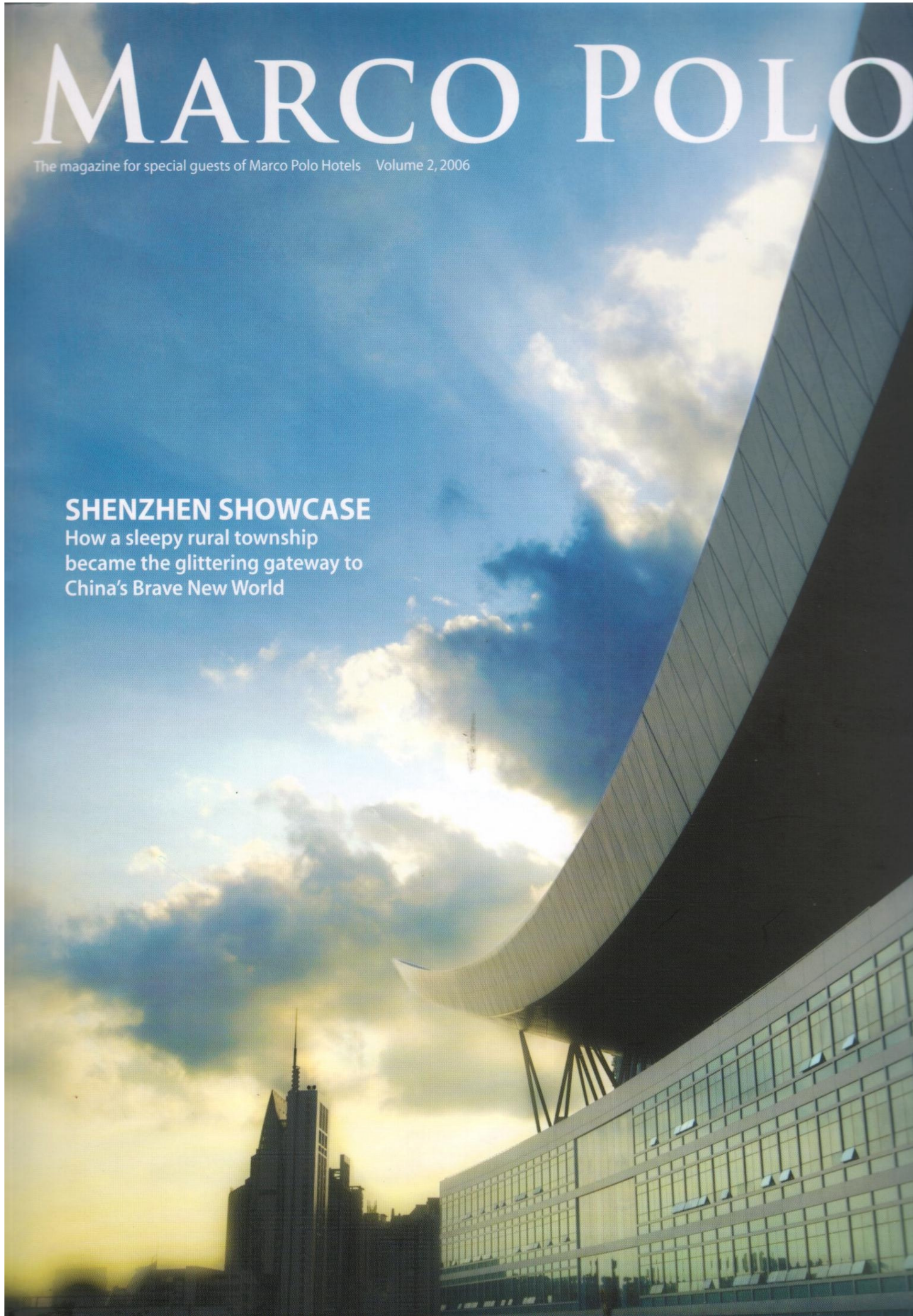


MARCO POLO

The magazine for special guests of Marco Polo Hotels Volume 2, 2006

SHENZHEN SHOWCASE

How a sleepy rural township
became the glittering gateway to
China's Brave New World



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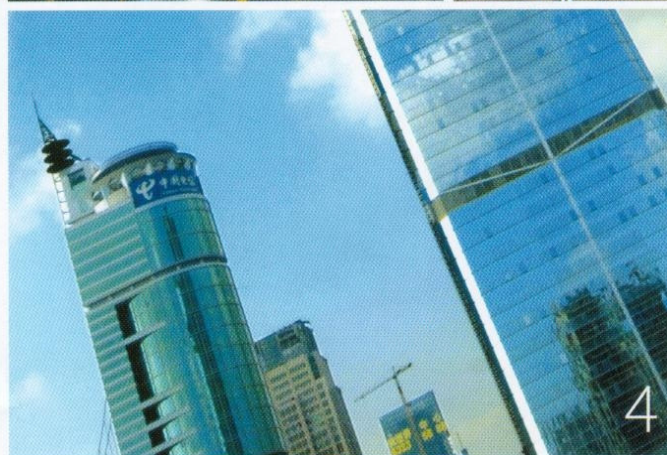
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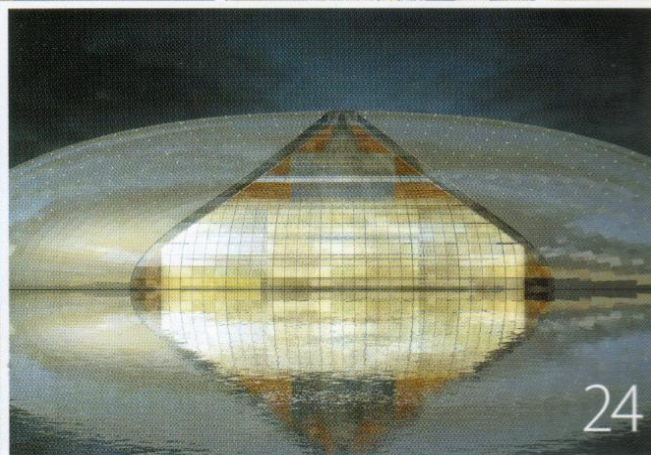
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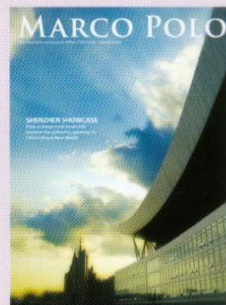
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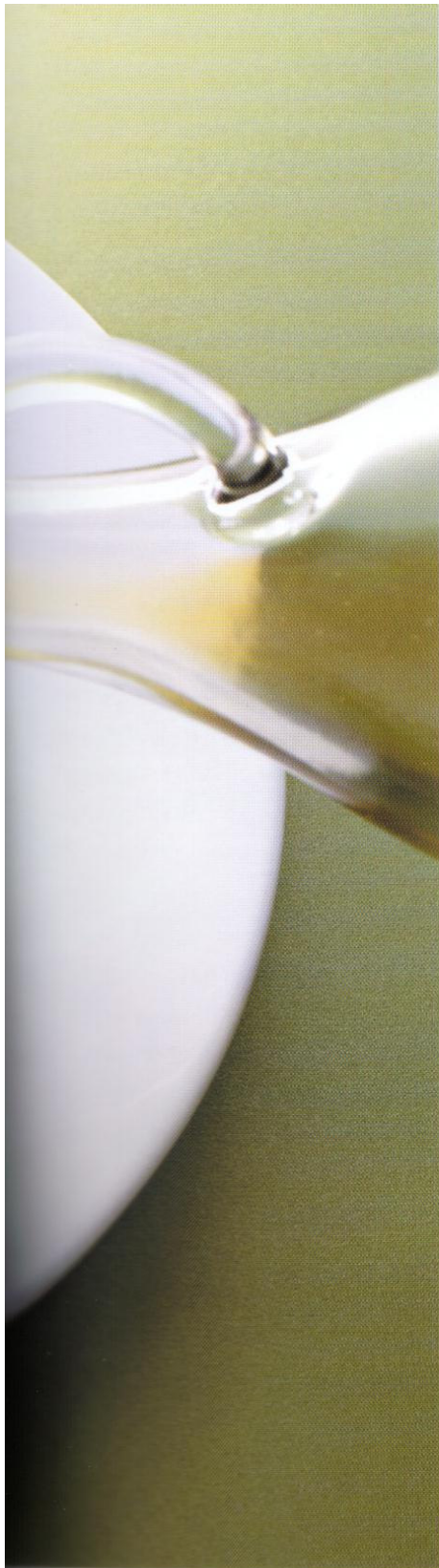
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A close-up photograph of a white ceramic plate. A thick, yellow liquid, likely olive oil, is drizzled in a decorative, swirling pattern across the center of the plate. To the right of the swirl, a small portion of a clear glass containing water is visible. The background is a solid, muted green color.

An essential oil?

Just as moderate consumption of red wine is reckoned to be good for the heart, so the beneficial properties of olive oil are becoming apparent — and its use in Asian kitchens, both of restaurants and homes, is growing. *Robin Lynam* reports.



The olive branch is an internationally recognized symbol of peace, but the fruit that hangs from it is conquering the world. Recent years have seen olives and olive oil winning hearts — and quite possibly helping to preserve them in working order — far further afield than the tree's traditional Mediterranean domain. Now it seems to be Asia's turn to fall for this golden, apparently magical liquid, which has become so strongly associated with maintaining good health.

It is now widely believed by doctors that olive oil — which is high in beneficial mono-unsaturated fat but low in harmful saturated and polyunsaturated fat — can help to lower the potentially lethal LDL cholesterol thought to lead to blocked arteries, which, in turn, all too often lead to heart attacks and strokes.

In Asia, this view has generated a new interest in the oil, which has hitherto had little to do with regional diets, although the first records of olives in China date back to the third century AD and the country has an estimated 20 million olive trees — around four times as many as France.

Olive soup is well established in Chinese medicine as a sore-throat remedy, but Chinese olives are otherwise an ingredient in only a limited number of

Chinese dishes, although they are popular with Thai and Malaysian chefs. As an expensive import from the Mediterranean with a distinctively foreign flavor, the oil has until recently had no role in Chinese cuisine at all, but as people become aware of its much-vaunted health benefits, it is beginning to play a bigger part in Asian lifestyles.

As a result, even Chinese chefs are beginning to look at it with a new curiosity. According to Tom Bennell, a director of Olives And Oils, which supplies top-quality olive oils and balsamic vinegar for tabletop use to the Marco Polo Hotels in Hong Kong, it is only a matter of time before it catches on as a cooking oil in Chinese kitchens.

"People here are becoming more aware that olive oil is good for them, and they like the taste, so consumption has gone up," says Bennell, who is also a qualified chef. "In the long run, people who are health-conscious will go that way."

As well as supplying many of Hong Kong's top restaurants, Olives And Oils, which is an offshoot of a successful London-based company founded by Bennell's brother, sells its Belazu range of olives, oils and vinegars to local supermarkets, and offers a large selection of fresh olives at the Great food hall in Pacific Place.



"People are eating more olives, and they're experimenting," Bennell observes. "There's an olive with chili that people seem to really like; on the other hand, we have one with garlic that doesn't go over so well with Chinese customers. They're an acquired taste, so it will take time."

A

According to Peter Pfister, Director of Food and Beverage for Marco Polo Hongkong Hotel, the hotel is using more olive oil for cooking purposes in its Western food and beverage outlets, and it is a popular condiment on the buffet tables, often mixed with balsamic vinegar for dipping, or as salad dressing.

"Here, it's developing a following because of the choices in our leading shopping malls," he explains. "The choices are so much bigger now. Before, you were looking at two or three different olive-oil options — now you can find 50 or more. It's coming from everywhere. Before, you just had it from Italy. Now it's coming from Greece and Cyprus — from Australia even."

Another factor is probably the continuing vogue for Italian restaurants in the more cosmopolitan Asian cities. Olive

oil for dipping has become a fashionable taste. Pfister has reservations, however, about its chances of replacing the other traditional edible oils in Hong Kong's Chinese kitchens any time soon, pointing out that much Cantonese food depends on flash-frying.

"At those very high temperatures it burns," he points out. "You cannot use it in a wok, because it turns black." Nevertheless, as Chinese chefs increasingly experiment with the tastes and techniques not just of other Chinese regions but with those of other countries, olive oil is finding a place on the kitchen shelf alongside the traditional edible oils.

On the Chinese mainland it is also making its way into an increasing number of homes, thanks to a growing presence on the shelves of supermarket chains such as Carrefour. According to the China Vegetable Oil Association, in 2004 a mere 3,000 tons of olive oil were consumed in China, but the figure for 2005 is believed to have risen by around 50 percent, and the International Olive Oil Council, which represents the interests of most of the major olive-oil-producing countries, expects China to become the world's largest consumer of olive oil within the next 10 years.

Most of that oil will be imported —

It is from fields like these that Spanish olive-oil producers such as Marques de Valdueza derive the raw material for their "liquid gold". The fruit is shown being harvested (below) before being sent to Marques de Valdueza for processing. The Spanish countryside is carpeted with olive groves and the oil that is manufactured from them is exported around the world.



"Limited and not conclusive scientific evidence suggests that eating about two tablespoons (23 grams) of olive oil daily may reduce the risk of coronary heart disease due to the mono-unsaturated fat in olive oil."

Chinese olives fetch better prices unpressed — but bulk shipments of olive oil from other producers are already being bottled in China, and new trees are being planted with a view to future oil production. Last November (2005), a new Chinese brand, Soliva, was introduced offering Extra Virgin Olive Oil and cheaper "pure" olive oil to shops and restaurants in the big cities. Among premium-priced edible oils, olive oil already commands 90 percent of sales.

Its following is also growing elsewhere in Asia. Japan currently imports 32,000 tons per year, and the International Olive Oil Council has been encouraging Japanese chefs to experiment further with it. After all, if something as distinctively French as foie gras can be used for sushi, why shouldn't olive oil have a place in a Japanese kitchen?

G

Good olive oil is readily to be found in smart Western restaurants in cities such as Bangkok, Singapore, Manila, Jakarta and Kuala Lumpur, and most aficionados love it for the taste, but it is primarily the health benefits that have made it so sought-after.

These are proclaimed more enthusiastically in some quarters than others. The full extent of the claims pertaining to health that can be made on bottle labels in the United States were spelled out under a 2004 ruling from the US Food and Drug Administration government agency:

"Limited and not conclusive scientific evidence suggests that eating about two tablespoons (23 grams) of olive oil daily may reduce the risk of coronary heart disease due to the mono-unsaturated fat in olive oil. To achieve this possible benefit, olive oil is to replace a similar amount of saturated fat and not increase the total number of calories you eat in a day."

There have been more extravagant claims, some dating back to ancient times. "With the sprig of a fruited olive, man is purified in extreme health," wrote the Ancient Roman poet Virgil, while American Founding Father Thomas Jefferson declared effusively that "The olive tree is surely the richest gift of Heaven."

The International Olive Oil Council is more specific in its claims. According to the Council, the oil, which contains nine calories per gram, is made up of 75 percent oleic acid and is rich in vitamin E, beta carotene and other anti-oxidants.

In addition to the well-publicized benefits of the mono-unsaturated fat in lowering LDL cholesterol, the council claims that inclusion of olive oil in a balanced, healthy diet benefits blood circulation and the workings of the digestive and endocrinal systems, as well as helping to moderate the effects of ageing on skin, bones and the brain. It is even thought to help protect against certain cancers, and the effects of radioactivity. For the latter reason, astronauts take it.

Possibly Solon of Athens was right when he pronounced in the fifth or sixth century BC that "The olive fruit is the greatest cure for any problem of life."

Peter Pfister is a fan. He also points out that recognition of the health benefits of olive oil has developed in parallel with a similar understanding of the advantages of moderate consumption of wine. Olive country, in the Mediterranean and elsewhere, tends also to be wine country.

"I like unfiltered olive oil, and I buy normally from Italy. I just like the taste. I buy from a wine shop, actually. A lot of wineries grow olives and produce olive oil, and if you are importing the wine it doesn't cost much to ship in a few extra cases of olive oil. People have started realizing that it's a good product and doesn't harm your health — unless you



Know your oils

THE BIGGEST OLIVE-OIL PRODUCER in the world is Spain, and it is also the country from which much of the olive oil labeled as "imported from Italy" actually comes. That wording merely indicates that it was bottled there.

Italy produces about half as much olive oil as Spain, Greece produces about half as much as Italy, and Turkey and Syria each produce about half as much as Greece.

The other significant but much smaller producers are Tunisia, Morocco and Portugal. Small-scale, mostly artisanal production, often related to vineyards, takes place in France — once, although no longer, a major producer — the United States and Australia.

The major grades of the oil are Olive Oil, Virgin Olive Oil and Extra Virgin Olive Oil.

The highest quality is Extra Virgin, which must have no more than 0.8 percent acidity, comes from the first pressing of the olives, and is suitable for table use. It is also thought to convey the greatest health benefits.

Virgin Oils, usually from the second pressing, can have up to two percent acidity, and may be used at the table or for cooking.

Straightforward Olive Oil is blended from Virgin Olive Oil and chemically treated or "refined" Olive Oil. It is permitted to have a maximum acidity of one percent, but typically has less flavor and aroma than Virgin Oil. It is, however, suitable for cooking, and although some of its health benefits may be reduced by heating, it is cholesterol-free and remains high in mono-unsaturated fat. "Pure" Olive Oil is merely regular Olive Oil, and inferior to Virgin Olive Oil. ■

