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From Sicily to Expo, how local products promote the land's identity and heritage: Adele Giaconia and the Villa Colonna Olive Oil

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A bridge between the past and the present, keeping the history and looking at innovation: this is the path some Sicilian farmers are following in the area known as "Nebrodi", a park established in 1993 that includes the most important Sicilian woodlands. The Arabians used to call it the "Island in the island", where wood, high mountain green pastures, and lakes clashes with the dry Sicilian lands. These producers are helping Sicilian economy using products at their best: among them, Adele Giaconia, a former math teacher, that - once retired - decided to embrace a different lifestyle, leaving Palermo and moving to her family estate in the countryside near Messina. The estate came with an olive grove that had been neglected for years. With the help of her husband Salvatore, Adele renovated the olive grove and founded the "Azienda Agricola Villa Colonna" for the production of high quality organic extra-virgin olive oil.

Can you tell us a bit of the history of this land?

I would say that our story dates back to 1577, when Marcantonio Colonna, a hero of the naval battle of Lepanto, was named Viceroy of Sicily by



Adele and Salvatore at their stand at Milan Expo

King Philip II of Spain. He also received the property of immense Sicilian feuds. Then the district in the territory of Reitano, a small town in the

province of Messina, was named "Colonna" and, at the end of the 18th century, the Giaconia family became the owner of nine hectares of the land, seven of them made of olive groves.

When did you start working on the production of your olive oil?

The Giaconia family had always produced olive oil that had never been on the market. Since 2001, together with my husband Salvatore, we increased the production by planting more than two thousand new trees and by building a modern watering implant. The clayey soil and the position of the olive grove, directly on the sea, allow an ideal environment for Santagatense, Giarraffa, Biancolilla, Verdello, Nocellara del Belice e Messinese varieties. The olive grove has several hundred-year-old trees of the "Santagatense" variety and has been recently upgraded with new species of trees selected to enhance the qualities of the product.

What's the secret behind producing olive oil?

We start harvesting early in October when the olives are greener. We use the traditional Sicilian method: every day before the harvesting, we settle nets under each single tree. Then, we collect olives manually or sometimes using automated combs, directly from the trees. Those considered overly mature or bad fruits, which usually fall down spontaneously, are discarded. On the same day of the harvesting, we carry olives to the mill, where olives

are weighted, washed and separated from the foliage and the waste. At this point, the real production of olive oil starts.

The production of olive oil represents more than a business...

Villa Colonna belongs to the "Strade dei Sapori dei Nebrodi", an association related to the Nebrodi's Park. We orga-



Adele with a bottle of Villa Colonna Olive Oil outside the Italian Pavillon at Expo

nize tours in the park and create a network of farm holiday accommodations and extra-hospitality services. To me, it represents the perfect way to

appreciate and enjoy the touristic offer of the area, characterized by a precious naturalistic, historical, and cultural heritage.

Why was so important to be part of this project?

In the past, our identity has been characterized by a strong connection between agriculture and local firms. This link still exists but can be also seen as part of a bigger picture, represented by our heritage. The historical, naturalistic, anthropological aspects are usually ignored or left apart, while they could represent a good starting point to make people aware of the importance of our identity.

What was missing to Sicilian products before Le Strade dei Sapori project started?

Our high quality products used to be sell in Northern Italy or abroad without keeping the connection with the land where they were made. We want to use our products to attract visitors and help them explore Sicily, using our local accommodations, having their meals in our restaurants, taking tours around our firms where products such as olive oil, cheese, wine, salumi are made.

Why does Milan Expo represent an opportunity?

As Villa Colonna, we decided to become member of the Bio-Mediterranean Cluster, with the Sicilian Region as Official Partner. We embraced the Cluster's spirit because it represents the Mediterranean values, related to food, integration, and culture. The Mediterranean area is made of a mix of tastes, cultures, history. That's why we decided to take our project and our products to Expo, to let visitors from all over the world discover about Sicily from a different perspective.

Which milestone are you most proud so far?

Our firm has been rewarded with an honorable mention for the special commitment in olive growing in the Nebrodi's area. L'Olio di Colonna has also taken part in the Twelfth Exposition of single Cultivar Oils. The chemical and sensory data related to our oil are considered excellent and are now included in the single cultivar oil database and in the 2015 edition of the related catalog.

What's your next goal?

Our goal is and has always been helping the survival of the small local businesses of our territory, often threatened by the bigger international companies. We have to provide high quality products with a well defined identity, something that is missing in products coming from big companies. A network of small businesses employing local labour and services can improve the growth of the Nebrodi economy, creating new jobs and welfare.



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