

ITALIAN OLIVE OIL... HERE TODAY... TOMORROW?

By JOE SANO

Hey! Take it easy with that olive oil! That's liquid Italian gold.

While we may have heard that jokingly said, the truth is that pure 100% Italian olive oil, if available, will see around a 30% price hike. The real deal, the 100% pure Italian olive oil from the 2018 crop (August 2017-September 2018), will probably be gone as you read this article. The Italian Olive Council and the Coldiretti Farmers' Lobby (both consulted for this article) estimate that the 185,000 tons of oil from this 2018 harvest will be gone by April 2019.

Italian olive oil production has fallen 57% this year. This is the lowest production in 25 years.

Italy, while not the largest producer of olive oil (Spain is # 1), is and has been the largest importer of olive oil for decades. While native Italian oil is sought worldwide in its 100% pure state, Italian oil remains the premium oil to blend with lesser quality oils obtained from other nations. The poor recent Italian olive crop and resulting oil shortage will cause the industry to rethink how it will meet this year's demand for a quality Italian product. It is anticipated that counterfeit products will swamp the marketplace this year being sold as 100% pure Italian olive oil. Buyers beware! You can't make what isn't available. There are some stored olive oil products which can offset some of that demand but there is a real industry crisis that is being met directly by the Italian government and the European Union.

In 2013, the warning signs were seen in the Puglia Region (the "heel" of Italy's southern most boot). Known for producing over 65% of Italy's olive crop, catastrophic weather, insects and resultant disease have destroyed many of the regions olive masserias (farms). Spring frosts (olive trees have difficulty surviving temperatures lower than 10 degrees F for longer than several hours), summer droughts and late summer flooding, olive fruit flies and now an unprecedented invasive bacterium

have made over 500,000 acres barren with a loss of over 4 million olive trees.

This newest devastating bacterium threat, *Xylella Fastidiosa*, has ushered in a cultural and economic crisis seldom seen. Olive production is cyclical. There are good years and bad years. The bacterium's arrival 6 years ago has changed everything. The disease is transmitted by the saliva of spittlebugs that suck water from the olive stems and branches. This infection then spreads throughout the tree blocking the movement of water and minerals ultimately causing the branches, leaves and the tree itself to wither and die.



*Infected olive tree ready
to be uprooted*

Since 2015, both the Italian government and the European Union have adopted a "zero-tolerance" policy to combat the spread of the disease. Any olive tree within 100 meters (328 feet) of one infected has to be uprooted whether it is infected or not. As one Brindisi grower lamented while choking back his tears. "...My life is being destroyed...an infected tree was found on another masseria and now they want to come and uproot mine, even if they're not sick...I grew up in these fields...These trees are my family..."

One scientist explained that once the bacterium has spread the only thing to do"



*Healthy trees in Puglia. Note the
tilled soil & lack of grass*

... is learn to live with it and strengthen the trees..." Good news can be found in the Town of Galatone in Puglia which finds itself in the heart of the epidemic. Showcasing new and ancient farming solutions they are fighting back and seem to be winning. The strategies are simple: cut down the flowing grasses in the olive groves- they harbor insects; feed 'aromatic' water-based mixtures from cow manure to the base of the trees; graft disease resistance limbs (leccino and fabolosa species) onto older trees. Some growers are reluctantly turning to herbicides and insecticides while those who choose the organic way are introducing natural biological products such as the manure mix in harmony with birds and insects that thrive on a spittlebug diet. The twisted, gnarly ancient olive trees such as those found in the "Plain of the Thousand Year Old Olives" near Ostuni depict the diverse cultural, economic and ecological benefits that the olive brings to the world. Hard work, innovative science, new farming methods married to ancient techniques and yes, tears, will hopefully enable the Italian olive and olive oil industry to flourish. (Photos used are in the public domain and are published by the Italian Olive Council)



*Plain of the Thousand Year Old Olives
near Ostuni*