



# GEORGOFILI WORLD

Newsletter of the Georgofili Accademy

## CALIFORNIAN OIL / ITALIAN OIL

by Claudio Peri

March 21 2016

\*\*\*



In a recent issue of ***Bloomberg Businessweek Magazine*** (January 25-31, 2016), an article appeared by Peter Robinson and Vernon Silver with the title *“A Californian Olive Grower Says His Oil Is Better Than Italy's”*.

The title in itself could be interpreted as praising Italian olive oil. If a Californian olive grower promotes his extra-virgin olive oil by saying that it is better than Italy's, it may be inferred that he considers Italian Extra-Virgin Olive Oils as the touchstone of olive oil quality. The article, however, offers quite a different impression.

Before presenting my point of view, let me first clarify this prejudiced discussion.

I'd never say that Californian oils are of lower quality than Italian oils. Such a statement would be unfair and false. There are very good Californian extra-virgin olive oils (and I know some of them very well), and there are also very common or even bad Italian olive oils (and I know some of them as well). But the approach of the article is questionable and seriously damaging to the reputation of Italian olive oil. Unfortunately, this practice of degrading a product is often exercised around the world, particularly in business competition, and is often aimed against the excellence of some Italian foods.

Now, let's get to the point.

It is misleading to compare a Californian (or any other country's) olive oil produced and sold by its producer with olive oils sold by commercial companies as blends of extra-virgin olive oils of various origin. The article correctly cites Jean-Louis Barjol, the executive director of the International Olive Council (IOC), who said "*it is rather a question of commodity vs specialized product*". I totally agree: when we are talking about commodity, the basic tool of competition is price, whereas when we are talking about a *specialized product*, it is quality that counts.

On this point, however, I suggest using critical thinking and fairness, as the blending of extra-virgin olive oils by honest industrial companies is a true art and the result of long-term experience.

I don't want to minimize the problem, but some brands of low quality olive oils that are traded with an Italian name (not always owned by Italian companies), in close association with American importers and retail organizations, are sometimes sold to American consumers at a low price. They not only mislead the American consumers, but also seriously damage the reputation of the many good and excellent Italian oils. I would like to make a slight correction to Gregory Kelly's statement that "*Europeans have long sold their dregs to unsophisticated Americans*". No, Mr. Kelly! In the first place it is Americans, not Europeans, who are selling olive oils to American consumers. In the second place, I assure you that unethical traders are selling bad oils also to European and Italian consumers who are, as you say, "unsophisticated" meaning "unable to distinguish a bad olive oil from a good one".

The interesting core of the article, however, is a comparison of the super-intensive industrial olive grove (the model of the California Olive Ranch), vs the traditional old-style Italian approach. The comparison ridicules the Italian way by presenting an example of a

microscopic olive grower who owns “some 50 olive trees planted above ancient catacombs” (!). This comparison is unfair. Many Italian producers own modern, intensive olive groves and use the greatest care in cultivating their olive trees according to their natural “architecture”, i.e., plant shape and structure. They not only produce excellent extra-virgin olive oils, but also preserve the biodiversity and flavours deriving from the different cultivars, matching them with the unique differences of regional culinary styles. Furthermore, they are fighting a difficult battle to preserve the beautiful landscapes in the hills of Umbria, Sicily, Apulia, and so on.

The California Olive Ranch model is presented with the following words:

*“The company's 2,200-acre orchard is an industrial marvel. The 1.3 million trees there are more like bushes, 6 to 10 feet tall and planted in neat, tight rows. The density lets a two-story mechanical harvester straddle the trees and strip away the olives to a conveyor that drops them into a truck, which delivers them to an on-site mill that can press 3,200 gallons of oil an hour. No olive is touched by hands...”*

I have no objections and I will not deny that the resulting oil may be good or very good. However, the comparison with the Italian model, in all fairness, should be done in a different way, by asking, for instance:

1. Do you prefer raising olive trees like bushes in tight rows, or do you prefer preserving the natural “architecture” of individual plants according to the cultivar and the climatic-soil conditions?
2. Do you prefer a worldwide standard of extra-virgin olive oil deriving from two or three varieties, or do you prefer preserving olive tree biodiversity and the amazing differences in the sensory profiles of the oils that allow them to be matched with different culinary arts and traditions?
3. Do you prefer the use of “.. two-story mechanical harvesters straddling the trees and stripping away the olives ...” or do you prefer the time-consuming, gentle harvesting by hand or man-operated mechanical shakers, preventing damage to the olive tree and to olive fruit integrity?

I must underline the fact that “no olive is touched by hand” is a meaningless statement in terms of product hygiene. On the other hand, olive and olive tree integrity is more important than touching or not touching the olives and of milling them very soon or simply as soon as possible within 24 hours in the case of healthy, undamaged olives.

Finally, it may be observed that some statements about the difference between Californian and Italian oils are based on a study carried out at the Olive Centre of the University of

California, Davis. I love UC Davis and I have been there as research fellow. I'm also a good friend of the Olive Centre and its director, Dan Flynn. But the same article says that the California Olive Branch is funding the Olive Centre. It is an admirable proof on the part of the magazine's transparency, but also seriously limits the reliability and fairness of the comparison.

I recently participated in meetings at UC Davis to discuss the concept and perspective of "Food Design". It was generally agreed that profit-driven choices in the food field should deal with the more complex approaches to biological, social and ethical or even esthetical values. If you forgive me for an over-patriotic statement, I would summarize by saying that the Italian artisan style of designing foods, meals and diets is closer to consumer expectations in America and elsewhere, than the Californian style of industrial food production.