Meneley (2007) Like an Extra Virgin

Meneley, Anne


Olive oil is a Mediterranean product defined by its “ancientness,” “naturalness,” versatility, and aesthetic value bestowed by the goddess Athena. It is “‘liquid gold’ for eating, curing, cleansing, illuminating, and anointing” (Meneley 2007: 674). I assume these are words/phrases/concepts used in marketing it? They are just sort of hanging here and need some contextualization.

Today, olive oil is both an industrially produced grocery store commodity, and a work of artisanal craftsmanship with subtle tastes as complex as fine wine. Although commercialized store brands are ubiquitous, there is a large following of olive oil connoisseurs in Italy that strive to sustain the artistic, “hand-picked” production of pressed olive oils, through the creation of the Slow Food Movement as a response to the emergence of fast food in Rome in 1986, and the implementation of personal touches such as handwritten expiration dates on the oil’s packaging (Meneley 2007: 682). The previous sentence is too complex and the reference to the slow food movement is jammed into the middle. Perhaps separate into two sentences. Also, create a link to the wiki page on the slow food movement on this wiki.

There is even an International Olive Oil Council that sets high standards to judge the “extravirginity” of fine olive oils, in a process involving sitting in a “clean, well-aired room with white walls” with the olive oil “poured into a clean, clear, stemless glass, and held and warmed gently in the palm of one’s hand.” (Meneley 2007: 684). Taste, color, aroma, and texture are all meticulously examined.

Meneley devotes two pages to define “extravirginity” as the pinnacle of quality in every sense. The depth of detail that Meneley included to do this was necessary for this article, because without it the reader would not understand that the term defines olive oil beyond the supermarket definition of grade-A freshness. An olive oil with the extravirgin designation must, for example, achieve at least a seven-out-of-ten taste test score, have less than .8% acidity, and must not be pressed through the use of heat and chemical treatments (Meneley 2007: 683). Although the term “virgin” does also apply in the humanized sense of high purity here, the “virginity” of olive oil also includes the technoscientific balance between agricultural processing of the olives into oil, as well as the preservation of its natural qualities as a classically cultural fruit of the Mediterranean.

Although olive oil is a common ingredient in beauty products, Meneley refers to olive oil as a “sexy fat” in an unconventional way. In countries such as England, its popularity grew as it trendily replaced butter as a more sophisticated fat for cooking. In addition, the oil is delicious in both its pure and processed forms, a rare characteristic of a fatty food product (Meneley 2007: 680). Although “sexy” may not be the most applicable term here, Meneley still successfully expresses the idea that olive oil is versatile and popular in an accessible, nearly cute way.

The global cultural importance of olive oil appears very dynamic and interdisciplinary. Meneley repeatedly emphasizes how the blending of aesthetic and scientific principles shape the artistic practicality of olive oil as a global staple that doubles as both a healthy cooking fat, and a symbol of the Mediterranean as an epicenter of culinary creativity. Olive oil has assumed the identity of “a new unity of the Mediterranean,” a light, healthy ingredient representative of the “Mediterranean diet” that highlights neat production of food products using methods that process the harvested crops as little as possible (Meneley 2007: 679). The “technoscience” of producing olive oil as a consumer product that is globalized, industrialized, and processed with modern machinery still emphasizes the age-old tradition of “domestic craft” and hard work to achieve the highest quality (Meneley 2007: 681). Meneley successfully depicted olive oil as a timeless, romantic European cultural emblem, especially by linking its current connoisseur culture to the ancient mythology that had preached its versatility and dietary richness.

Great article for this assignment.