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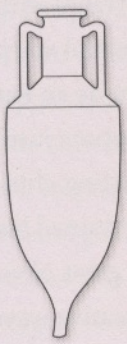
FOOD REVOLUTIONS



The mortal moon hath her eclipse endured,
And the sad augurs mock their own presage;
Incertainties now crown themselves assured,
And peace proclaims olives of endless age.
—William Shakespeare, Sonnet 107

"Too much love kills, even more than hatred. That's what we've done to olive oil. Our reaction to it is totally visceral: oil belongs to the most sacred things, which are paradoxically the first things that we vilify. 'Grease the palm,' 'Oil the works'—oil has become a synonym for corruption."

I'm sitting with Paolo Pasquali, in a broad, low-ceilinged room with

an antique breakfront and an enormous, age-sleeked table that came from a church sacristy, and a holy water stoup against the wall with a tap over it that spouts olive oil. He calls this place an *oleoteca*. "Wine has the *enoteca*, and the wine cellar, but until now, oil has had nothing analogous. It wouldn't be the mill, of course, which is a noisy, aggressive, stressful place, where people rush to process as many kilos of olives per hour as possible. So I created the oleoteca. It's a place of merry holiness, where you can enjoy oil in its multiple tonalities—mythological, scientific, and culinary."

Pasquali taught philosophy at the University of Florence, and quotes Aristotle, Aquinas, and Lévi-Strauss with an intensity that reveals how their words have shaped his mental warp and woof. He also trained as a musician, and made a fortune as an entrepreneur in publishing, then sold his business for another fortune just before the Internet swallowed it. He's handsome, with the jutting chin and hooked nose of a battle-hardened *condottiero*. Now he's trained his Renaissance-man energies on the art and science of making great olive oil, in a place where the arts and sciences have melded in creative ways for centuries. He owns Villa Campestri, a thirteenth-century estate in the Mugello, the hill country north of Florence, where he makes oil from small groves in various parts of the property. The Mugello has been called the cradle of the Renaissance: Giotto was born around the corner, Fra Angelico up the road, and philosopher Marsilio Ficino taught and wrote among the olive groves of nearby Cafaggiolo, the ancestral home of the Medici. Pasquali believes the time is ripe for a modern renaissance of olive oil, based on a new philosophical and aesthetic understanding of great oil in the twenty-first century.

To begin with, he says, the language we use to talk about oil is all wrong. Olive oil labels, with their opaque references to production methods and oil chemistry, give the consumer no sense of what the oil will be like to eat, and no desire to find out. Pasquali thinks no better of official taste testers, who brandish spiderweb charts of sensory characteristics and spout terms borrowed from lipid chemistry, "as if

they were nurses trying to talk like doctors." Pasquali finds that even the basic words people use to describe olive oil are charged with unwanted meanings, and need to be retooled. "Pungent" and "bitter" have far more positive connotations in the Mediterranean than in North America, for example, where they sound harsh to many people. In China, "eat bitterness" is an ancient curse.

"We must reclaim the nobility of language which oil has lost. The language of music, for example, which is the natural way to speak about beauty. We talk about an oil's 'floral notes' or its 'harmonious' structure, instinctively borrowing from the musical lexicon."

Before his talk grows cloying, Pasquali hops to his feet, because like all Renaissance men he's also a man of action. He walks to a console on the wall built in gleaming copper and stainless steel, which despite its modern materials fits with the thirteenth-century decor. He takes three tulip glasses, holds them one by one under the three spigots of the console, and out come three green and gold ribbons of oil, three different extra virgin experiences. He invented this device to shelter fine olive oil from its three worst enemies: oxygen, heat, and light. It's part of a new business model Pasquali has devised, OliveToLive, which he says will allow restaurants and stores to serve the highest-quality olive oil, and to make a profit doing it.

"Oil is the opposite of wine. Wine ages, oil goes bad. The instant an oil is bottled, the decay accelerates. Bulk oil is the only way to go—super-premium bulk oil."

This console, he explains, contains three light-proof vessels that preserve the oils in an oxygen-free environment, at 16 degrees Celsius, the optimum temperature for oil storage, until the moment it's served. Oil that's kept in the OliveToLive system, which has been installed in a handful of high-end restaurants and oil bars in Italy and the US, maintains its freshness and sensory qualities longer than bottled oil.

Pasquali fills three more glasses, then brings all six back to the table, where he sets three in a line before me, and keeps the others for himself. He tells me to start with the gentler oil, made at the McEvoy Ranch

near Petaluma, California, and then work up to the more pungent and bitter oils from Andalucía and from Pasquali's own trees. He cups a glass in the palm of his left hand and cranks it around with his right, to warm it. I do likewise. He shoves in his sizable nose, and breathes.

While we snuffle and muse over the oils, Pasquali describes his personal education in the substance, which, as with most things he does, has been hands-on. He's made oil at Villa Campestri for the last five years, and participates actively in the milling, the harvest, and the year-round care of the trees. "When I first started, I'd go out with local farmers, the oldest ones I could find, and spend the whole day with them among the trees, pruning or hoeing or picking. I found they were able to talk about oil for eight straight hours, and saw that olive oil must have a power even greater than soccer! They had the oil bug, and I caught it."

Since then Pasquali has made Villa Campestri a center of R&D and communication about fine oil. He's hosted study groups and retreats for sensory scientists and other scholars from the University of Florence and the Culinary Institute of America, and has more research planned for the future. Guests at Villa Campestri enjoy a complete olive oil experience: guided tastings, mill and orchard tours, seminars on sensory science, massages with olive oil, and magnificent oil-based meals in the hotel restaurant. His daughter Gemma, who holds a PhD in agronomy, leads the seminars, often accompanied by her young children, including Pasquali's newest grandchild, two-year-old Cosimo, after whom this year's oil at Villa Campestri is named. "The children love tasting oil," Pasquali says. "They seem to sense its innate goodness and healthfulness, perhaps because of the percentage of the linolenic acid in olive oil, which is just like mother's milk, and is fundamental for its absorption in the intestine."

By now we're tasting the third oil, made at Villa Campestri. It's a fierce oil: floridly fruity, brazenly bitter, lip-puckeringly pungent. I slurp some, then cough and hack like a character in *The Magic Mountain*. Pasquali smiles unblinkingly, with glistening lips.

Then he's off on another of his carefully reasoned tangents: how to

make money from oil. As he says, he loves the myth, poetry, and science of olive oil, but he remains an entrepreneur. "People don't ask for free wine at a restaurant. Why should they expect free olive oil? Until premium olive oil becomes a profit center in restaurants, we producers will never make a fair living." In his restaurant, he says, he charges €9 for a flight of three oils, and business is brisk. The Culinary Institute of America recently opened one of his *oleoteche* at its campus in Napa, California, and likewise charges for an oil experience. Pasquali says he aims to open another four oil bars soon, in Spain, Greece, Japan, and Singapore, and to use them as springboards to educate fifty top chefs around the world in the fine art of fine oil. "They'll become opinion leaders, spokespeople for how real oil works."

A door opens behind him, and his grandson Cosimo toddles in, his round cheeks pink from the cold. *"Ciao nonno!"* he chirps, leaning heavily on his grandfather's leg. He sees our oil and reaches up for the nearest glass on the table, the potent Villa Campestri oil which bears his name. As Pasquali cups his hands under it to prevent it from falling, Cosimo brings the oil to his lips and gulps it.

He shakes his head as if he's been slapped across the face, and coughs loudly, his eyes filling with tears. I think he's going to cry—that he's crying already. Then, still coughing, he chokes out a word: *"Buono!"* And he holds out the glass to his grandfather for more.

Pasquali's expression shifts between pride, tenderness, and what can only be described as hope. For a moment, I think *he* may cry.

"Can you imagine a better opinion leader?" he says at last.

THE MODERN HISTORY of olive oil began shortly after World War II, when Ancel Keys, the Minnesota epidemiologist, visited hospitals in Naples, Madrid, and on the island of Crete. Keys found an incidence of coronary heart disease that was drastically lower than in America, though people in these places had recently suffered the extended dietary privations of wartime, while Americans had had access to a varied and