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# Passion for Olive Oil

A Tuscan trip  
becomes a life-  
changing experience.

By Susan Van Allen

**I**n the autumn of 2007, New Jersey native Nick Coleman arrived at Mulinmaria, a villa in Tuscany, south of Arezzo. He looked out over the hills of silver-leaved trees and asked, "What are they?"

"It's a moment we will never forget," Nadia Gasperini Rossi, the villa owner, tells me. "They were olive trees, and Nick, who was in the middle of a post-graduate adventure (backpacking from the Arctic Circle to the Sahara desert), had stopped in Tuscany to help our family harvest the 750 trees that surround our guest-house/villa."

What Nick and Nadia didn't know was that this would be the start of a life-changing experience. By the time Nick left Mulinmaria, two weeks later, an obsession with olive oil had taken root in him. During his stay, he had handpicked olives with Nadia and her family, carefully cleaned them, watched the traditional pressing process, and had the culinary revelation of tasting the oil right after the olives were pressed. Nadia and her husband Roberto are dedicated artisanal producers who have tended and nurtured their grove for over 30 years. The oil that results from their work is excellent.

Though Nicholas had graduated from the Berklee School of Music and planned to run a recording studio, he was pulled back to the olive groves. He returned to Mulinmaria the following fall, and with Nadia's guidance and encouragement, began to seriously study every aspect of this "liquid gold." Over years of intense work, Nick became an olive oil expert (Oleologist), which culminated in him passing vigorous testing



## Flavors of Olive Oil

### Bruschetta with Kale

- 2 pounds kale**
- 1 garlic clove, peeled**
- 2/3 cup extra virgin olive oil, divided**
- Sea salt and freshly ground black pepper**
- 8 slices of crusty bread**

Remove the stems from the kale. Slice into broad strips. With a heavy knife, lightly crush one garlic clove. Put 6 tablespoons of olive oil and the crushed garlic into a 12-inch skillet and turn the heat to medium. When the garlic begins to turn golden, add the sliced kale, stirring to coat the leaves with olive oil. Cover the pan and cook for about 10 minutes, until the kale is tender. When done, remove the garlic and season with salt and pepper to taste. Heat a broiler to medium high. Brush both sides of the sliced bread with olive oil. Broil the bread on both sides until lightly toasted. Spoon the kale onto each slice of bread. Drizzle each with olive oil and serve.

Makes 8 servings.

### Nadia's Chestnut Cake

- 3 cups chestnut flour**
- 2 tablespoons sugar**
- 1/2 teaspoon salt**
- 1 orange rind, minced**
- 2 1/2 cups tepid water (about 95°F)**
- 2 tablespoons olive oil, plus more for greasing pan and drizzling**
- 1 cup raisins**
- 1/2 cup pine nuts**
- 3 tablespoons fresh rosemary leaves**
- Fresh ricotta for serving, if desired**

Preheat oven to 350°F. Sift the flour into a bowl. Mix in sugar, salt, and orange rind. Gradually whisk in the water, as if you are making pancake batter. The amount of water may vary according to the quality of the flour. Stir in the olive oil. Let the mixture rest for 1/2 hour. Grease a 12-inch cake pan with oil and pour in the chestnut flour mixture. Garnish with raisins, pine nuts, rosemary, and a drizzling of olive oil. Bake for about 40 minutes, until the outside cracks and the inside resembles warm pudding. Serve with a dollop of fresh ricotta, if desired.

Makes 6 servings.



### Cannellini Beans with Sage and Olive Oil

- 1 pound dried cannellini beans**
- 6 cups water**
- 2 garlic cloves, lightly crushed**
- 2 tablespoons fresh sage, coarsely chopped**
- 1/4 cup extra virgin olive oil, plus a few tablespoons more for drizzling**
- Sea salt and freshly ground pepper**

Place the beans in an earthenware bowl, cover with water, and let soak overnight.

Drain beans and put in cooking pot with 6 cups water, garlic cloves, sage, and olive oil. Cover and simmer, never allowing the water to boil. Cook until the beans are tender, about an hour to an hour and a half. Drain. Remove the garlic cloves. Add salt and pepper to taste, and finish with a drizzling of olive oil.

Makes 8 servings.



to become one of the youngest Americans to receive the highest seal of approval in the Olive Oil World: Summa Cum Laude certification at Italy's National Organization of Olive Oil Tasters.

I met Nick in the aisles of New York City's Eataly, the massive Italian import emporium owned by Lidia Bastianich, Joe Bastianich, and Mario Batali. Nicholas had met Batali when he gave olive oil seminars to chefs of Batali's New York restaurants, and Batali wisely hired him to oversee Eataly's impressive selection. It's a pleasure to be around this enthusiast. "Americans know a lot about wines and cheeses," Nick says, "but when it comes to olive oil, most aren't educated, so the demand for quality isn't there and the supermarket offerings are poor—tasteless and greasy. Bottles labeled "Extra Virgin" and "Product of Italy" typically contain olives from several countries that are processed in mass quantities and not fresh."

Nick's advice is to buy olive oil that's been produced from a single estate and harvested within the last two years. He encourages using different oils depending on what you're making. "What grows together, goes together," he says, meaning fish dishes pair well with oil from the coastal region of Liguria, while a spicier oil from the region of Campania goes well with rich tomato sauces.

Nick's infectious passion inspired me to sign up for his "Olive Oil Uncovered" seminar at Eataly's Scuola. For a few hours on a Saturday afternoon, I joined other students to taste four oils from different regions of Italy that were expertly paired with small plates. Nick's entertaining presentation includes a slideshow of olive groves and presses he's visited in Italy, and a tasting lesson that involves swirling the oil in a cup to warm it, inhaling to enjoy its aromas, and then slurping noisily to aerate the oil and

allow it to spray inside the mouth. When students coughed, Nick applauded. "That tingle comes from the oil's antioxidants; it's a fruit juice essentially—fresh and great for your health!"

Nick has gone back to Mulinmaria in Tuscany every year to join his mentor Nadia for the harvest, except for 2010 when Eataly opened. "I am so proud of his success; he is like my adopted son," says Nadia. "We are always glad to see him. It's the best time of year, like a family reunion. My two sisters come, my grown-up son and daughter, and everyone gets olive oil to bring back home with them to last the year."

When it comes to eating during the harvest, Nadia says, "We're so busy, there is no time to cook during the day. We have to use the hours of light for working outside. So we have a simple lunch under the trees—bread, tomatoes, cheese, drizzled with olive oil, of course. And later, we make something easy, like soup or cannellini beans with the new olive oil, a typical dish this time of year. And there is always bruschetta, made with vegetables and olive oil. We even use olive oil in our desserts, for a chestnut cake."

Nadia is a warm, welcoming signora who enjoys hosting guests who come from all over the world to Mulinmaria. "They look around, like Nick did when he first saw the olive trees, and they think what we are doing is extraordinary. But for me, it is just natural. There is no secret—we are just enjoying life, what is fresh, in the moment, every day."

For more on Nick and Nadia, see [www.groveandvine.com](http://www.groveandvine.com), [www.mulinmaria.com](http://www.mulinmaria.com).

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