Untold Italy Episode 347: Olive Oil Lovers Guide to Italian Flavor and Heritage

When we think of Italian food, olive oil immediately springs to mind. It is a staple of Italian cuisine and the olive harvest is an important tradition in italy. Families and producers across the country are gathering right now to pick olives and crush them for the coveted liquid gold that will sustain them for the coming year. Today we are learning all about the magic and importance of olive oil to Italian culture and cuisine.

Ciao a tutti and Benvenuti to Untold Italy, the travel podcast, where you go to the towns and villages, mountains and lakes, hills and coastlines of Bella Italia. Each week, your host Katy Clarke takes you on a journey in search of magical landscapes of history, culture, wine, gelato, and, of course, a whole lot of pasta. If you're dreaming of Italy and planning future adventures there, you've come to the right place.

Katy Clarke:
Where would Italy be without olive oil? It's difficult to stay. This delicious liquid has not only been important in regional Italian food and cooking but has had many other applications over many centuries as we will learn today. Italian olive oil differs from other oils produced across Europe and is a source of pride from region to region - from Sicily and Puglia in the south to Tuscany and Umbria in central Italy and as far north as the Veneto region and the shores of Lake Garda.

Joining me today to learn more is olive oil expert and president of online olive oil destination Olive Oil Lovers, Joanne Licina. Since her first adventures in Europe as a young adult, Joanne's interest in small producers has helped her develop a refined palate for olive oil and a passion for bringing the really good drops to people who appreciate the care and attention that these producers bring in creating a superior oil. So andiamo. Let's dive into the wonderful world of Italian olive oil.

Katy Clarke:
Benvenuta! Welcome to the Untold Italy podcast, Joanne. It is very much my pleasure to be here. Thank you, Katy, for having me. Oh, I'm so thrilled to have you on the show, Joanne, today, because I can't believe that after 340 episodes, we haven't had one yet dedicated to olive oil. But here we are. We finally got there and it's right in the middle of olive harvest season in Italy too, which is exciting.

Katy Clarke:
But before we dive into all of that and the wonderful world of extra virgin olive oil, um, why don't you let our listeners know a little bit about yourself and your company, Olive Oil Lovers?

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Joanne Lacina:
Uh, so I'm Joanne Lacina. I'm the president of Olive Oil Lovers here in the US, and I have been in the olive oil industry for an official 20 years now. Uh, it's hard to believe. And I first came to be in this industry when I kind of did that post-college, 20 years old, trying to figure life out. You know, want to go travel and see the world. I was working a desk job in Minneapolis, Minnesota for a couple of years and just thought, oh, I got to see what else is out there. So I hightailed it to the island of Crete in Greece, which was kind of random. There just happened to be a course there teaching English I thought I would take and then go travel.

Joanne Lacina:
And I turned out making a lot of friends right off the bat. And just fell in love with the island, with its people, with the culture, with the food, and very much the olive oil. I don't think anyone on the planet consumes more olive oil than the Greeks. This is, I think, a fact. And they just pour it on everything, and it's just, it's such a part of being in Crete year-round, and you're surrounded by beautiful, beautiful, you know, silver shimmering olive trees. And the harvest season is in the fall, and you get to see farmers harvesting their trees all throughout the countryside, bringing it to the local mill, eating it, you know, fresh out of the tap, so to speak, and just pouring it all over everything all the time, every day. And it was just - obscene in a wonderful way when I was living there, and it tasted so delicious, like nothing else I'd ever had growing up in the United States. And so I was very intrigued and kind of started going down the path of exploration, which turned into much more traveling, meeting more producers, tasting, building my palate, and, you know, eventually coming back to the US and launching an e-commerce website to bring all this fantastic olive oil to home consumers in the United States.

Joanne Lacina:
Because you just, you just weren't finding these kinds of really unique, special, special oils in, in the everyday supermarkets. And I just wanted to, to explore the opportunity to see if people would, you know, buy olive oil online. And, and they certainly did, and they still do, and we're growing every day. And here we are. 20 years later.

Katy Clarke:
Amazing. You've actually got some qualifications and formal training in olive oil tasting, haven't you?

Joanne Lacina:
I do. I, I was, um, first formally trained in Liguria, Italy, uh, in a town called Imperia by ONAOO. That's O-N-A-O-O, which still offers, um, really fantastic, fantastic educational courses today, and that was in 2011. And, you know, up until that point, I was just really passionate about the product. So it was really, really very interesting and intriguing to learn what goes into making olive oil taste so great, how to really assess and taste olive oil and smell it, and looking for defective and positive qualities in the oil, learning how mechanical machinery and harvest time, you know, when the olive ripens, how all of these little factors contribute to the resulting oil. It was just really fascinating to me. And then I did another

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course here in New York in the US in 2017, kind of on a whim. It was the Extra Virgin Olive Oil Savantes, which I had heard the rumor was it was the most difficult class on the planet.

Joanne Lacina:
And I thought, well, let's go and do it. Yeah, Simon, who's running the course for some decades now, he's Australian, and he was conducting the class in New York. And it was a 3-day course with a very, very challenging exam. 90-minute exam on the last day that I miraculously, surprised myself, got a perfect score on, which had never been done in the history of the Extra Virgin Olive Oil Savantes. I thought he was joking when he said we have a first-time scorer here, because just to be a Savantes, you have to get, I think it's maybe 25 out of 30 points, and it's very, very difficult to get those, even that score. A lot of people retake the course again and again to try to get a higher score. And so that was quite shocking to me. You know, I was a female American, didn't grow up in the olive trees, and was able to accomplish that.

Joanne Lacina:
And so that kind of - that was quite surprising. And I run this company and I taste oils every day and I travel all around the world and visit all the producers and I'm very, very, very hands-on. So I'm happy to stand by the products that we sell. And the people who make them.

Katy Clarke:
It sounds like a dream job to me, going around tasting different olive oils. And I think one thing that people may not realize if they've only tasted olive oil from the supermarket is just the variety and the different types of olive oil that you can have. Like, some can be extremely peppery, some can be more fruity. And yeah, I think it's amazing that you've been able to develop your palate such that you can achieve that perfect score on that test. Amazing.

Joanne Lacina:
Yes, that was amazing. You know, one of the aspects, one of the parts of the exam was varietal identification, smelling and tasting the oil and identifying what variety of olive and region that it comes from, because most varieties are very regional-specific. And, you know, as we know, as you know, Italy has hundreds of varieties of olives, probably more than its neighboring countries. And there's very unique flavor profiles to each variety of olives, so it can get really - you can get really nerdy about it, just like wine. You know, like wine sommeliers, there's olive oil sommeliers as well.

Katy Clarke:
Yeah, it's so interesting. I love it. And people are so passionate about their olive oil. I know in Italy, wherever you go, every village, every region, every town, they always say they have the best olive oil. And they have, they bring the receipts to prove it, don't they?

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Joanne Lacina:
Everyone, everyone's village has the best oil for sure. And I never, I never deny it when I'm told that, because I'm sure they do.

Katy Clarke:
So olive oil just goes back millennia as one of the staple foods of the Mediterranean. And so what's a little bit of a background to olive oil, and, and why is it so important to Italians in particular?

Joanne Lacina:
Uh, well, the Italians have been handling olive oil, I will say, for thousands of years, and that's quite incredible. And when I, when I just think about that in my head after being there and traveling around, it's amazing to me to think of all these civilizations before us that were growing and harvesting olives, eating them, using the oil in their rituals, in their sports, in the Olympics, and in their churches for fuel. And it was so highly traded amongst all these civilizations. So I just imagine these ships full of, you know, the big clay pots of vats of olive oil, you know, sailing across the Mediterranean from Italy to Greece to Spain. It's kind of a - just has a really magical history that is still here with us today. And there's olive trees all around the Mediterranean, some that are said to be more than 1,000 years old. And, you know, when you see a tree that is said to be more than 1,000 years old in person, it's almost a spiritual experience. You just wonder what this tree has seen and been through and who's harvested its olives over the hundreds of years.

Joanne Lacina:
And it's really a life-giving tree. And today, culturally, it remains a significant part of the culture. If you think about right now what's happening in Italy, you know, in this autumn season. Everyone is so excited, so excited. Uh, you know, they look at their trees, they're almost ready to harvest, and when they are, they're going out and picking the olives, taking them straight to the mill, uh, sticking a cup under the centrifuge as it's coming out, this fresh, bright green oil, with huge smiles on their faces, crossing themselves with the oil, as one of my producers in Lazio sent me a video the other day, and blessing the first oil of the harvest. And they're going to take that straight to their tables for dinner with their grandparents and cousins and children and pour that all over their food, pour it on a fresh piece of bread, and truly, truly celebrate the beginning of the harvest season. So, it's really a wonderful cultural thing to be a part of.

Katy Clarke:
And it's the longevity of it, I think. You know, if we think about it going back 1,000 years at least, and these trees that are over 1,000 years old. It's something that maybe in our cultures, in our modern cities, we can't really appreciate so much because it's something that's very traditional and it's been repeated season after season. And it does something to their culture and the people, I think. And the people are so proud of what they produce. And I know that you work with some pretty interesting people that are so passionate about their produce all over Europe, but in Italy as well.

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Joanne Lacina:
It's true. And I always say, like, even if you're Italian, uh, you know, Greek or Spanish, you know, but especially Italian, if you don't have an olive grove, then certainly your cousin, your uncle, your grandfather, someone does. And you probably have some olive oil that you bring back home with you and, you know, 5-liter cans when you go visit. It's such a close part of every Italian, even if you're living in Rome or Milan. I think you have some tie to olive oil.

Katy Clarke:
So Italian olive oil, what's different about it to Spanish or Greek olive oil? I know there's like 500 or so, maybe there's hundreds of varieties. Who knows how many olives there are? But is there a difference between Italian olive oil and olive oil from, say, Spain or Greece, or even, you know, the other side of the Mediterranean over in the Middle East?

Joanne Lacina:
Italy is the 2nd largest producer after Spain. So they produce quite a bit of oil, especially in the region of Puglia is the largest production region. And then you also have Calabria and Sicily. The southern regions produce quite a bit. And yes, there's over 500 varieties of olives grown in Italy, and over 300 of those olives are what we call olive oil producing olives. So, some are just - will just be table olives, let's say, and some maybe will just be used for oil. Some can be used for both, and that really is just dependent on the amount of oil that you can extract from the olive itself. So, if you can only get, let's say, a few drops out of the olive and not much oil, but it has a sweet flesh, you know, a lot of flesh, then that would likely be brined for a table olive.

Joanne Lacina:
So, it's quite remarkable that there's truly hundreds of olive varieties in Italy that you can produce olive oil from, as opposed to Greece, let's say, that has, you know, one big dominant variety called Koroneiki, and then, you know, a handful of others. Other regional varieties throughout Greece. Spain has a handful, maybe 5 really dominant varieties that they're producing oil from in Spain. And again, you know, a handful of hyper-local varieties. Whereas in Italy, every region has a multitude of very region-specific varieties. If you tell me a region, I'll tell you what varieties they're growing in that region that are not typically grown elsewhere in Italy. You do see that a little bit, but they're very regional varieties.

Joanne Lacina:
And then you also have your hyper-local unique varieties within those regions as well. And each variety, like I said earlier, will have a different profile of flavor or even mouthfeel or viscosity, let's say. So, you'll have some olive varieties Northern Italy, Umbria, Tuscany, some varieties up there - Moraiolo, Frantoio, Leccino - especially Moraiolo can have a lot of green, grassy, artichoke, bitter, really strong, pungent notes. And then you can go to Liguria there on the northern coast of the sea, and Taggiasca is a really fantastic - I love this variety. but it's really soft and gentle and tastes like apples and fruit, and it's just so lovely when it's really fresh. But it's not going to be as bitter and pungent and green. And then you can go all the

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way down to Sicily and have their Nocellara. There's Nocellara del Belice, Nocellara etnea from, you know, Mount Etna, and those will be kind of 2 different profiles of Nocellara, you know, from those 2 different areas, and, you know, you can get so many different flavor profiles.

Joanne Lacina:
If you just wanted to go travel from Italy from north to south, you could absolutely have a really exciting time tasting your way through Italy - Italy's regional olive oils. And interestingly, they also pair really well with the cuisines of that area. I find this all the time. You know, the cuisine has developed naturally over time to really complement the olive oils of those regions. So it's, you know, it's a really fun, fun thing to explore.

Katy Clarke:
Yeah, absolutely. I think one of the things that I've learned most about through this podcast and talking to different people in Italy and people passionate about Italy and Italian food is that, you know, regionality and also the how the wine, the olive oil, the food, it's all symbiotic. It works together. Like they're always trying to balance those flavors. So obviously in Liguria, they're using - or this is, I learned this from someone that we work with in Liguria, Enrica. She's a chef or home cook, and she does food tours. But she said, yeah, when we make the pesto, we're using a certain type of olive oil, a certain type of basil. And it's so interesting because, you know, we think, oh, it's just - whether you get a recipe, it says, oh, just get some basil, get some olive oil, and why doesn't it taste the same? Well, that's why.

Joanne Lacina:
Yeah, if only recipes - I would love to see the day when recipes actually specify an olive oil type in the recipe. It makes a huge difference in the - especially as a finishing oil where it's really going to shine and come through the dish. It's going to make a very big difference if you're using a spicy, strong, grassy Moraiolo from Tuscany versus that softer, sweeter Taggiasca. And, you know, I personally, for basil pesto, nothing is better than a Sicilian Nocellara. That is my go-to when I'm making pesto. And I would love to see that in a recipe, you know, for pesto, Sicilian Nocellara extra virgin olive oil, because that's going to be the best and complement those flavors to a T.

Katy Clarke:
Yeah, absolutely. Yeah. It's so fascinating to me how different they can be. It really is. Now. So I think the other thing to point out is that you have a lot of small producers that you work with. What's the difference between something that's produced at in a smaller volume to

Joanne Lacina:
There's a very big difference, and I think people, a lot of people kind of want to, want to know as well, well, okay, I have these classic brands I see in every, in every supermarket that I've, you know, been using in my kitchen at home. Why should I, you know, buy a bottle of one of these, maybe, you know, more expensive Italian oils, let's say? And it really comes down to how it's made and how it's produced, how the trees are cared for, and in Italy especially, it's

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very common to see more family-run operations, so it's quite small. There's a producer in Calabria, Librandi. It's the Librandi family. This is a great example. When I went to go visit them in Calabria, and they lived in this house with this... you know, big, big house, lots of rooms. Nonna lived there, the grandkids lived there, you know, the brothers lived there. It was just, you know, it was a whole family affair.

Joanne Lacina:
And the mill was downstairs where they were crushing the olives. And, you know, so I'm walking around their small mill just amongst their olive groves. So you can just walk out the door and they're, you know, and you're surrounded by all these olive trees. So they're quite literally living in an olive grove. With their own olive mill below their multi-family apartments. And, you know, the matriarch, the grandmother, served us the most wonderful lunch. You know, all these just traditional foods, just a full spread on the table. And, you know, we're of course pouring the oil all over everything.

Joanne Lacina:
And, you know, this is what you're getting in a bottle of Librandi, let's say. I mean, this is truly hand-picked from their own trees by their own hands, driven straight to their mill, you know, just down the road from the groves, crushed the very same day. Very, very important for quality. They're watching everything. They're, you know, they're tasting, they're ensuring that the quality is the absolute best of the best. If the quality is not best of the best, they do not put it in their bottle with their name on it. And they stand behind the quality of their products. And so it really comes down to the time and effort that it takes to pick the olives from the trees and, you know, the personal care that goes into the oil that's inside the bottle.

Joanne Lacina:
Supermarket brands, it's just, it's a different level of quality, and you're working with larger companies that are sourcing, they're sourcing oil from multi-countries. It's not uncommon to look at the back label of a product and see product of Greece, Italy, Tunisia, Morocco. You know, it's from anywhere. And so these oils, think of it being treated as just a very, like a mutt. It could be of any, you know, of any of these origins from any variety. A lot of bottles may not even have a harvest date on it, so you're not even sure which harvest date this is. Think of a harvest date as the freshness date of the product. Olive oil is quite literally fruit juice.

Joanne Lacina:
So, you know, you buy a bottle of any kind of fruit juice, you don't save it for best in your fridge, do you? You consume it in good time to ensure that you're getting the freshest-tasting juice. And it's the same thing with olive oil. You know, fresh is best always. And when you're buying from these smaller producers, you're truly buying a piece of the family's heart, if you will. Truly, they really stand behind the products and they put all their, all their blood, sweat, and tears and joy into, into every bottle. And, um, and that's what you're getting from these producers.

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Katy Clarke:
100%. And I think when you have tasted something that's made in a small batch and handpicked and pressed the same day, and then you go back home and you taste what's new that you had to buy at the supermarket in a pinch because you'd forgotten to water in advance or didn't bring that tin home from Italy, um, I always do now, it tastes bland, you know. It doesn't have that flavor or the different nuances that you get when you have a small-produced oil. And I think once you've experienced the difference, it's very difficult to go back, actually, because now I've - I just got sent some oil from Umbria from a very small producer, and it's just, oh, it just sings in my mouth, and it just makes such a big difference to our cooking. The other thing that I was going to say is, yeah, I think that people don't really understand, or they've not been educated about that length of time that you need to consume that olive oil. So it's really good for, I think most people say, a year, right? So they don't like to push out oils that are older than a year. So the latest harvest is the best.

Joanne Lacina:
Fresh is always best with olive oil. However, if it's stored in dark glass in a cool place, completely sealed, not exposed to any light or oxygen, it can maintain its fresh fruity flavors up to 24 months. It could be 18 to 24 months. However, you know, like anything, that freshness, those really bold, fruity, powerful flavors just kind of will soften and wane over time, especially after opening, because now you're introducing oxygen. So, the more you're consuming of that bottle, the more oxygen that you're letting into the bottle, and so the kind of quicker it's going to oxidize. So, just, you know, I always encourage people to just use your olive oil very liberally. Don't save it for best. It's not, it's not a fine wine.

Joanne Lacina:
It is a fruit juice. So, you know, just feel very, very good about using it very liberally and quickly so that you can go ahead and open another, the next fresh bottle.

Katy Clarke:
Yeah. And it's good for you. Don't hold back. There's so many health benefits. I think everyone's heard of the Mediterranean diet and you know that it plays a fairly pivotal role in that. But I just wanted to circle back on the storage of the olive oil as well, because There's an Australian producer that's doing a very big advertising campaign on social media at the moment, and they've got this - it's driving me crazy - they've got this plastic squeezy bottle of their olive oil, and I'm like, hmmmm - having to really hold myself back from doing a snarky comment about that. It's like, it's, it's not a good idea to store your olive oil in plastic, is it?

Joanne Lacina:
No, it's quite interesting that that is a trend, uh, right now, but I, I will call it a trend, but it's not the best storage for olive oil, no. And I think we're moving away from plastic more and more. And, you know, it is more permeable. The oil will not stay as fresh as long in the plastic. You know, it's not the best for the environment, not the best for the oil itself as a packaging for consumable food. So, it's best to be avoided. Plus - you know, if you're producing - if you're putting your blood, sweat, and tears into the best olive oil you can make

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with you and your family, you are absolutely not going to put it in the worst packaging, you know, possible for it, which would be plastic.

Joanne Lacina:
You're going to put it in a, you know, in a glass bottle, tin, an opaque container to maintain that freshness for as long as you can. It's so important for the producers to ensure that the final consumer is tasting, you know, the best representative of their product. And so it's, it's also a little telling too, uh, you know, as people aren't putting their absolute best oil in a, you know, the, the best wineries in the world aren't going to one day decide to, to put their best wines in a, in a plastic wine bottle, are they? So personally, it's, it's better to avoid plastic-packed oil. Yes.

Katy Clarke:
I love some of the packaging that the Italian producers make for their olive oil. Like, it's so beautiful. You could just, you know, like, I covet it just for my kitchen, like, just as a showpiece, just not even, not even for the oil once it's finished. Because they do put, like, as you say, such care and attention not only into the oil but also into the packaging so that it actually reflects their, their history and their culture and their traditions.

Joanne Lacina:
Yeah, there's, there's some beautiful packaging coming out today. And, you know, it's become - I think a lot of the producers are so proud, like we said earlier, you know, "who makes the best olive oil?" "I do, in my village." You know, it's so - the pack - you know, I'm seeing a lot of packaging come out that's very reflective of kind of the very local culture of that region. And I see that with some olive oils coming out of Puglia especially. Just, you know, not only are they really proud about the oil inside, but the packaging itself tells the story of the land or the legends of their towns and their areas. And yeah, there's some really neat creative packaging out there for sure.

Katy Clarke:
Yeah, look, the people of Puglia, they've just got such a great sense of community. And I think that Pugliese olive oil was often considered to be that one that would get, you know, it was a mass-produced one that would get blended with, you know, other countries. But now there's some really great up-and-coming producers that are really proud of their indigenous olives and, you know, making some amazing varieties too. I think Puglia is definitely a region to watch for so many reasons. But yeah, the olive oil is fantastic.

Joanne Lacina:
Yeah, I didn't know what to think of Puglia before I went. It's not exactly on everyone's radar for, you know, where to go in Italy. Um, but I was so - I love Puglia. My memories of, you know, my trips there are just that it's so fertile. It's such a fertile region, and you'll be driving down the road and you'll see a field of artichokes on your left and potatoes on your right, and then here's some olive groves and here's, here's some, some grapevines, and it's just such a

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major, major farming culture there. And it's beautiful. The land is stunning. It's some of the most beautiful agricultural land for sure in all of Italy.

Joanne Lacina:
And it's magical that they can grow so much food in that area. And if you're growing so much food in that area, you're going to have some of the best meals you'll ever have in Puglia, hands down. I mean, I think I was just talking about the focaccia a couple of nights ago. You know, just dreaming of the focaccia, the best focaccia I ever had in Bari. Just crispy and oily. If the focaccia isn't, you know, leaving your hands full of delicious, you know, oozing olive oil, then it's not real focaccia. If you - if your hands don't get completely covered in oil eating your focaccia, then, you know, it's, it's not the real thing. Um, they do focaccia amazing there, and, and I, I just always thought, well, this is kind of cool that, you know, it's a little - to me, you know, 10 years ago especially, I thought, oh, you know, no one normally talks about like going to Puglia for a holiday or exploring this area.

Joanne Lacina:
But so it's a little - felt a little undiscovered- and a place that I still want to go back to and explore even more, especially in the summertime. I think, you know, often my producers there say, oh, we have the best beaches in all of Italy; you have to come in the summertime. I'm always going there in the harvest season. I need to get over there in the summertime for sure.

Katy Clarke:
There's good news though for that because there's now direct flights, I think, from New Jersey straight to Bari now. So it's not JFK, it's - what's the other one? LaGuardia. I think there's flights direct from LaGuardia. From - it's either JFK or LaGuardia straight into Bari. So you've got no excuses now. And that I can assure you that that focaccia is still the same and it's waiting for you because we just had some photos come back of everyone just going, "Oh my gosh, this is the best focaccia I've ever tasted!”

Joanne Lacina:
It haunts my dreams, that focaccia. Yes.

Katy Clarke:
I think it taunts mine too. I think I've got, like, you know, when you're trying to take the photo and you've got the oil dripping down, but you don't care. And you're like, why did I order - only order one slice? That was a mistake.

Joanne Lacina:
Yes. And that is something that - I'm so happy that in the last, in the 20 years that I've been in the olive oil, a big dream of mine, as I, you know, in those first few years, I had to have a mental transition about olive oil being a fat, right? That was good for you. And then, yes, you can actually consume it in liberal amounts. You know, I'm a child of, you know, the '90s where it was all just, you know, low-fat, no-fat everything, you know. Avoid drops of fat at all costs,

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or, you know, you'll put on all the weight. And so, when I was first, you know, living in Crete and just in horror watching the Greeks just... there'd be a, like, a Cretan salad with tomatoes and cucumbers and feta cheese, and then half a bottle of olive oil, just, you know, pouring it over for a whole minute until - you know, that was just floating in olive oil. And it's like, no, that's too much, it's too much, no, no, no, no, no. And the Greeks are like, ah, this is, this is what we do.

Joanne Lacina:
And then they dip their bread in the bowl and with all the juices, you know, collecting at the bottom, and it's the most delicious thing ever. And then I had to learn to just let go and accept that, you know, you look around the whole Mediterranean and everyone, you know, just looks so fantastically fit and slim and trim. And, you know, the Mediterranean diet, you wonder what's their secret and how can they when they eat all this pasta and all this olive oil. And, and I really had to move away from that kind of fear of eating fat. And I'm glad that I think the trend has moved away from that quite considerably. We've now realized that natural fats are in fact very good for us and they are in fact and nutrient that our body needs, and especially olive oil. To me personally, you can eat it in full liberal amounts. Don't hold back.

Joanne Lacina:
It's olive fruit juice. Don't worry about it. It makes all your food delicious. And, you know, so eat that focaccia that's dripping in extra virgin olive oil. Don't worry about it. Just wipe your hands on a napkin afterwards. And it's all good.

Katy Clarke:
What's good for your skin too.

Joanne Lacina:
It is, it is. Yeah. I mean, it's, it's good.

Katy Clarke:
And your hair.

Joanne Lacina:
And, and your nails and all the things. Absolutely. Yeah.

Katy Clarke:
Well, you mentioned a couple of producers, but one thing that I was really interested in, um, when we first started talking with you guys is that we noticed that you had one of our producers that we visit on our Tuscany tour, Pruneti, that has got some really lovely experiences if you're in Italy to have a try of their oil. And are there any other producers that are offering similar experiences that you work with?

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Joanne Lacina:
There are. There's quite a few who do offer some tours and tasting experiences. I do have to mention Mandranova on the southern coast of Sicily. They are wonderful. They have an agriturismo with accommodation, and Silvia and Giuseppe, they're just so wonderful. This couple who bought the land some years ago, and they cultivate all the trees, they do their own harvesting. You can, if you're there this time of year, you can even watch their mill in action and the harvesting in action. They will cook wonderful meals for you.

Joanne Lacina:
You can hang out with Sylvia in her kitchen and drink white wine and eat almonds with her while she, you know, just whips something up to eat. And it's - that's a really, really magical experience to visit them if you are in Sicily. That's a really wonderful place to escape for a few days. But then, as you mentioned, Pruneti - I mean, in Chianti, if you're in that area, of course I've been working with them for many, many years, and they are just wonderful, wonderful. They're really passionate about what they do, and you can have the full tasting experience in their tasting room there. And there's also Marina Colonna. She offers tours.

Joanne Lacina:
She is amazing. She lives in the Molise area, so just north of Puglia. If you ever want to visit the Molise region, she has a beautiful estate there, again surrounded by her olive trees, an on-site mill right there. She loves having tours come and visit her there, especially in harvest season. It's always a really, really magical time to visit if you can go this time of year, in the autumn. There's Bonamini, Frantoio Bonamini, if you're up in Veneto. They're just outside of Verona, kind of near Lake Garda. That's also a family-run operation, and they love giving tours and tastings.

Joanne Lacina:
There's Tamia in Lazio, which is quite interesting. He's in this area called Tuscia, which is between kind of the border of northern Lazio and Umbria. And so he always says "Ah yes, you know, people go to Rome and they go to Tuscany, but they never come to Tuscia. They never come here." And this is, you know, the most magical place ever. And when I visited him, I saw exactly what he was talking about. I'm like, "oh, this is so cool". This is like this little undiscovered area of Italy where there's hot springs and forests and amazing food, as there is everywhere in Italy. And there's some agrotourism around that area as well.

Joanne Lacina:
He's in Vetralla, in that area, and they do guided tastings and olive grove tours. But for any of these producers, it's very important to check their websites, call in advance. Do not just show up because a lot of them are very, very busy. So, you know, lock in your appointment time so that you can get a proper tour. And, you know, I highly, highly recommend a visit any time of year. But, you know, from my point of view, especially in the autumn when you can really experience firsthand this magical tradition of olive harvesting and trying that oil as soon as it comes out fresh from the mill, it's really, really a memorable experience to have.

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Katy Clarke:
Yeah, absolutely. It's called Novello, isn't it? And this first taste of the new olive oil. And I think people will be surprised at the color of it because when we pour ours, it's kind of like if you get something from the store, supermarkets, it's kind of a sad, like a light yellowy color, isn't it? But if you get it straight from the press, wow, it's a very bright and vibrant green color usually.

Joanne Lacina:
It is. Sometimes it's shockingly green. And I have had many people over the years say, this can't be real. There's no way this is real. And again, it kind of comes back to the variety of olives. Some varieties just are going to produce a really bright emerald green, and some come out a little more golden. But this very, very first kind of crushing of the olives that's bottled straight away, we call - it's known as Novello in Italy. You'll hear it called Nuovo.

Joanne Lacina:
It's the fresh, fresh, freshest olive oil that you can get your hands on, and they quite literally bottle it right away. And, you know, you'll get this really cloudy, beautiful, bright green mixture. And this is exactly what, you know, as I was saying earlier, as soon as the first oil comes out, they put a cup under the tap, and then they take that to the restaurant, and then they celebrate the season's first harvest. And that's quite literally what this Novello/Nuovo olive oil is. It's the very, very first crushing of the season when the oil is at its absolute peak. Green, most vibrant, fresh state. And I have airplane bookings for all of these novellas all over Italy right now, and I think some will, some will be getting on flights this weekend and landing in our warehouse in a few days, and then we start shipping it straight out to customers because I just, I want to give everybody the opportunity to try buy this, this oil as it comes straight out of the mill.

Joanne Lacina:
And you can, you can taste the tradition and celebration in every drop. It's really unique.

Katy Clarke:
Yeah, what a service. So instead of having to get on the plane and go to Italy, you bring it straight to people's homes. That's exciting. How can people find out a little bit more about Olive Oil Lovers and where to buy the Novello online?

Joanne Lacina:
So you can go straight to our website. It's very easy, oliveoillovers.com. And we can ship anywhere throughout the United States. We actually have our pre-sale going on right now, so you can lock in all the bottles you like from our novellos that are being bottled right now as we speak, being picked, crushed, bottled right now by our producers. And we have quite a few from Italy, you know - from Lazio, Sicily, Umbria, Tuscany, all over. We have kind of a representative of all areas of Italy. So you can pre-order those on our website right now, and then once they're gone, they're gone. They're in a very limited supply.

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Joanne Lacina:
Yeah, so we ship throughout the United States. If you're not in the United States, I'm sorry. But, you know, I do encourage anyone to, you know, if they're traveling to Italy, to find, see if there's any local olive oil companies where they're visiting, see if they can book a tour. And certainly, you know, pay attention to the oil that you're eating in every restaurant. If you love it, ask them what it is, see the bottle, note the brand, put a couple bottles in your suitcase to bring home. And, you know, wherever you are in the world, you know, take a look in your supermarket market. And, you know, there are some more specialty markets that will probably be more likely to carry some of these more niche brands from these smaller producers. And then just make sure, check that harvest date, make sure it's from the most recent autumn.

Joanne Lacina:
So, you know, right now in the stores you're still going to be seeing fall 2025 harvest oils because, you know, we're - the harvest is just getting going right now. But those tend to reach the 2026 harvests will begin to reach the stores, you know, in the beginning, the first few months of the year is when you start to kind of see those on the shelves. So just make sure you're getting the freshest oil. Look for the harvest date, look for the region, look for the variety. The more specifics, you know, that the label shows you about the oil inside, then, you know, the higher chance it is to be, you know, made from a from a small producer who's putting their all into the oil inside the bottle.

Katy Clarke:
That's such great advice. Thanks for giving everyone those tips. I think it's really important, you know, if you're looking out, because in Australia we have a lot of Italian-style delis. I know they do in Canada and probably, you know, in the UK. We used to live there as well and they have those available there. So yeah, definitely look out for the year of harvest and also the producers and what it's stored in too. So if it was me and anyone is thinking about getting me a gift for Christmas or any other reason, I would love a bottle of beautifully produced olive oil. And if you get one of the ones with a really nice, beautiful packaging, you know, that looks super nice on your kitchen bench as well.

Katy Clarke:
And you can then turn it into a vase once you're done with it. I mean, there's, you know, it's the gift that keeps on giving.

Joanne Lacina:
Absolutely. A candle holder. Yeah. Whatever, you know, vase for your flowers, all the things. Yes. And you make a very good point. Olive oil is a really fun, fun, unique gift to bring. You know, we encourage people to bring a bottle as a host gift for a dinner party.

Joanne Lacina:
You know, the dinner parties you're going to around the holiday times, you know, everybody's going to bring a bottle of wine. Well, why not bring a bottle of oil? A really good olive oil that

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your host can really appreciate using. You know, a bottle of wine, as delicious as it is, is gone by the end of the night, but a good bottle of oil can last them some weeks in their kitchen. So, um, it does make a really unique gift.

Katy Clarke:
I love that idea. A lot of people aren't drinking alcohol so much these days as well. So it's the alternative, bring a bottle. Love that idea. Well, we're going to share all of Olive Oil Lovers details on our website and you can find that, but it's oliveoillovers.com, which is a very easy website. And I commend you for having a very easy website to find. So Grazie Mille, Joanne. Thank you for sharing your passion for olive oil with us today and all those stories. And I think, you know, if anyone's traveling to Italy, you know, and you do have the opportunity at this time of year to go visit, it could really change your life like it did Joanne's.

Katy Clarke:
So Grazie Mille, Joanne.

Joanne Lacina:
Yeah, get over there, do it. Thank you so much. Thank you so much for having me. Ciao, ciao, ciao,

Katy Clarke:
Ciao.

Katy Clarke:
Listeners, I love how a chance encounter with delicious olive oil changed the trajectory of Joanne's life and helped her share her passion with others. As we mentioned, it is olive oil pressing season right now in Italy and a very special time to be there. If you ever get a chance, do take this wonderful opportunity to experience the harvest and taste the novello oil. It is not just a food experience. It is a cultural experience steeped in tradition that will help you feel truly part of Italy. Joanne mentioned a few places you can visit and do an olive oil tasting at any time of the year and perhaps during harvest too. It's very important to book ahead, to avoid disappointment, as she said.

We have put links to the places that Joanne mentioned and to Olive Oil Lovers in the episode show notes on our website at untolditaly.com/347. Thanks also to Joanne for sharing tips on how to spot a good olive oil in the wild for our listeners outside the US. I think some people in my circle might be receiving some olive oil this holiday season. It's definitely a gift that keeps on giving all year round.

Grazie mille. Thank you for joining us today on Untold Italy. I hope you enjoyed today's show. If you did, it would be fantastic if you left a rating or review on your favorite podcast app. That helps us reach more Italy-loving travelers like you.

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That’s all for today. Next time we’re meeting a frequent traveller to Italy who shares her favorite places and experiences across the boot, but until then, it’s ciao for now.

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