

THE OLIVE OIL BETWEEN MYTH AND HYSTORY

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The olive oil has always been considered a historical, cultural and social peculiarity of the Mediterranean peoples. The olive tree and its cultivation has its origins in the myth of the dispute between Palade Athena, Zeus' daughter, and Poseidon, God of the sea, for the supremacy of the Attic. In fact the myth tells that Zeus had to decide which of the two Gods deserved the honour to build a temple on the Acropolis, symbol of the local power, therefore he launched a challenge where he was the judge: the one who offered men the most useful gift, would be the winner. Poseidon gave the men the horse, which had a key-role in the development of civilization; but Zeus designed Athena as winner, as she planted on olive tree on the Acropolis. Apart from this fascinating myth, the olive cultivation is far older. In the italic land fossil leaves and nuts were found together with small stone mortars where they were smashed; they were dated back to the V Millenium b.C. Furthermore epigraphic eastern sources dated back to III Millenium b.C. allowed to discover a wild variety, the "Olea Oleaster" a plant similar to our "Olea Sativa", used in the field of food, in the cosmetic one as fuel for lamps and for the mummification of corpses, in Egypt. Some laws regarding the olive oil-trade are witnessed also in the codex of Hammurabi (XIX – XVIII cent.b.C.). in the first Millenium; thanks to the Greek and the Phoenix,

the oil trade spread in the Mediterranean area. The oil was exported into vases of goatskin, the pithoi, from Crete, to Egypt and to Greece. Here the olive twigs were used to prepare decorating meats for the Royal tombs. But in I century b.C. the Romans gave a fundamental impulse to the olive cultivation, first in Italy, afterwards in Spain finally along the coasts of North-Africa. From this above mentioned wild plant called “Oleaster”, the “Olea Sativa” was created. This means “cultivated” ; then the “Olea Europea Sativa”, a cultivar that quickly adapted to the Mediterranean climate. Under the Romans the oil trade reached such an economic importance that the exchanges were regulated through the use of rules comparable to our customs. The abundance of olive oil production is to be found also in literature: in fact the Latin poet Plautus tells that the olive oil merchants created a League to defend their interests, while the workers of the oil mills joined into corporations. In the II century this sector collapsed because of the abandon of fields of the expert hand workers, substituted by slaves and because of the first barbaric invasions. A long period of non-cultivation followed, that had a new life during the Middle-age, over all in the central part of Italy. In fact here the Medici family gave the Commons the possibility to rent the peasants some areas on the hills at low prices, on condition that they cultivated them with olive-fields or vine yards. In this way the fortalice cellars were created: nowadays they still exist in Tuscany. Later the Republic of Venice established a price- hierarchy of the oil on the basis of its quality. Towards the end of 1700 the olive-cultivation became a specialized cultivation and the oil began to be exported all over the world. Today the olive-trees covered surface is a million hectares: an estate composed of 15 million plants.

In the history...the oil has reached the range of symbolic food since it was discovered, and with the passing of time it has been given a different meaning; sometimes with a mystic value. Nowadays we use the olive oil because it is good and it is considered the healthiest dressing. But in the field of food fats there is really a wide choice. Among these there is only one with a nourishing value and a “dignity” to be compared to the olive oil: butter. Oil and butter characterize two kinds of diet, two cultures, two areas of influence, North and South, where South is the symbol of the Mediterranean, the Sun; Greek and Roman civilizations, that is to say the cradle of western civilization.

The oil of the pharaohs: thanks to some archeological finds, we know that oil was already traded in Egypt before the XIX dynasty. The olive twigs, probably coming from Caucaso, decorated the tombs of the Pharaohs and they were taken to the Afterlife by this symbol of life and fertility. But even before, in 2500 b.C., the Babylonian Codex by Hammurabi regulated the production and trade of the olive oil. The Phoenix and the Carthaginians traded oil and olive trees all over the Mediterranean. In Greece this food, that is dressing, medicine and cosmetic, was thought to have a divine origin. According to a well-known myth in the Hellas the olive-tree was a gift from Athena, the Roman Minerva who fought against Poseidon for the supremacy in the Attic. The two, before a tribunal made of Gods chaired by Zeus made a challenge offering Athena a gift. Poseidon made a sea-water pool appear: it was the symbol of Athens’s ruling power onto the sea. Instead Athena hit the ground with a spear and an olive-tree appeared. Zeus and the others had no doubts: Athena was designated as the protector of Athens.

The tree of Minerva – Apollo and Artemides were born under an olive tree. Aristeos, Apollo's son knew from the Ninphes how to plant the wild olive to have an abundant harvest and he taught the men to smash the olives to have some oil. Everybody was grateful to him, the Greek as first, but also the Sicilians and the Sardinians because they learned the olive cultivation from him according to the legend. Actually the olive-tree arrived in Italy with the Greek colonists and already in the VII century b.C. the Etruscan had wide plantations. The sacred value of the olive oil is witnessed both in Rome and in Athens. Homer tells us how Ulysses built his wedding bed with the wood of a big olive-tree. There is no writer from the Classical Age that did not talk about the oil and its cultivation.

Homer's oil mills – How was oil extracted in that age? In the island of Santorin a very old oil-mill was found, dated back to the Mycenaean age. It is composed of a concave stone where the olives lay, and a convex stone falling and smashing them. The olive compound was put in baskets placed one on top of the other; these pushed one on the other letting some liquid out, composed by vegetation water and smashed olives. After some time of decantation the oil came out. There were also similar techniques with stone containers to fill with olives hit by sticks or similar utensils. When the Roman civilization was at its top the olive cultivation was one of the most developed branches of agriculture: there were a dozen variety of olive-trees.

Omnium plantarum prima: during the Imperial Age the oil was abundant it had a gold price and it was distributed free, as bread, to the poorest. The "oil negotiators" were traders who were used to oil-trading, the so-called "green gold" and they joined into importers' corporations. The exchanges of the olives took place in the so-called "Oraca Olearia"

that was a sort of specialized stock exchange. The works dealing with agriculture, from Cato to the Georgics, gave lots of advice on oil production. Nothing was made by chance: from the most adapt varieties to pruning, from the harvest- period to the olive- pressing techniques. The most surprising thing is that a lot of these teachings are still used as for example green-olive-hand picking, that according to Cato, Pliny and Columella, just to quote only some sources, was the best system to obtain top-quality oil, “ex albis ulivis”. Then there was the oil with more intense colour, coming from the olives of the “invaiatura” period. A bit lower there was the ripe-olive oil, made of olives picked up during the winter. Less precious but cheaper were the oils made of olives fallen down to the ground or caught by parasites: they were generally addressed to slaves’ feeding. The winning emperors and the generals in the moment of triumph decorated their heads with olive-twigs, symbolizing the “Pax Romana”. But the homelands of the oil aren’t Rome or Athens.

The oil in the Bible - This is a role claimed also by Israel. Wasn’t the first olive tree born by a seed fallen from Paradise on Adam’s tomb, on the top of Tabor mountain? Even for the Jews it was a gift by God: in this culture the ointment has a religious meaning, a sort of nomination, reserved to kings and priests. As for the symbol of peace and hope, how can’t we think of the olive twig that the dove took to Noah at the end of the Flood? The olive, just like grapes, has always been something more than a simple fruit. The Christians realized it at the beginning, in fact they took all the positive images linked to the olive-tree and to the oil, thus transforming it in one of the first symbols of their religion. If the first Christians fought the pagan cult of the trees, the olive tree was reinforced . Jesus spent his last hours praying in the Gethsemane olive-field, that can be visited still today and has some of the oldest olive-trees.

From Jerusalem to Rome- This is enough to let tradition survive. Thanks to the religious orders after the year 1000 the olive tree is a spread and important cultivation. The olive fields are increasing all over Italy, over all in Tuscany, where trading middle-class discovered the oil production and trade as an important economic source. The Northern markets welcomed the precious oil, and while new olive-trees were planted in Italy, Genoa and Venice started to track this noble dressing by sea. The inhabitants from Liguria encouraged this cultivation in their homeland, in Provence and in Spain. They were imitated by Venetians who planted these olive-trees in Apulia, Dalmatia and all over the isles of the Mediterranean. The actual plantations in Calabria, Campania, Abruzzo, Sicily and Lazio are dated back to the same period.

The oil of the caliphs – The olive tree is present also in the Eastern part of the Mediterranean. The Arabians were the most important researches of the Middle age. Their techniques of olive-pressing and smashing were really new, and under the Arabian dominion Spain became a big oil producer, as in all the eastern and North-African countries. In the middle of the XV century a Spanish viceroy built some roads to connect Naples to Apulia, Calabria and Abruzzi just to ease the oil trade. At the end of the century Venice moved huge quantities all over Europe. In the second decade of 1600, another Spanish viceroy let 50 masters in the art of plantation come to Sardinia from Palma de Majorca. Each of them taught to some students, and these, on their turn, to others. With this expedient and with a law allowing the property of the olive-tree to those who planted them, this careful viceroy pushed the production of oil in the region.

Pope's incentive: In the decade between 1830 and 1840, thanks to a politics of incentives, in Umbria, part of the State of the Church, about 40 thousand trees were planted. Since then, up to today, the Italian olive-cultivation (depending on freezing weather) continued to increase both in quantity and in quality. The techniques have changed. Some less productive olive fields have been planted again, and the mechanization of picking in some areas is a reality. The introduction of new pressing techniques, together to the anticipated picking-time, created a big and wide-spread quality improvement. Today the olive is spread in the most Italian regions and in the most countries of the Mediterranean.

Eight million olive trees – The Italian emigrants tried to spread the olive-trees in other continents, precisely in the temperate area, the one between the 30th and the 45th Northern parallel and to the corresponding area of the Southern part of the world. Oil is produced in USA, Chile, and Argentina, in South-Africa in the Far East in Russia and in Ukraine. Australia and New Zealand seem to have adapt zones and some experiments are already on. But over 90% of eight million existing plants are cultivated in the Mediterranean area and among the producers, Italy is an absolute protagonist. The Italian oil has had a great qualitative increase in the last years, and the consumers have contributed to it. There are not only experts to distinguish a spicy oil from a fruity oil, an oil from Liguria and one from Tuscany, between an oil for roasted bread (bruschetta) and an oil for fish. Even if it is true that we aren't the only producer-country of olive oil, the Italian oil of the above areas has no rivals in the world. Even if the world doesn't only look.....

The Mediterranean diet today....

A food model implying tradition, socialization, balance: the term “ diet” is used to define food-habits and the organization of more kinds of food within a certain time. If a diet is correctly followed, one can have the most advantages for health and fitness. Some diets raging far from the advised standard given by the official science, can cause serious damages to our health. These damages can be perceived even months or years later and they are hardly connected to our wrong diet(osteoporosis, anaemia, digestion, galls, hormonal problems,...). In some cases weight can be lost , but soon after it can be assumed again, even much more than before. A diet is basically a lifestyle, a food model to be led all life long, thus avoiding troubles with the organization of meals and health problems. A people’s food-culture is strictly bound to a certain geographic area and to the climate, to the tradition and personal and economic conditions. Today’s Italian food-style has kept just a few aspects of the Mediterranean diet, characterized by natural food without any chemical additives. Except for some food necessary to be stored for the winter season (pork, jams or fruit kept in well aired cellars), all the other food was once consumed fresh or stored only for some days. The recipe that best matches this model is certainly “ pasta e fagioli”(a soup with beans and pasta), one of the most typical peasants’ dishes. In fact pulses have always been defined as” the meat for poor people”. If pasta is hand-made with eggs this dish can provide proteins, glycols, precious minerals, vitamins and fibres. So the Mediterranean diet is not only composed by pasta and bread. First of all wholemeal bread is used together with pasta(made not only with durum wheat) but also with cereals. A particular space is dedicated to pulses. Just a little meat is advised, particularly the so-called white meat and the Mediterranean

fish. Just a few fats with particular regard to extra virgin olive oil. A lot of fresh vegetables and fruit, with some wine. A further characteristic is the great variety of products with the possibility to match a neverending variety of tastes and flavours, for every single need. The list of the recipes is practically infinite, uncountable if related to local habits and traditions. But the Mediterranean diet implies also physical exercise. The last-century peasants and workers made hand-works all day long and they walked or used non-motorized means of transport. That's why they needed a sufficient and constant energetic support, over all made of glycols. The so-called 'only-dish', made of first and second courses matched together, were one of the main characteristics of this diet. Beyond "pasta and fagioli" (and all the soups made with pulses), other examples are constituted by pasta and tomato-sauce with meat, with some cheese and extra virgin olive oil. Furthermore vegetable soup with pulses, Neapolitan pizza with sardines, mozzarella (a type of fresh cheese) and tomato, etc. The meal was enriched by a good glass of wine and some fresh vegetable and fruit. All the Mediterranean countries have different kinds of food-styles, matching some similarities. About 50 years ago prof. Ancel Keys' staff led a detailed study comparing the food-style of USA, Japan, Italy, Greece, Yugoslavia, Holland and Finland. 12000 people aged between 40 and 59 years were taken into consideration and divided into 14 sample-groups. The study revealed that the death-rate for cardio-diseases was sharp inferior among Mediterranean people. The higher death-rate of other populations was meant to be due to the use of saturated fats as butter red meat etc...

Further studies have all confirmed these data, so far.

Italy as EU leader for PDO and PGI products – the Italians as people of Saints, poets, sailors and Producers of food with the

denomination of origin. Coming to today's history, according to the socio-economic observatory of Qualitylife'foundation, with a publication collecting all the certified products, Italy is a European leader as number of PDO, PGI and STG products with 175 denominations, 13% more than two years ago, before France (160) and Spain (121). Not always these numbers mean success, according to the observatory launching a warning: 90% billing and 93% production of this section is due to the first ... PDO, GPI products. The remaining 160 products collect over the crumbs of a sector billing more than €5,5 milliard per year for the production and € 10 milliard to the consumption, and that has never stopped so far, but has always developed even abroad especially for the Italian so-called "made in Italy" food. The key- product for the third year is "Grana Padano" covering 37,76% of the value of consumption in this sector. The Grana is followed by Parmigiano Reggiano and Prosciutto di Parma. At the top of the Italian Regions with most certified products there is Emilia Romagna, followed by Lombardy. Among the successful places there isn't only the Northern area but even the Southern with the Oliva Bella della Ramnia PDO, coming from Apulia, that exported 80% of the total certified production in 2007 with 90% increase of the exported quantities compared to the preceding year. For the first time the Atlantis Qualivita (Qualitylife), "an instrument of scientific information in the agro food field", according to its authors, this year will be published in the bookshops as a leader of a new book-collection.