aioli, tapenade, which is going to taste like that anyway from the olives, anchoïade. But especially with the old fashioned [what] Provençal people did was, they used it to dress salad, which perhaps we wouldn't so much. But always something else that would go in. Obviously — perhaps obviously, I think — garlic, but, you know, other strong flavoured things, which would be onions, lardons, little sautéed bits of pork fat, anchovies, different strong flavoured things. Even bell peppers, I think, have a particular affinity for this kind of oil. I always think that you can't understand the traditional taste of Provençal cooking if you don't know this oil and haven't tasted it in the cooking.

Jeremy: That's a really interesting perspective, I think, that in demanding an old fashioned oil, the people of Provence might be trying to maintain a traditional foundation flavour of their cuisine. As far as I can tell, that's not something that's happening in Italy. But it does prompt a final question.

You say in your article that there's no one best of anything, but do you actually have a preference for a modern oil or an old fashioned oil? Or are you going to insist that each has their place?

Ed: Well, each has its place. But if I had to choose and couldn't live with, you know ... had only one I could ever live with, ever again, it would definitely be the modern oil. It's just ... It goes with everything, so to speak. And the old fashioned oil just doesn't. It doesn't flatter. You know, I have a wonderful garden in summer and I just, I would need modern oil to flatter those vegetables. That's all I have to say.

Ed Behr graciously agreed to make his two recent articles on olive oil, one on the new oils and the one we've been talking about here on old fashioned oils, freely available. There are links in the show notes at eatthispodcast.com.

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