

# South African artisanal olive oil beats world's best

story by paul ross

**H**e was all smiles when I was introduced to Giulio Bertrand at Morgenster (Afrikaans for 'morning star') in the Western Cape region of South Africa. Surrounded by his visiting family from Italy, Bertrand had much to smile about. His Morgenster estate extra virgin olive oil had just won the prestigious L'Orciolo d'Oro award in Pesaro, Italy, beating the world's top olive oil producers for the sixth consecutive year, firmly establishing itself as a world-class producer.

Giulio Bertrand didn't set out to revitalize South Africa's long-dormant olive oil industry. But the 76-year-old Italian entrepreneur found his passion at this historic 300-year-old estate in the rolling hills west of Somerset. So in 1992, he imported and planted 3,000 Tuscan olive saplings of frantoio, leccino, coratina, favolozza and peranzana to the similar Mediterranean-type climate of the Western Cape. And, in just over a decade, Bertrand has transformed one of the Cape's most breathtakingly beautiful estates into what could be a Tuscan hill-village with an extraordinarily rich and varied landscape with stunning views over its neat silver-patterned olive groves and vineyards. Morgenster Estate now encompasses 28,000 trees with 42 hectares under cultivation yielding 67 thousand litres annually. Bertrand's early plantings signaled the beginning of an olive oil renaissance for South Africa.

While most food and wine lovers have been focusing on South Africa's incredible wine boom, a fledgling olive oil industry has been emerging. Today, South Africa's artisanal olive oils are more abundant and better than ever. National consumption of olive oil is showing significant annual growth as consumers become increasingly aware of the "excellent health-enhancing qualities of olives", according to ARC Infruitec-Nietvoorbij research centre in Stellenbosch. Although per capita consumption is difficult to trace, overall imports have grown by 75 percent. (Extra virgin olive oil makes up 63 percent of total imports.)

In celebrated Cape cuisine, Mediterranean

influences—in particular olive oil—have become pervasive in the culinary culture while retaining a uniquely South African flavour. And while olive oils from Italy's Tuscany region remain the benchmark for premium olive oils, restaurants and consumers are starting to realize they can now get excellent extra virgin olive oils from single estates in South Africa. Leading Cape Town consultant chef Peter Goffe-Wood—whose business card reads 'food alchemist'—uses Morgenster in several recipes, including fresh grilled asparagus salad with extra virgin olive oil, lemon and shaved parmesan—and his signature gazpacho.

What exactly is extra virgin olive oil? Simply, it is oil that has one percent (or less) oleic acid. Extra virgin olive oil is the oil from the first pressing of the olives, which extracts the very essence of the olive. Harvested olives are processed without heat or chemicals during extraction for "cold pressed" oil. Oils that are certified extra virgin by the International Olive Oil Council must also have perfect aroma, flavour and colour.

Like estate wines, estate olive oils tend to represent the highest quality. In fact, there are striking similarities between grape vines and olive trees and the liquid their fruit produces, one reason why you see many of the finest wine estates in Italy, such as Antinori and Frescobaldi, producing world-class oil as well.

Both are products of their terroir—and both vary depending on the varieties planted and how the oils they yield are blended. And both benefit from harvesting by hand at precisely the right moment. (There are differences as well—the main one being that while some wines improve with age, olive oil is best consumed young—ideally within 18 months of harvest—freshness is key.)

**O**live harvest begins in late March at Morgenster. Hand harvesting is done, as it is with other smaller estates, where the olives are destined for artisanal oils. The ultimate flavour of any variety can be completely changed by either harvesting the fruit green (unripe) or mature (ripe). Unlike many fruits (including other olives), which are picked at the point of perfect ripeness, Morgenster olives are handpicked predominantly under-ripe, which has a big influence on the style of oil produced. Green oils have a green herbaceous characteristic—but optimum levels of polyphenols which provide flavour and aromatics, and antioxidants that promote healthfulness—while the riper fruit has more of an olive fruity flavour.

And like estate-grown grapes, which are processed entirely on-premises, Morgenster estate-grown olives are pressed on-premise in an ultra-modern plant using Pieralisi equipment (unlike many estate-grown olives which are frequently pressed in communal mills). Like many top oils, Morgenster is bottled without filtration.

Bertrand reveals some secrets behind the success of his extra virgin olive oil. "First of all, I am Italian and we have olive oil in our DNA. And secondly, from the beginning of this project I have been assisted by the number one olive oil adviser in the world," he says. Consultant Professor Giuseppe Fontanazza of Perugia—who influenced varietal choices—also works with Morgenster oil maker Gerrie Duvenhage during the blending process.

Sitting at the long oak table in the tasting room—the original Morgenster wine cellar—across from the classic Cape Dutch architecture manor house, the Morgenster extra virgin olive oil is excellent—highly aromatic and fruity, with an intense colour.

Like other successful luxury brands, Bertrand also understands the power of design. The artisanal extra virgin olive oil and olive products earn a price premium with designer bottles etched and labeled with the scallop-mounted morning star from the front gable of the homestead, considered one of the finest examples of baroque style in the Cape—if you happen to be an art historian. The label is now also used on its wines.

While Bertrand was not initially driven by his belief in the property's viticultural potential, he later planted a selection of Bordeaux varieties, vinifying the grapes at Lanzerac's facility in Stellenbosch. Since 2001, however, Morgenster grapes have been crushed on the property and winemaker Marius Lategan's wines have been released to immediate critical acclaim.

The flagship Morgenster Estate is terroir transmitted into bottle, with an opulent nose followed by an St-Emilion-like structure on the palate. Morgenster Estate has complex flavours with a high proportion of luscious Merlot (45 percent in the finished wine): the 2001 was a fine elegant debut. And, Château Cheval Blanc's Pierre Lurton has overseen the launch of a second label—Lourens River Valley—that critics say is the equal of most wineries' top cuvées (and I agree).

"My dream is to produce the best Italian-style olive oil and Bordeaux-style wine in South Africa. Where there is passion, there is no compromise," says Bertrand. Giulio Bertrand is well on his way to realizing his dream. ☛