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'But I really AM a virgin!'

...as the shady olive oil said to the clueless punter. Charlotte Eagar sniffs out the high-end goods

We've all heard of bank fraud and art fraud, but the latest con is olive-oil fraud. No surprise, really, because olive oil, once known only as a staple of the Mediterranean peasant, is worth billions, with 3,269,249 tonnes' worth of olive oil consumed globally per year. As one EU official said: the profits are 'comparable to cocaine smuggling with none of the risks'.

We became hooked on the gloopy green stuff in the Eighties, when extra-virgin olive oil became an elixir, if not of youth, then of health, said to reduce heart disease and cholesterol and to make your skin softer and your hair more lustrous. The 16th-century Hungarian countess Elizabeth Báthory was reputed to bathe in the blood of virgins to achieve eternal youth – she'd probably have looked hotter on a diet of insalata caprese.

But it turns out that a lot of what appears on the shelves as Italian extra-virgin olive oil may actually be raddled Spanish slut. As Tom Mueller points out in his bestselling book *Extra Virginity*:

'The Italians grow 300,000 tonnes of olives a year, consume 400,000 internally and export 600,000.' Do the maths. The Italian government launched a major investigation: so-called Italian extra-virgin oils were being adulterated with oils that not only were not Italian, but were also closer to lampante – lamp oil.

Of course, olive oil doesn't have to be Italian to be good. When Charles Carey founded the Oil Merchant in 1985, he set off for Tuscany. Now he imports Spanish, Greek, Moroccan and even South African olive oil: 'A good oil should have a blend of front, middle and back taste,' he says, as we slurped our way through a selection at Fortnum & Mason. 'Maybe passion fruit at the front and pepper at the back. A lot of supermarket oils are just rather bland.'

Better bland than bogus, of course, but the good news is that there is a *Tatler*-friendly solution at hand – single-estate olive oil, grown and bottled by the same family, preferably someone you know.



Marina Colonna

Fadrique Alvarez de Toledo

Francesca and Sofia di Belmonte

PURE AS THE DRIVEN OLIVES

• COLONNA •

Princess Marina Colonna was one of the first Italian toffs to recognise the British olive-oil market, probably because she spent three years living in London in the Seventies. 'In the Eighties, Italians didn't think about selling olive oil,' says Marina. 'Wine was the thing. Now olive oil's trendy.' Colonna Extra Virgin's distinctive amphora-shaped bottles are available not just at Fortnum & Mason and the Oil Merchant but at delicatessens countrywide. *Colonna Extra Virgin, £22.65 a litre, at The Oil Merchant*

• MORGENSTER •

A gorgeous, lemony oil, Morgenster is an anomaly – an Italian olive oil made in South Africa. It's the retirement project of Turin industrialist Giulio Bertrand, who bought a 200-hectare farm in the Cape. 'I thought I'd spend two months a year here when it's cold in Turin,' says Giulio, 'but it's turned into 10.' Prize-winning Morgenster is available at

Sainsbury's, Fortnum & Mason, The Oil Merchant and Waitrose. *Morgenster Extra Virgin, £14.25 for 50cl, at Waitrose*

• MARQUES DE VALDUEZA •

The Marqués himself oversees the making of this pungent oil from olives grown on his estates in Extremadura, central Spain. He also makes a milder oil called Merula, which 'we use for things like mayonnaise', says his son Fadrique Alvarez de Toledo, who spent three years in London working for NM Rothschild. *Marqués de Valdeuza Extra Virgin, £14.99 for 50cl, at Waitrose*

• PHENICIA •

This peppery Moroccan olive oil is ideal for salads and made by the charming and debonaire Anour Zine, who diversified the family's fruit farms into olive oil four years ago. Anour risked marital harmony for the sake of his oil: he dragged his bride to London for a few days' work because 'Fortnum

& Mason's oil producers' dinner was on the first night of our honeymoon,' he explains. *Phenicia, around £10.95 for 50cl, at Harrods, Partridges, The Oil Merchant and Wholefoods*

• PUNTA LICOSA •

Produced by two Heathfield-educated Neapolitan princesses, Frankie and Sofia di Belmonte, Punta Licosa was launched in the UK last year. It is a delicious lemony-peppery oil, made from olives grown in the grounds of the Palazzo di Belmonte, a 17th-century palace-cum-hotel by the sea, two hours south of Naples. According to Sofia, who's married to Adam Bruce, son of the Earl of Elgin, 'We have a man who follows our olives from the grove to the press and sits watching until the oil is sealed.' *Punta Licosa Extra Virgin, around £16.95 for 50cl, at Ocado and Selfridges*

• RACALIA •

Will Richards may not sound very Italian, but the retired Old

Etonian solicitor is in fact also the Marchese di Pedicini. His family has lived between Sicily and England since 1803, when they started making Marsala, a fortified Sicilian wine. Richards began making olive oil commercially in 2010. 'We planted the trees between 1999 and 2006. Now we've got 2,000,' he says. Nutty and peppery, delectable Racialia is available from selected retailers – or from the company website. *Racialia Extra Virgin, £40 for a 3-litre box, at racialia.com*

• ZAYTOUN •

Zaytoun is an Oxfam-backed co-operative of 1,700 West Bank Palestinians. A light, mild oil, good for mayonnaise, it comes from groves that have been in the same families forever. Zaytoun was founded in 2004 by Heather Masoud, a British development worker married to a Palestinian, after she went to the West Bank on an olive-harvesting holiday. *Zaytoun Olive Oil, £10.99 for 50cl, at Wholefoods, Planet Organic and Oxfam shops*