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Like an Extra Virgin

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## Like an Extra Virgin

**ABSTRACT** In this article, I track the contemporary possibilities for the global circulation of extravirgin olive oil. Recent technoscientific discoveries about the health benefits of extravirgin olive oil combine with narratives about olive oil's "ancientness" and "naturalness" to make it a very successful food commodity in an era of global concern about the risks of "industrial" food. "The Mediterranean" has emerged as a culture area that is defined by food in two realms: in a scientific register ("the Mediterranean Diet") and in contemporary gustatory discourses of distinction that imagine "the Mediterranean" as a site of delicious, "real" food as opposed to the industrial, processed food of the North Atlantic. [Keywords: olive oil, food commodities, "the Mediterranean," discourses of distinction, production]

**A**CCORDING TO AN ancient Greek myth, Athena, the goddess of craft and artisanship (*techne*), competed with Poseidon, god of the sea, for the namesake of the city of Athens: Poseidon offered only a salty spring whereas Athena offered the olive tree. Athena's gift seemed to be more persuasive to the Athenians, for it provided not only olives but also olive wood, for quotidian furniture, kingly crowns, and weapons, and olive oil, the "liquid gold," for eating, curing, cleansing, illuminating, and anointing. There could hardly be a more appropriate gift from a goddess of domestic arts. Yet Athena's gift to humankind depends on *techne* to make something useful and functional from it: olives must be cured before they are edible; wood must be carved and finished; and olives must be crushed and pressed to obtain the "liquid gold."

The association between craft and craftiness is embodied in Athena. She is also the goddess of a male *techne*: strategy in war. Odysseus is her favorite hero, and he is the guileful one who uses craftiness over force to win. Indeed, in the narrative frame of the *Odyssey*, the olive tree is the unifying element that binds the fantastic world of the "stories" and the prosaic civilized world (*oikoumene*). Although strange and fabulous lands are opposed to civilized ones by the absence of agriculture in the former and its presence in the latter, there is one specific tree present both in the world of the "stories" and in the *oikoumene*—the olive:

The tree of whose wood Odysseus built his bed, the fixed point of his home (23.183–204). And in fact the olive is on a number of occasions the means of Odysseus' escape from danger. It provides the stake with which he bores through the Cyclops's eye; and the handle of the axe with which he builds his boat. [Vidal-Naquet 1981:87]

The olive tree is also the cornerstone of the domestic household (*oikos*) and a sign of civilization, the inhabited world of arable land and agriculture. Thus, the olive tree is both the sign of "feminine *techne*," the civilized and civilizing domestic crafts, and "masculine *techne*," craftiness on the battle field. Athena, who is Odysseus's tutelary goddess as well, is the goddess of both, and the olive tree is her gift to humankind.

I start with this account of the mythology of olive oil to mime contemporary accounts of olive oil, both scientific and culinary, which also tend to start with olive oil's mythic past. I use Athena as an entry point into an exploration of three dimensions of contemporary olive oil production, consumption, and circulation. First, I examine how an emerging notion of "the Mediterranean" as an imaginary space defined by the culinary and gustatory has affected the circulation of olive oil. Second, I consider how part of this notion of "the Mediterranean" opposes the Mediterranean to Northern Europe as Antique to Modern, and craft production against industrial production. Consequently, representations of olive oil as a "natural" fat and genealogies of a seamless, unchanging since antiquity, "techne" style of production often erase the actual mechanization of olive oil production. Finally, I explore how, in the process of establishing the "extravirgin" oil, the technoscientific (chemical) becomes entwined with discourses of distinction (*organoleptic*).

### A NEW UNITY OF THE MEDITERRANEAN?

For both the ancient Greek geographer Strabo and noted French historian Fernand Braudel, the olive tree rather than the sea itself is the distinguishing feature of the

Mediterranean region. The International Olive Oil Council, the organization responsible for regulating and promoting the worldwide production, circulation, and consumption of olive oil, published a book entitled *The Olive in Mediterranean Cooking* (March 1994), which features a map of the Mediterranean region, marking space not by country but by olive varietal.<sup>1</sup> Under this definition, even regions far from the sea, such as the interior of Tuscany and Umbria, are considered Mediterranean because of their olive trees. In anthropology, the delimitation of the region known as “the Mediterranean” focused on the particular cultural values that were posited to unite the region, particularly a focus on the chastity of women and the implications of their comportment for male honor. However, after the publication of J. G. Peristiany’s influential *Honour and Shame: The Values of Mediterranean Society* in 1966, anthropologists immediately began to debate whether or not there was such a “cultural entity” as the Mediterranean (see Gilmore 1987; Pina-Cabral 1989). Some, like Jane Schneider (1971), found the originary unity in shared ecological conditions, concomitant modes of subsistence, and political and social organization. Aside from a resurgence of the notion in ethnomusicology (and, indeed, one does find antiphonal olive-picking songs all over the Mediterranean; see Magrini 2003), the concept of “the Mediterranean” is the most salient not in the academy but, rather, in medicoscientific and culinary discourses.

Specifically, this region has been defined of late by technoscientific discourses that propose that “the Mediterranean Diet” is superior for health as well as an aesthetically pleasing and desirable culinary realm; this aesthetic is amply represented in cookbooks, magazines, cooking shows, and the like. Olive oil is central to both. I argue that this positive imaginary of the medicoscientific and the gustatory aspects of the diet-that-stands-for-a-region profoundly affect the way extravirgin olive oil circulates in the contemporary world. I stress here that it is estate-produced extravirgin olive oil that is perceived to be of dietary and culinary-aesthetic value.<sup>2</sup>

The now-ubiquitous “Mediterranean Diet” was not, like olive oil, envisioned as a gift of a goddess but, rather, a gift of science—albeit one with its own considerable mythology. In 1948, the Rockefeller Foundation funded a study of 765 families on Crete to evaluate the postwar standard of living; 128 of these families were chosen for daily inspection to evaluate food intake. This research strategy, which might have warmed the cockles of a cultural ecologist’s heart, involved the inspecting of cooking practices, the recording of every bite put in everyone’s mouth, and the weighing of food consumed and even food waste (Visser 2004:2). Although it was published originally in *Crete: A Case Study of an Undeveloped Area* (Allbaugh 1953), this study still has ramifications today: when later studies found that Greeks had low incidences of heart disease, the dietary information in the Rockefeller report was claimed as an explanation. The prominence of the “good” fat olive oil in the Greek diet was portrayed as the linchpin of what became known

as the “Mediterranean Diet.” When heart disease began to appear almost endemic in North America in the 1970s (at least among middle-class males), books on the “Mediterranean diet” began to literally “pour from the presses” (Visser 2004:3), and olive oil, its star, received an enormous boost. Indeed, olive oil consumption in the United States went from 64 million pounds in 1982 to 250 million pounds in 1994 (Rosenblum 1996:273). The Italians, recognizing a good market opportunity when they saw one, quickly replaced Greece as the signature Ur-Mediterranean country and started exporting and importing olive oil in even greater quantities than they had in the early 20th century when olive oil-importing companies acted as the legitimate fronts for the Mafia’s less salubrious businesses (Rosenblum 1996:138).<sup>3</sup>

The “ancientness” of olive oil is one of its potentially significant intrinsic qualities, or Peircean “qualisigns,” which is often invoked as a guarantor of the “rightness” of today’s scientific claims about the benefits of olive oil.<sup>4</sup> The fact that Hippocrates, the man widely touted as the “father of medicine,” was a firm proponent of the therapeutic qualities of olive oil was noted in the introduction to a highly technical manual dealing with all manner of olive production, including the chemical composition of various oils (Kiritsakis 1998:3). Nutritionist Jean Barilla claims: “Knowledge of the health-giving and healing properties of olive oil are just now opening the eyes of the modern medical community. *Where ancient wisdom and cutting-edge science meet, we have found a pot of gold . . . green gold*” (1996:11, emphasis added).

New scientific research seems to verify Hippocrates’s faith in olive oil almost daily: scientific research claims that olive oil is proven to be helpful in the prevention of heart disease, breast and colon cancer, and Type II diabetes. A recent *New York Times* article (Burros 2004) announces, “Olive Oil Makers Win Approval to Make Health Claim on Label.” In the 1990s, olive oil researchers cited its antioxidant and other chemical qualities as healthful, including one such chemical that probably only a few are aware of: namely, “terpenic alcohols, which assist in the fecal excretion of cholesterol through increased bile acid secretion” (Wahlqvist and Kouris-Blazos 1996; see also Krasner 2002:12). Other scientists have proven that pure (now called “extravirgin”) olive oil is high in phenolic compounds: in a recent article, Dr. Perez Jimenez explains, “we think, looking at our results, that the reduction in oxidative stress and the increase in the nitric oxide bioavailability are behind the observed improvement in ischemic reactive hyperemia” (American College of Cardiology 2005). The article, by the American College of Cardiology, decodes the above expert advice for the lay reader as proof that olive oil contributes to positive cardiovascular functioning. The latest in this series of discoveries of olive oil’s salutary qualities is the discovery of a chemical substance in extravirgin olive oil, oleocanthal, which has the same anti-inflammatory effect as ibuprofen. These particular qualities of olive oil cannot be evaluated by individuals experientially but,

rather, require the intervention of technoscientific expert knowledge, which most of us take as authoritative.

Yet more is going on in the contemporary olive oil craze than functional concerns with health. As I note elsewhere, extravirgin olive oil is also a sexy fat (Meneley 2005). Chef and food historian Patric Kuh, in his book *The Last Days of Haute Cuisine: The Coming of Age of American Restaurants* (2001), uses Thorstein Veblen's (1977) memorable and evocative term *aesthetic nausea* to refer to the way in which fats go in and out of favor in culinary fashion: just as the use of butter (as opposed to lard or schmaltz) in haute cuisine signified sophistication rather than farmhouse cookery, butter began to evoke feelings of "aesthetic nausea" when the rustic Italian and Mediterranean cuisines began to pull ahead of haute French for U.S. palates. On the other side of the Atlantic, Elizabeth David's *A Book of Mediterranean Food*, published first in Britain in 1950, described ingredients that were at that time scarcely available in Britain (for instance, olive oil was sold in tiny bottles in drugstores on the laxative shelf). But for David's audience, among them food writer Gina Mallet, "the fact that you couldn't buy olive oil easily, if at all, only made Elizabeth David's book more alluring" (2004:107). Times have changed in Britain: 2006 was the first year that olive oil sales surpassed that of other vegetable oils, according to an article in the *Guardian*, which begins,

Whether you wish to blame Delia, Ainsley or Jaime is up to you, but the verb "to drizzle"—in a culinary as opposed to climatic sense—is now recognized by the Oxford English Dictionary. And judging by the latest sales figures for the UK, we just can't drizzle enough these days. . . . This millennia-old Mediterranean staple has come a long way since the days when Britons could only buy it at their local chemist. [Hickman 2006]<sup>5</sup>

U.S. chef Paula Wolfert's influential 1977 *Mediterranean Cookbook* demarcated the Mediterranean not only as a geographic region but as a shared culinary and aesthetic space as well, unified by a primary fat: olive oil. On her website, she writes, "My approach to the Mediterranean is based on a myth—an ideal, shared by many of us, of a robust, simple, and sensual lifestyle far from the madding crowds of our competitive North Atlantic culture" (Wolfert 2005). Wolfert also claims an authenticity for people and food of the region, claiming that Mediterranean food is "real food. . . . The real food of real people" (Laudan 2003:290). Ironically, it is Wolfert, an influential "taste maker," who succinctly sums up the imaginaries associated with the Mediterranean, which set the region in imaginary contrast to Northern Atlantic (incl. Northern Europe and North America) and, by extension, to the rest of industrial modernity. That is, we envision a cuisine and an attendant lifestyle that is more authentic and less stressful, more "natural," than the world in which we live. As I argue elsewhere for Italy (Meneley 2004, 2005), these imaginings can be described as a kind of "reverse Orientalism"; like the negative Orientalism regarding knowledge about the Middle East (Said 1979), these positive imaginings have an effect on people's actions in the world,

even though they are not necessarily based on a knowledge of languages and cultures of the Mediterranean.<sup>6</sup> Having health and gustatory satisfaction as central to the definition of "the Mediterranean" makes it possible to encompass the Muslim Mediterranean in a safe domain, a culinary aesthetic one. "The Mediterranean" becomes a transcendent category, under which the more common Orientalist knowledges—and attendant fears and prejudices about Muslims—can be subsumed or elided.<sup>7</sup>

Olive oil and other olive products are also increasingly popular ingredients in beauty products like soaps and skin creams; once again one finds an intertwining of the scientific and the aesthetic. Writer Vanessa Penna quotes Fernando Aleu, MD, discussing his research on the antioxidant potential of olive leaves, which allowed him to develop an antiaging skin lotion, *Crème d'Olives*: "I've done years of research, but you only need to look at Mediterranean women's skin for proof that having olives in their diet and using them in skin care smooths and refines the complexion" (Penna 2000:142). These imaginings of pleasant, beautiful, and authentic Mediterranean spaces and beautiful people help shape the international olive oil market, as do medicoscientific discourses and technos of aesthetic distinction. Food writer Calvin Trillin implicitly refers to these seemingly contradictory discourses—those of technoscientific and medical and those of gustatory and aesthetic connoisseurship—that so profoundly shape olive oil markets and modes of marketing today. When asked to comment on the scientific research that claims that olive oil contains the same pain killer as ibuprofen, Trillin quips, "It may only be a matter of time before there is extra virgin Advil and first pressing Motrin" (Hotz 2005).

#### THE "NATURALNESS" OF OLIVE OIL

Olive oil is popularly understood to be a kind of Ur-natural fat, as opposed to an industrial one like Crisco or margarine or fat substitutes like olestra, which is described by noted nutritionist Marion Nestle as the "ultimate techno-food" (2002:338–357). In discourses about fat as a substance, as well as in contemporary food discourses in general of late, "natural" fats are beginning to come back into favor after the recent scare over trans fats; olive oil—sometimes dubbed the "friendly fat" (cf. Barilla 1996)—continues to be the favored among them.<sup>8</sup> Sometimes technoscientific claims are used to justify olive oil's "naturalness"; as an Umbrian olive oil producer told me, "olive oil is a 'natural' (*naturelle*) fat par excellence because it shares with breast milk the same distribution of fatty acids" (conversation with author, April 17, 2005). Food connoisseur Deborah Krasner states: "Here's where olive oil becomes the hero of this health story: It naturally contains a great variety of antioxidants, and it's high in mono-unsaturated fatty acids. We know it's a safe and nutritious food—it's been in continual use in the human diet since antiquity" (2002:13).

In addition to the antiquity of the olive and its use in the Mediterranean, much is made of extravirgin olive oil's



"natural" qualities when extolling its healthful virtues by contemporary firms vying for a share of the increasingly lucrative olive oil market and by health professionals seeking to promote healthier lifestyles. Although the fact that considerable *techne* is involved in olive production was obvious to the ancient Greeks, there is considerable talk among olive oil marketers and food writers of olive oil as a "natural" substance, full of "natural" goodness—as if it simply flowed from nature itself, like breast milk. For instance, food critic and cookbook author Patricia Wells blurbs the back of Mort Rosenblum's book, *Olives: The Life and Lore of a Noble Fruit* (1996), saying, "We close the book with a renewed reverence for one of nature's most enduring gifts." Even scientists claim the "naturalness" of olive oil as a source of its superiority: "Dr. Perez Jimenez said that olive oil may be superior to seed oils because it is a *natural* juice, pressed from the olives, so it does not go through the type of process need to extract oil from seeds, such as sunflowers, soybeans and rapeseed" (American College of Cardiology 2005, emphasis added).

Food historian Rachel Laudan (2003) argues that in food discourses of late, there tends to be an uncritical extolling of "the natural" as inherently good by those whom she calls "Culinary Luddites." As she points out, many foods are unpalatable, indigestible, or even poisonous in their "natural" state. For instance, olives in their "natural" state are bitter and simply inedible. As Annie Hawes, novice olive farmer in Liguria, notes in her book *Extra-Virgin: Amongst the Olive Groves of Liguria*: "I mentally take my hat off to whatever unbelievably desperate person first discovered the edibility of the olive—I'm sure I would have starved without ever guessing for a moment that the things weren't poisonous" (2001:97).

Even when the considerable *techne* necessary for producing olive oil from bitter and inedible olives is acknowledged, what tends to be highlighted in contemporary promotions of extravirgin olive oil is an untouched and unchanging lineage of olive oil production from the ancient Minoans onward. One is left with the impression that the production process is itself timeless. However, there have been considerable transformations in olive oil technology over time and space. If artisanal production (*techne*) is not exactly natural—and for the Greeks the definition of *techne* was the use of artifice to overcome nature—then at least in its traditionalness and antiquity it stands with respect to modern industrial production as being relatively natural.

Yet there was a major shift in the second half of the 18th century toward the mechanizing of olive oil production. The industrializing of olive oil production was linked to the revitalization of what was perceived to be a stagnating Mediterranean economy (Mazzotti 2004). An explicit alterity between Northern Europe and the Mediterranean was posited, with the North seen as more advanced technologically and economically as opposed to the Mediterranean, which was lagging behind and stagnating (Mazzotti 2004:277). A notable irony is that the increased demand for olive oil at this time, which provided a partial impetus for

Mediterranean economic reforms, went beyond its function as food and as a source of internal light in wick lamps. Indeed, transformations in olive oil pressing technology to produce a higher quality of olive oil were themselves generated by the industrial revolution. Higher quality oil (with a lower acidity level) proved to be the best lubricant for clockworks and also for industrial machinery, the best industrial lubricant available at the time (Mazzotti 2004:278).<sup>9</sup> Mediterranean olive oil was greasing the wheels of English factories and overall capitalist expansion, a part of olive oil's history that is erased.<sup>10</sup>

For contemporary producers and marketers, what is emphasized is the *techne* or craft aspect of olive oil production. Not only is the "ancientness" of olive oil production invoked, but these production "traditions" are presented as being in need of protection from the onslaught of mass-produced olive oil marketed by multinationals. Olive oil connoisseur and promoter Judy Ridgway states: "A phrase which some producers like to include on their label or in their promotional literature to indicate quality is 'traditional method'" (1997:25), in which *traditional* merely refers to the stone wheel that is used to crush the olives. During my research with contemporary producers of estate oil in Tuscany and Umbria, I noticed that although their mills are fully "modern" in machinery, in accordance with EU regulations regarding safety and hygiene, a bow is often made to "techne" style production by retaining the old stone millstones that crush the olives. These millstones are now powered by electricity instead of slave, horse, or water power. The rest of the process is highly mechanized, but "tradition" is often invoked. In promotional material it is the "naturalness" and the "traditional" mode of processing that is foregrounded, the *techne* partially veiling the technoscience. Even genealogical metaphors are sometimes employed. For instance, the owner of a sizeable modern mill in Trevi, standing in the midst of gleaming steel oil tankards, not a terra cotta pot in sight, told me that olive oil was in his veins because his family had been making the exact same oil for 400 years. *Techne* and technoscience are united in the product of extravirgin olive oil, which, rather counterintuitively, is launched onto the market and into the bodies of consumers as a "natural" product.

Most of the oil presses that I visited in Tuscany and Umbria had a museum or a tasting room decorated with the trappings of "traditional" production, like the beautiful "Ali Baba" terracotta pots and the flat ladles that were formerly used to scoop out the oil as it settled in these pots, the circular fiber mats used to press the oil, and olive-picking "combs" and gathering sacks. In a wonderful example from Spain, both human experiential knowledge and the most advanced computer technology are employed to recoup a "traditional" past. Glimpses of the "ancient" were achieved by a Spanish engineer by taking photos of the tower presses and beam presses at the Museum of Oil History in Jaen. To better understand how these presses operated, he included oral testimonies of elderly men who actually participated in the traditional production but also relied on the latest

AutoCAD technology to produce a simulation (Rojas-Sola 2005).

The terracotta amphorae used to transport wine and olive oil in the ancient world, considered by some to be the first commercial packaging (Twede 2002), are now defunct. Despite transformations in shipping technologies, packaging continues to be a very important part of the production and circulation of contemporary extravirgin olive oil. The Avignonesi estate, whose marketer I interviewed in Tuscany in 2000, consciously styled its bottle on the shape of the ancient amphorae, albeit with a flat bottom in conformity to current shipping and storing conventions.<sup>11</sup> The nods to tradition and *techne* can be read on the labels of Tuscan and Umbrian estate oils (i.e., oil produced by olives solely from one estate), on which one often finds a sketch of an artisanal mill, a terracotta pot, a grove of olive trees, or a rustic house, in addition to, most importantly, a handwritten expiration date.<sup>12</sup> The handwritten date is particularly important in indexing a specific producer and a high-quality product that will not, unlike some industrial brands that are so highly processed that they contain only a little extravirgin olive oil for color, last forever.

#### INDUSTRIAL VERSUS ARTISANAL PRODUCTION

One of the most important contemporary food movements that sets up an opposition between industrial versus artisanal production is the Slow Food Movement, started in Italy by Carlo Petrini in 1986, who was appalled when the first McDonald's restaurant appeared in Rome (see Petrini 2001). This movement vociferously opposes industrially produced food: particularly, the name *Slow Food* implicitly points to its bad "other," the classic exemplar of industrial food, *fast food*. In contrast, the Slow Food movement champions artisanally produced food, like artisanal cheeses (as opposed to highly processed and packaged cheeses) and extravirgin estate olive oils, among other "heritage" products. In 2000, the press of the Slow Food movement, Slow Food Editore, published an elegant volume entitled *Extravergine* (Ricci and Soracco 2000), wherein the *techne* of olive production is stressed; the advertisements in the volume include an olive oil with the Chianti Classico DOP (Denominazione d'Origine Protetta) and Laudemio, a consortium of elite, independent Tuscan estates, which, also employing a genealogical metaphor, describe their oil as being as "noble" as their lineages.

Yet the opposition between natural-industrial really reflects a tension between artisanally versus mass-produced olive oil. Despite the fact that industrial technology is employed in the production of olive oil that claims to be artisanally produced, these estate oils oppose themselves to the mass-produced olive oil like that of Bertolli, Colavita, and Carapelli. The latter depend on the "sameness" of taste that is distinctive to brands, so they aim to produce a blended olive oil that remains the same year to year wherever it is sold in its broad international network. Here one finds labels that are as mass produced as is the oil. The connection be-

tween producer and consumer is essentially an impersonal one, albeit one of trust in brand predictability and dependability ("goodwill").<sup>14</sup> As opposed to the generic placeless anonymity of industrial production, whereby olive oil may be bought from many countries or regions and blended until it achieves their signature brand's typical taste, smaller olive oil producers try to find ways to distinguish their product. In the production of estate oils, in contrast, there is the attempt to overcome what Karl Marx described as the severance of the connection between producer and consumer, which he argued was characteristic of capitalist production. Extravirgin olive oil producers accomplish this goal, or attempt to, by achieving a distinctive taste that indexes the particularity of the oil and the identity of the producer.<sup>15</sup> Instead of the erasure of the producer that Marx argued was characteristic of capitalist production, extravirgin olive oil producers try to make the labor invested in the commodity visible; for instance, noting on the label that the olives were "hand-picked."

Another valued guarantor of distinctiveness is achieving a DOP status for one's extravirgin olive oil. For instance, the Italian province of Umbria has its own DOP; to attain DOP status, the oil must be from olive trees planted in Umbria and it must also be bottled there.<sup>16</sup> Within the Umbrian DOP, five distinct underzones are recognized (Assisi-Spoleto, Colli Martani, Colli Trasimeno, Colli Orvieto, and Colli Amerini). Geographical area is highlighted in the requirement that the oil be produced in Umbria, joined by the specific qualities of climate and soil of each of the five regions. The distinct microclimates are held responsible for different varietals and tastes of olive oil. For instance, the warm microclimate surrounding Lake Trasimeno is said to allow for large trees and an unctuous, mild oil in contrast to Assisi-Spoleto, where the trees are half the size and grown in terraces on the sides of the mountains. The piquant taste of this latter oil was, my Umbrian informant assured me, a result of the trees having to "suffer" (*soffrire*) the harsher climate and relatively shallow soil in the terraces. In addition, particular production conventions must be followed (modes and timing of picking and pressing, the amount of heat used in the pressing, and methods of storing both olives and oil). In the words of one olive oil producer, the olives must be treated with *rispetto* (conversation with author, April 20, 2005), which is the notion of "respect" for the olive-guided technological production techniques. For instance, according to one producer, the olives must be pressed with gentle pressure at cool temperatures, without chemical extraction, if one did not want a resulting olive oil that, in his words, tastes like "kitty pee-pee" (conversation with author, April 24, 2005).<sup>17</sup> Another Umbrian olive oil producer produced the following proverb: "Olive oil is like a woman. If you treat her well, she'll give you a good product. If you treat her badly, she'll kick you in the shins" (conversation with author, April 18, 2005).

But proper production practices are not enough: to receive DOP certification, the oil must not only be graded as "extravirgin" but also must receive a grade of seven out of

nine on a taste test, according to one of the official Umbrian olive oil tasters. The designation is valued not only because it gains distinction for the producers, giving their oil a higher profile, but also because it means it can be sold at a higher price and has a much greater chance to be exported outside of the country. The DOP itself might be considered a kind of Latourian hybrid of nature, culture, land, *techné*, technology, and climate. The DOP is patterned on the French DOC. Chaia Heller notes that the French construct “nature” in distinctly social terms as a product of human labor associated with traditional agriculture practice (Heller this issue; see also Heller 2002). Although some scholars like Amy Trubek articulate the possibilities of reviving a “taste of place” (*gout de terroir*) as a means of creating locally “sustainable” food systems, others such as Ruth Laudan argue that another effect of the French Terroir Strategy, as she calls it, is that it is a “brilliant marketing device” (2004:138), something that the Slow Food movement, which has adopted this strategy, describes a little differently, as I discuss below.

#### DETERMINING “EXTRAVIRGINITY”

“It’s true.” He shrugged. “Lucia wants to be a virgin when we marry, just like her mother. So we had to stop sleeping together until we got engaged.”

Vincent’s statement, apparently illogical, drew no comment from his friends. In a country where literal fervent Catholicism was only a generation away, everyone knew that there were as many grades of virginity in girls as there were in olive oil—which, of course, is divided into extra-virgin (first cold pressing), extra-virgin (second pressing), superfine virgin, extra-fine virgin, and so on, down through a dozen or more layers of virginity and near virginity, before reaching a level of promiscuity so unthinkable that it is labelled merely “pure” and is thus fit only for export and lighting fires.

—Anthony Capella, *The Food of Love*

The above quote from a novel whose central theme is the oft-noted connection between food and sex makes fun of the recent proliferation of olive oil gradations that so confuse consumers, as well as playing on the potential manipulations of “virginal” status that so vex those responsible for ensuring that olive oil is not adulterated or misbranded. Vigilance in purity is as much an issue for food regulators as it is for olive oil producers. For instance, a chemist working for the U.S. Food and Drug Administration states: “Constant development of new and more useful analytical techniques as well as continuous *surveillance* is required to control *adulteration* and mislabeling of olive oil products” (Firestone 2001:179, emphasis added).

“Virginity” is a qualisign of value that is used to characterize both people and olive oil. In women and olive oil, virginity stands for purity. It is perhaps not chance that not only was Athena the goddess of *techné* but she was also a product of a virgin birth, springing from the head of Zeus fully grown and clothed. Moreover, the immortal Athena remains a virgin for all time. Connecting this rich

mythohistorical tradition to his contemporary product, a Greek olive oil producer in a recent advertisement proudly proclaimed his olive oil as “4,000 years old and still a virgin!” (National Post 2002:L19). Even in contemporary olive-producing societies, as I have argued elsewhere, people tend to speak of olive oil in a version of the honor–shame idiom, surveilling their olives through the production process to insure “pure” oil, as they might guard the purity of a virginal daughter (Meneley 2005). I was told by several Italian olive oil producers that if an oil does not achieve an extravirgin designation, they do not bottle it under their own label, metaphorically disowning the “impure” daughter.

It is the *extra* in the extravirgin olive oil that departs from this shared metaphorical space; after all, in the words of one Tuscan olive oil producer, a woman (or a goddess) is either a virgin or she is not (conversation with author, November 15, 2003). “Extravirgin” is a relatively recent designation denoting the highest quality of olive oil. The concrete and imaginary conditions of food production—and *technes* and technoscientific shaping of or interventions in food production—produce entailments on a food commodity’s ultimate exchange and consumption. The term *extravirgin* may evoke an ultrapure supervirgin in the imaginaries of many, but it is also a legal and bureaucratic term now. The International Olive Oil Council (IOOC), a body created in 1956 to regulate and promote olive oil production, established internationally standard criteria for grading to ensure product authenticity and to rank the various categories of oil, which novelist Cappella so cleverly superimposes onto womanly virginity. There are nine official categories to which an olive oil can be assigned, affecting very much how the oil can be marketed and the price it can command.<sup>18</sup>

Extravirginity is now determined by a chemical test for acidity level: legally, the term *extravirgin* can only be used to denote an olive oil that has less than 0.8 percent acidity. Extravirginity is also determined by production practices: the appellation “extravirgin” cannot be applied to oil that is produced by a treatment using heat or chemicals. Yet these objective, abstract, and democratic scientific modes of determining extravirginity are not enough. Aristocratic *technes* of distinction and aesthetics intervene in the form of an organoleptic taste test—done by highly trained, official tasters—which is also necessary to determine if an oil can be classified as “extravirgin”; tasters must establish sensorially that the oil has no defects at all. Although the organoleptic test results are couched in such language as follows—“olive oil is classified as extra virgin grade when the median of the defects is equal to 0 and the median of the fruity attribute is more than 0” (Kiritsakis 1998:244)—how one determines the grade is quite a different matter.

Lidia Bastianich, a celebrity chef and cookbook author, argues that “top-quality ‘extra-virgin’ olive oils . . . are pieces of art” (Best Life magazine 2004) appreciated by a rarefied aesthetic sensibility that must be cultivated. In short, extravirgin olive oil is a fat that can be perceived as a work of art, something that cannot be imagined for mass-produced fats like Crisco. In Italy in 2005, I took part in an olive oil



tasting seminar taught by a professional Umbrian olive oil taster. The *techne* for tasting includes qualities of persons and their purity of intention and body: (1) an orientation of the taster's intellectual capacities (concentration and memory) and (2) the comportment of the taster's body (good health, and untainted by perfumes, deodorants, mints, garlic, cigarettes, or coffee). Discourses of purity also appear in determining the surroundings in which oil should be evaluated. The oil should be tasted in the daytime in a clean, well-aired room with white walls. The olive oil should be poured into a clean, clear, stemless glass, and then held and gently warmed in the palm of one's hand. For visual inspection, one should hold up the glass to the natural light to evaluate the clarity and color of the oil.<sup>19</sup> For the olfactory evaluation, our tutor instructed us to give three to four short sniffs. The gustatory evaluation involves pouring a few drops on the tip of the tongue, tasting it before inhaling it sharply, so that the piquancy registers at the back of one's throat. The oil, despite being oil, should not taste "greasy." Then moralistic evaluations figure in: oil is graded by "defects," such as sourness or rancidness, and "virtues," such as "fruitiness" or "harmonic qualities" when the "perfume, flavor, and tactile sensations are in great equilibrium" (conversation with author, April 22, 2005).

In another aesthetic realm, extravirgin olive oil evaluations in many ways mimic the discourses of haute cuisine, so wonderfully parodied in Russell Baker's "Francs and Beans," in that it is unthinkable to use such a vocabulary of distinction to talk about mass-produced oil.<sup>20</sup> However, as in the case of coffee described by William Roseberry (1996), much more influential in olive oil tasting is the discourse of wine evaluations. For instance, the wine term *grand cru* has been adopted to denote single estate olive oils of particular excellence. One of the most successful French extravirgin olive oil marketers, L'Olivier, has included 33 Grand Cru oils from all over the Mediterranean in their list of their New Harvest oils (L'Olivier 2006).

"Wine speak" is a discourse in which connoisseurship is cultivated and demonstrated in the sensory process of seeing, smelling, and tasting the wine but also in the capacity to deploy sophisticated and persuasive descriptions of the wine (Silverstein 2006). Claudia Pharand, the owner of an exclusive Montreal shop selling expensive olive oil, makes this point explicitly: "Getting into olive oil is like getting into wine," offers Pharand, who has a wine cellar at home. "You get into the controlled appellations, you learn the subtle differences in taste by region. So, the mono-variety olive oils are categorized by region" (Latimer 2003). As in the case of wine, in olive oil discourses of connoisseurship, the agricultural, the technoscientific, and the aesthetic are brought together in one field. Silverstein's evocative phrase "boutique agriculture" (2006:12) describes much of what the Slow Food movement promotes, but it is a term that keeps class and hierarchy in the frame, something that Slow Food elides or denies. Surprisingly, for a movement that arose from the Italian left, there is remarkably little discussion of class in the Slow Food movement (Laudan 2004; Leitch

2003; Meneley 2004), although Slow Food supporters deny accusations of elitism (cf. Kummer 2002; Parasecoli 2003).

## CONCLUSION

Although not all North Atlantic consumers may be aware of the Slow Food movement, the concerns that inspired the movement also underpin many contemporary food concerns related to the industrial production of food: the dangers of *E. coli* that arise from meat-slaughtering technology, the effects of fast food on obesity, and the politics of genetically modified food. As Jack Goody (1997) demonstrates, industrial food facilitated European expansion in the days before refrigeration; when refrigeration became more accessible, as did food in general in the postwar period, industrial food took a class slide in North America and Northern Europe. Some food historians, like Ruth Laudan, argue that we seem to have had a collective amnesia about how industrial food actually made food safer and its supply more secure (Laudan 2003), and she suggests that gastronomy is only possible under conditions where food accessibility is assured (Laudan 2004). When people are confident that they have enough to eat (or in the case of some North America, more than enough), questions begin to be raised about what might have been lost in the transition to industrial food in terms of artisanal *technes* and tastes and the confidence that comes from knowing the origin of one's food.

It was when industrial food became readily available and cheap—and viewed with some derision and suspicion—that "the Mediterranean" became the positive Other for the North Atlantic, largely defined in terms of food that was imagined to be artisanally, instead of industrially, produced: food that was healthful, aesthetically pleasing, and requiring of a discerning palate that becomes part of what Pierre Bourdieu (1984) calls discourses of "distinction." The opposition between the North Atlantic and the Mediterranean is one of technoindustrial superiority and *techne*-aesthetic superiority. For North Atlantic dwellers, knowledge of the Mediterranean *techne*-aesthetic distinctions is part of an upper-middle-class "habitus." Instead of the generic readily available food items, "boutique cooking" is valued, in which each ingredient has a traceable origin.

Even though part of the Mediterranean is Muslim—long considered Europe's despised Other and now depicted as the troubling Other within (cf. Asad 2003:159–180)—the Muslim Mediterranean can be encompassed or elided through the rubric of "Mediterranean cuisine," which can be consumed as delicious and healthy food without reference to religion and politics. Just as class politics get erased in the Slow Food movement, so do regional and religious politics in discourses about Mediterranean cuisine. These are imaginaries, of course, but ones with real consequences for the way in which extravirgin olive oil can travel the world.

In the contemporary world, there is no doubt that the healthful aspects of the Mediterranean Diet and aesthetic appeal of the Mediterranean as an imagined space—both



unifying different orders of qualisigns of antiquity, naturalness, and artisanal technes of distinction and tradition—shape how olive oil flows globally. And yet the imaginary of Mediterranean cuisine as a kind of desirable culinary alterity depends crucially on an implied opposition with a reference point somewhere to the north and west, lands typified by the ancient geographer Strabo as the lands of barbaric others who subsisted on cuisines typified by butter and beer as opposed to olive oil and wine. In the modern geographic imaginary, the boundaries of Europe are ever shifting geographically and rhetorically, and the Mediterranean stands as one of Europe's imagined others, an antique classical pagan land straddling as noted above the boundaries of relative newcomers, Christendom and Islam.

But the Mediterranean does not merely stand to Europe as backwards periphery to industrial core, as European classical antiquity to European modernity (Herzfeld 1987). Rather, it may be seen as a semiperiphery with a rich cultural and aesthetic capital as opposed to a core with a rich endowment of both scientific and material capital. It is this relationship of partial identity and partial alterity that is figured in the opposition between artisanal technes of aesthetic distinction and industrial technoscience. Even the determination of a single qualisign, "extravirgin," has technical, scientific, and aesthetic aspects. The diagnosis of extravirginity partakes of purely objective analysis (chemical), traditions of production (techné), and the discursive connoisseur "techné" of distinction, the subjective appreciation by experts with "taste": ultimately, there is more to being an extravirgin than being pressed for the very first time.

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## NOTES

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1. The council itself proposes that olive oil is a kind of culture carrier: "One fact is certain: the expansion of the olive tree beyond its home area moved hand in hand with the spread of culture from East to West" (March 1994:5).

2. Numerous studies claim that the health benefits of the polyphenols and antioxidants are only present in extravirgin olive oil. As I elaborate further, mass-produced oil cannot operate in the same way in terms of showing culinary distinction.

3. As an anonymous AA reviewer noted, it is notable that Italy replaced Greece as the signature Mediterranean olive producer, given the prominence of Greek mythology and medicoscientific, mythology-based research on Crete in anchoring narratives of olive oil's current success. See Rosenblum (1996) for an illuminating discussion of the rivalry between various olive-producing countries. For example, consider the Spanish: despite being the largest olive oil producers in the world, they are eclipsed by the Italians who are the most successful marketers, buying up the excess oil from other parts of the Mediterranean and noting on the label "Bottled in Italy" rather than "Produced in Italy." Even within Italy there are rivalries: I was asked indignantly by a Puglian olive oil producer why I went to Tuscany to study olive oil when only two to three percent of Italian olive oil is produced in Tuscany, as opposed to Puglia, which is the largest oil producer (see Meneley 2005 for further discussion).

4. My use of the term *qualisign* is guided by Webb Keane's (2001) reading of Charles Peirce.

5. Leo Hickman is referring to the British celebrity chefs Delia Smith, Ainsley Harriott, and Jaime Oliver, all of whom are so well known that no last names are necessary.

6. Indeed, Wolfert's assertion that the Mediterranean can be a refuge from the competitive North Atlantic culture reveals an unfamiliarity with the agonistic aspects of social interaction in the Mediterranean described in great detail in the anthropological literature (cf. Campbell 1964).

7. Arjun Appadurai (1988:21) makes a similar argument for the transcendent category of "vegetarian," under which various national cuisines can be partially subsumed to appeal to U.S. markets for which it is a salient category.

8. It is interesting to see how perceptions of "healthy" fat—and how they have been ratified in technoscientific research—have changed over the last century. With the introduction of the notion of "calories" and child health, Crisco was promoted as a way of getting children (esp. girls) to eat more fat to help them grow (Neil 2002:306). Such a suggestion is hard to imagine now, given contemporary concerns about trans fats, of which Crisco was the exemplar, and childhood obesity in the Northern Atlantic countries.

9. Massimo Mazzotti continues, "Because of its viscosity and oiliness, olive oil worked extremely well under pressure: it maintained coefficients of friction between 0.07 and 0.08 between wood surfaces, metal surfaces, or a combination of the two. This meant that, given the relatively low rotational speed of English machinery before the turn of the nineteenth century, olive oil could endure great stress without decomposing" (Mazzotti 2004:292).

10. Obviously, this section owes inspiration to Sidney Mintz's (1985) groundbreaking work on the taste for food commodities like sugar and unequal consequences of industrializing production. Another notable work is Susan Terrio's (2000) on craft production of French *grand cru* chocolates.

11. The ancient amphorae came to a point at the bottom, which facilitated stacking in ships for transport. When off-loading the cargo, the amphorae would be stuck in the sand to keep them upright.

12. Fine olive oil, unlike fine wine, does not improve with age and should ideally be consumed within two years of its purchase. This particular property of olive oil is of immense concern for extravirgin olive oil producers seeking markets.

13. In a book published in 1996, Rosenblum describes the Laudemio consortium as the first *grand cru* of olive oil (1996:111).

14. See Paul Manning (this issue) for a discussion of the consequences of brand unpredictability in postsocialist Georgia. See also R. E. Moore (2003) for an insightful discussion of branding practices.

15. I elaborate this point in Meneley 2004.

16. My Umbrian olive oil-tasting tutor, who was one of the olive oil judges for the assignation of the DOP, was here referring to the rather widespread practice of buying up oil from elsewhere and bottling it under Italian labels.

17. Cold extraction was opposed to hot extraction with chemical refinements, which one Californian olive oil expert likened to

petroleum processing, stressing that the oil produced by the latter production method was so far from nature that it could hardly be considered food.

18. Obviously, the implications of the IOOC's activities are much more multifaceted than I can address here. However, one can see the themes of "ancientness," "naturalness," and "technoscience" in the following statement from their website:

By coordinating national production and marketing policies for olive oils and table olives, adopting rules and standards to ensure product *authenticity* and implementing multidisciplinary activities in the fields of agriculture, technology, science and information, the Council has become the linchpin of any multilateral activity aimed at *defending and promoting* the olive tree and its produce. ... The fact that the prestige of olive oil is growing stronger by the day far beyond its Mediterranean borders confirms that our ancestors were right. At the same time it augurs a new lease of life for this *age-old tree* and encourages the entire olive community to continue working for all those who earn their livelihood from olive farming. [International Olive Oil Council n.d., emphasis added]

19. In contrast, the Californian Olive Oil Council judges insisted that, for tasting, one had to use dark blue glasses so that the color of the oil cannot impinge on the evaluation of the taste and smell.

20. Baker describes his peanut butter and banana on a graham cracker as "pâté de fruites de nuts of Georgia," implicitly drawing our attention to the fact that one does not use this language of distinction to refer to "industrial" food (2003:43). Monty Python's spam sketch where a waitress announces one of the specials as "Lobster Thermidor aux Crevettes with a Mornay sauce served in a Provencale manner with shallots and aubergines garnished with truffle pâté, brandy and with a fried egg on top and spam" plays with this same theme (see Monty Python 1975).

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