

The Meaning of Olive Oil: A Journey Through History, Innovation, and Quality

March 20, 2025 · Davide Gomba



Last week we hosted the first live interview by RuralHack!

This article aims to recap what emerged during the online presentation of Cinzia Scaffidi's book *Il Senso dell'Olio* held last week.

From a purely metanarrative point of view, I think we should increase the amount of content of this kind, but let us know what you think!

Everyone Has a Book in the Drawer: How Did You Get Yours Out, Cinzia?

The long writing process and the research behind the book

Cinzia Scaffidi told us that writing the book took about a year, but the real work started much earlier, with an extensive phase of field research.

She visited producers, interviewed experts, and collected data, seeking to understand the world of olive oil from a multidisciplinary perspective. This method allowed her to approach the topic in a detailed and multifaceted way, highlighting not only the production of olive oil but also its cultural and social implications.

The History of Olive Oil and Its Role in Society

A central point of the interview focused on the historical and symbolic value of **olive oil**. Scaffidi recounts how oil, since ancient times, has had multiple uses: food-related, cosmetic, medicinal, and even industrial. In her book, she emphasizes how, until the 19th century, olive oil was also used for public lighting, especially in London, before the advent of electricity revolutionized the sector. This change had a strong impact on local economies, such as that of Apulia, which exported large quantities of **lamp oil**.

Moreover, the book explores the role of olive oil in **Mediterranean civilization**, stressing its centrality alongside bread and wine. These three elements not only hold gastronomic value, but also represent a deeply rooted cultural and territorial identity in the Mediterranean.

Technological Evolution and the Quality of Olive Oil

Another topic discussed was the **change in oil production due to technological advancements**. In the past, oil was produced using rudimentary methods that often

compromised the final quality. Scaffidi explains how the introduction of modern mills, made of stainless steel and equipped with more controlled extraction systems, has led to a significant improvement in the quality of extra virgin olive oil.

In the book, the author dedicates a significant portion to **innovation in mills** and how this has influenced the purity of the oil. More advanced technologies have made it possible to **eliminate the flaws** that previously led to low-quality oils, making much more refined and healthier products available today.

Market Complexity and Consumer Misinformation

Scaffidi also discusses the difficulties consumers face in recognizing **quality oil**. Marketing and legislation often confuse customers, who find themselves choosing among products with unclear labels. In her book, the author analyzes the so-called **“jungle of words,”** highlighting how terms like *extra virgin*, *refined*, or *olive oil* are often used ambiguously.

During the interview, she points out that many **Mediterranean consumers** take olive oil for granted, without realizing its nutritional and organoleptic characteristics. Paradoxically, Northern consumers, who are discovering olive oil for the first time, are more inclined to study its qualities and select high-end products

Another issue discussed is **food fraud**. The author describes how the olive oil sector is often subject to scams, with products being passed off as extra virgin oils that in reality contain blends of lower-quality oils. The proposal to create a new category of **“premium extra virgin”** oil, aimed at distinguishing high-quality products, is one of the topics that emerged in the discussion..

Fonte: <https://www.ruralhack.org/en/the-meaning-of-olive-oil-a-journey-through-history-innovation-and-quality/>