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The Sicilian extra virgin olive oil

Jan 04: For centuries the land of Sicily, from east to west, from Trapani in the west to Agrigento in the centre south and up to the eastern coastline of Catania with its volcanic Mount Etna, has witnessed the presence of olive groves and the production of pure virgin olive oil. For the first time producers of Sicilian virgin olive oil visit India and join Sicily's group of wine producers on tour in India from 20-25 January. Michele Shah reports

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The visit will include olive oil tasting as part of the Masterclass put together by Subhash Arora President of the Indian Wine Academy and Michele Shah consultant to IRVOS (Sicily Regional Institute of Wine and Oil) for their international development programme. Susan Hulme MW will be leading the wine tasting. The tastings are being organised in conjunction with ITC Maurya in Delhi, ITC Sonar in Kolkata, ITC Gardenia Bangalore and ITC Grand Central, Mumbai.

The olives are harvested between August and September, by hand or by shaking the tree branches to make the olives fall, and year after year, this ritual is like a celebration for the local people. During the picking all the leaves are removed and the olives are washed. They go through the usual three phases of production, crushing, pressing, and extracting.

Sicilian optimal climatic and environmental conditions makes it an important region for agricultural production in the cultivation of prized DOP (Protected Designation of Origin) olives. Thousands of acres of Sicilian soil are dedicated to olive groves, and the region produces about 10% of all Italian olive oil. The most common olives cultivated in Sicily are *Biancolilla*, *Cerasuola*, and *Nocellara*, out of which *Biancolilla* is above all favoured as the best for olive oil. These olives tend to grow on shorter and bushier trees than their counterparts in other regions.

Biancolilla Olives

The *Biancolilla* olive tree is cultivated prevalently in Sicily. The trees resemble an umbrella shape: large but not too high which allows for more accessible hand picking. Its broad branches produce a large yield of fruit and thus olive oil. Once mature, the olives become yellow with a blush of pink and are medium in size.

Tasting

The best way to enjoy an extra virgin olive oil, is to trickle some on to a small part of homemade bread, or to simply enjoy rolling it on one's tongue, similar to tasting wine. Sicilian olive oil tends to be strongly flavoured and spicy, and usually has a pronounced grassy fragrance. Many Sicilian olive oils have a delicate fruity fragrance of flowers and grass, slightly sweet and mildly pungent, full-bodied in density, with golden yellow colour and green hues. Best to use it raw, directly drizzled over fresh bread, grilled fish, salads and fresh vegetables.

There are six extra virgin olive oil producing areas in Sicily which have been granted DOP (Protected Designation of Origin). These quality certifications are used by Italian food and agriculture industry to certify and regulate the strict parameters of production. In and around Agrigento, after harvesting the *Biancolilla*, the olives are pressed by a stone press and bottled without filtration resulting in a cloudy and green liquid. Olive oil from this area has an intensive and powerful aroma, is greenish/gold in colour with an approachable fruity flavour. On the eastern

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and powerful aroma, is greenish/gold in colour with an agreeable fruity flavour. On the eastern side of Sicily, Monte Etna olive oil is produced at the base of the volcano Etna, as well as in Catania, Enna and Messina. It has a delicate fruity fragrance and flavour, with a light spicy bitter touch, with a yellow-gold colour with green reflections. Due to its fruity flavour, Monte Etna olive oil is an ideal dressing for raw or cooked fresh vegetables, wild-herb salads, drizzled over vegetables soups as well as roasted fish.

A few facts:

- Sicily produces about **10%** of Italy's olive oil
- there are **6 DOP** (Protected Designation of Origin - similar to DOC for wines) olive oil producing areas of Sicily, more than any other region of Italy: Val di Mazara DOP, Valdemone DOP, Valle del Belice DOP, Valli Trapanesi DOP, Monte Etna DOP and Monti Iblei DOP
- the most common varieties of olives for oil production are Biancolilla, Cerasuola and Nocellara.

The Olive Oil Producers

There will be three producers attending the event with their products. The first is Azienda Agricola Ravida - www.ravida.it - near Menfi in the province of Agrigento. Their produce is made from a blend of Cerasuola, Biancolilla and Nocellara del Belice cultivars, with a total production of 45,000 litres

RAVIDA is a perfectly balanced multi award winning extra virgin olive oil defined as 'one of the best in the world' (Food Channel, USA), 'one of Sicily's finest oils' (Gourmet Traveller, Australia), 'Sicilian nectar' (The Guardian, UK). Produced on the Ravida family olive press in south west Sicily, it is a blend of Cerasuola, Biancolilla and Nocellara olives extracted within a few hours from picking at low temperatures, stocked in 1000 Liter containers and bottled against order only. These steps confer the olive oil its excellent aroma and taste, an exceptionally low acidity and high polyphenols. It was the first Sicilian olive oil to hit international markets in 1991. Today **RAVIDA** is a staple on the shelves of Harrods, Harvey Nichols, Selfridges, Fortnum & Mason and Waitrose in the UK.

BARBERA The second producer is a cooperative *Oleifici Siciliani* with a range of freshly pressed virgin olive oils:

www.oliobarbera.com / www.frantoia.com / www.oleificisiciliani.com with an annual production of 1.848,000 bottles made from blending the Biancolilla, Cerasuola, Nocellara cultivars.

Premiati Oleifici Barbera is a family company founded in Palermo in 1894 by Lorenzo Barbera and from its early days was awarded the Grand Prix at the International Exposition in Paris in 1901 on the occasion of the opening of the Eiffel Tower, to being awarded the Gold Medal at The Mario Solinas in Madrid in 2001. Today the company is managed by Manfredi Barbera who signed a cooperation agreement in 2005 with over 10.000 olive growers and 45 olive oil millers, creating what is probably regarded as the biggest consortium in Sicily, the *Oleifici Siciliani*.

Premiati Oleifici Barbera is part of the management of the consortium as well as being in charge of the promotion, sales and global distribution of the products and brands of the consortium.

The main plant located in Custonaci (near Trapani) is currently carrying out very interesting experimental projects: 1) an Experimental Oil Mill, which is born from the most innovative technologies - it is in fact the first oil mill of its kind; 2) an Olive Tree Museum: in cooperation with the University of Studies of Palermo where they have planted 400 plants of the 40 original varieties of olive trees that have ever existed in Sicily from the time of the Phoenicians.

Their range of products is fairly large and is divided into 4 main brands (Barbera, Frantoia, Primagoccia and Tre Poderi) and 4 minor one-product brands, including over ten different varieties of extra virgin olive oil obtained from Italian olives, the majority of which are grown in Sicily.



PLANETA The third olive oil producer is Planeta www.planeta.it known more for its wine production, its virgin olive oil production is a 'passion' as Planeta like to put it, produced in the natural oasis of Capparrina, near the beaches of Menfi with the following cultivars: Nocellara del Belice, Biancolilla, Cerasuola.





Olive Oils from these three companies will be showcased at the Sicilian Masterclass. The details of the event have been published in the previous editions of delWine.

Michele Shah

Michele Shah is an English wine journalist specialising in Italian wines. She is a writer, author and an international judge who also felicitates wine programmes, with Italy as her specialty. She lives in Tuscany and has been to India on a few occasions. She will also be a part of the delegation and will conduct the Master Classes in India along with



Susan Hulme MW and Subhash Arora on January 20-25, 2013. Ms Shah may be reached at micheleshah@gmail.com

Tags: Sicilian Olive oil, Sicilian Extra Virgin Olive Oil, DOP, Biancolilla, Cerasuola, Nocellara, Italian Olive Oil, Michele Shah, Arigento, Mount Etna olive oil, Catania, Enna, Messina, Val di Mazara DOP, Valdemone DOP, Valle del Belice DOP, Valli Trapanesi DOP, Monte Etna DOP, Monti Iblei DOP, Indian Wine Academy, Sicilian Masterclass, Subhash Arora, Azienda Agricola Ravida, Premiati Oleifici Barbera, Barbera, Oleifici Siciliani, Custonaci, Frantoia, Primagocchia, Tre Poderi , Planeta

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