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Olive Oil: Once the Pits, Now Liquid Gold (or Green)
by Katy Budge

*My first encounter with "the real stuff" ...
industry hitting its stride on the Central Coast ...
olive oil facts and factoids ...
and, believe it or not, there is a Spam Truck!*



just harvested olives at Tiber Canyon Ranch, KB'07

For most of us of a certain age, the words "olive oil" meant a tiny, triangle-shaped, and very dusty bottle of "Pompei" brand in the back of the cupboard. Fortunately, olive oil is enjoying a renaissance in this country -- once again, we're finally catching on to what Europeans have known for centuries -- and we've learned that a fabulous meal can consist simply of olive oil, sea salt, and a loaf of crusty bread.

I remember the exact moment I learned that culinary lesson. As a freshly minted English major in the early 1980s, I jumped at the chance to do the archetypal backpack jaunt in Europe, especially since some friends would be over there at the same time. One in particular was tutoring for an Italian family in Milan, so I went to visit him one early winter weekend.

When he picked me up at the train station, he said that plans had changed and would it be okay if we went to the country house tomorrow instead of staying in Milan? Um, well, geez, if we must, though it is possible that if I'd known about the Autostrada, the Italian version of the autobahn, I might have said no and unknowingly missed a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity.

I think my knuckles had to be pried off the Fiat's dashboard, but we arrived safe and sound at "the country house," actually a former monastery dating back to the 11th century. Since it was surrounded by vineyards and olive trees, the family made their own wine and olive oil. I knew odds were really good that I'd like the wine, but I didn't get the hoopla about the oil. In fact, I got a little suspect when someone poured some onto a plate, sprinkled some coarse salt over it, and offered it to me with a loaf of bread. First of all, the oil was green, the salt was certainly not Morton's table salt, and whoever heard of eating bread with oil? But when in Rome, or rather Tuscany ...

What happened next was one of those moments when you realize the transcendent potential of taste. I was expecting bland, oily blah -- what I got was pungent, peppery, green, grassy, fruity, explosions of wow! Never mind the wine, I wanted to pick the plate up and slurp up every last drop of oil! Thankfully, I didn't, because I came to realize later (many months and even years later) that the "country house" was the renowned Badia a Coltibuono (<http://www.coltibuono.com/0index.asp?lingua=ing>) and my hostess was Lorenza De Medici -- yes, that de Medici, and no, she certainly wouldn't remember me.

As in Europe, olive oil and olive trees seem to do well in the same regions that wine grapes flourish, and many references to Italian folklore say that olive trees grow best when the following five conditions are present: sun, stone, drought, silence, and solitude. Given that, it's no surprise that California's Central Coast is front and center in the olive oil revolution. The local charge was arguably spearheaded by Pasolivo (<http://www.pasolivo.com/>) and the efforts of its founder Karen Guth to help the California Olive Oil Council (<http://www.coooc.com/index.html>) establish a standardized certification process, but the rest of the award-winning ranks swell with names such as Olea Farms (<http://www.oleafarm.com/>), Tiber Canyon Ranch (<http://www.tibercanyon.com/>), Vineyard Canyon Ranch (<http://www.tibercanyon.com/>), Olio Nuovo, Robbins Family Farm (<http://www.robbinsfamilyfarm.com/>), Carriage Vineyards (<http://www.carriagevineyards.com/olives.html>), Allure Estates (<http://www.allureestates.com/>), Figueroa Farms (<http://www.allureestates.com/>), Olivas de Oro (<http://store.olivasdeoro.com/>) ... well, you get the idea.

Most of these local olive oil labels are small operations, and often rely on friends and family to help harvest. Such is the case with Tiber Canyon in Arroyo Grande, owned by Will Carlton and Chris Anderson, who host a gathering each year to harvest about 10 acres of sustainably grown Tuscan varieties. You might think that spending a December Sunday morning pulling bushels of olives off trees sounds too much like work, but it's far from it. Modeled on similar events in rural Italy, everyone moves through the trees at their own pace, chatting with old friends and making new ones, all conversations punctuated with the rat-a-rat-tat of olives hitting the plastic harvest containers. After about four hours of picking, everyone is treated to a relaxed, rustic, and tasty feast barbecued by Chris's parents.

(at right: Harvesters turn in their bounty at Tiber Canyon Ranch, KB'07)

Unlike harvesting something like grapes, where far more skill and expertise come to bear in selecting the ripe fruit and pruning it off, olive picking is pretty easy. You just strip the olives off the branches with either your hands or harvesting rakes, an action which also supposedly helps prune the tree. Any significant leaf matter gets pulled out later, but if some gets in the mix, it's of little matter since the whole fruit -- pit and all -- goes into the crusher. You also don't need to sort out olives that are riper than others; once the crop as a whole is deemed ripe enough to produce the desired style of oil, all the olives come off.



(Somehow, the goopy, purplish, just pressed olive paste at left, turns into clear, delicious olive oil, below.

Pasolivo harvest -- KB'07)



The best way to find your favorite style of oil is simply to taste some, and be ready for a broad range of tastes. (Here's a tasting wheel with some typical flavor profiles. http://www.oliveoilsource.com/tasting_sheet.htm) As with wine, the style of olive oil depends on a variety of factors, including the type of olive, the ripeness at harvest, the weather, the soil type, the microclimate, etc. Some oils are mellow with just a bit of fruitiness, while others are so green and grassy that they literally catch in your throat. Some oils are best for cooking, while some are best for finishing a dish or just on their own.

If you want to taste through a lineup of olive oils produced locally and throughout the state, you can belly up to the tasting bar at the We Olive (<http://www.weolive.com/>) flagship store in Paso Robles or a growing number of locations in California. If you're a newbie, the friendly staff will walk you through the process; if you already know what style you like, they'll point you right to it. Of course, you can also revel in all things olive at the Paso Robles Olive Festival (<http://www.pasoolivefestival.com/index.html>). In large part the brainchild of We Olive founder/owner Gary Brown, and now a signature event for the Paso Robles Main Street organization, this annual event will celebrate its 5th festive year in 2008, and draws not only Central Coast area olive producers, but an increasing number from throughout the state as well.

Facts and Factoids about Olive Oil:

Olive trees are among the oldest known cultivated plants, and were being grown before the emergence of written language.

Olive crowns and olive branches are symbols of blessing, peace, and abundance, and were ritually offered to deities and powerful figures; an olive branch was even found in King Tut's tomb.

Olive trees were so revered in ancient Greek society that anyone who cut one down was condemned to death or exile.

True "flavored" olive oil means that the flavoring agent -- such as citrus, or even jalapenos -- has been pressed right along with the olives. "Infused" oils are those that have had the flavoring agent added to the already pressed oil.

"Extra-virgin" olive oil is from the first pressing of olives, has the strongest flavor of all the oils, contains less than one percent acidity, and typically comprises a pungent flavor best used alone as a dipping liquid or for drizzling.

"Virgin" olive oil must have less than two percent acidity, is somewhat milder in flavor, and is excellent in recipes where the olive flavor shouldn't come through in the dish.

"Light" refers solely to the color of the oil, not the fat content. This particular oil has a very mild taste, making it akin to vegetable oil.

"Pomace" oil is second or third pressing oil that has been treated to a heat filtering process to extract the remaining oil; because the heating process changes the chemical qualities of the extracted oil, there are questions about the health benefits of such oils.

The Mission Olive Preservation, Restoration, and Education Project (MOPREP) (<http://www.moprep.org/>) aims to preserve the cultural link to the California Mission Olive tree for the purpose of general public education and enjoyment of the historical significance, culinary heritage, and health benefits of the Mission Olive tree and its oil.

Frequently Asked Questions about California Olive Oil from the California Olive Oil Council's website ...

- Q. Where are olives grown in California?
A. It is possible to grow olives in most regions of California. Olives are grown anywhere where the temperatures does not frequently fall below 20 degrees F any time during the winter. There are very large olive growing regions in the Central Valley as well as the North Sacramento Valley.
- Q. How long have olives been grown in California?
A. The first olives were planted around 1789 at the mission in San Diego.
- Q. When are oil olives harvested?
A. Harvesting may begin as early as November and finish as late as late February.
- Q. How should olive oil be stored?
A. It is recommended that olive oil be stored in a dark, cool area such as a cupboard away from heat or direct light.
- Q. What is the shelf life of olive oil?
A. Olive oil is best when used within one to two years of pressing.
- Q. Approximately how many pounds of olives would be found on an average tree?
A. This varies a great deal but approximately 30-200 pounds are produced from the average mature olive tree. There are many variables.
- Q. How many gallons of olive oil could be made from an average mature tree?
A. Approximately 2/3 to 4 gallons of oil per tree.
- Q. Do some varieties have higher oil content than others?
A. Yes, there is a great span with regard to percentage of oil from the fruit among the different cultivars. The range is approximately 12-28%. Examples are Arbequina (25-27%), Barouni (13-18%), Frantoio (23-26%), Mission (19-24%) and Pendolino (20-25%).
- Q. Are the olives picked when they are green?
A. No, for oil the best maturity stage for ripe fruit flavor and good keeping quality is as the fruit is turning from yellow/green to purple on the outside skin and before the pulp turns black. Table olives are picked green and firm. But olives are also picked at all the other stages of ripeness depending on your desired style of oil.
- Q. Is the pit crushed as well?
A. Yes. Traditionally the entire fruit is crushed.
- Q. What is an extra virgin olive oil?
A. Extra virgin olive oil is obtained from the fruit of the tree solely by mechanical or other physical means under conditions that do not lead to deterioration of the oil. No chemicals or extreme heat may be used during the extraction process. Extra virgin olive oil must pass a wide range of chemical tests, including a maximum acidity, in terms of oleic free fatty acid, of not more than 1 % and a peroxide value of less than 20 meq O2/kg. In addition, it must be judged defect-free with some olive fruitiness, determined through a blind sensory evaluation by a trained tasting panel (such as the COOC's Tasting Panel).
- Q. Is extra virgin olive oil healthier for me than other oils?
A. Yes. Olive oil is very healthy and has a number of health benefits. Complete information may be found at this site under Health Benefits.
- Q. How can I be sure that I am purchasing an extra virgin olive oil?
A. The California Olive Oil Council's Seal Certification program provides quality assurance to the consumer and retailer. Only the finest olive oils produced receive our seal. We follow the same guidelines as the International Olive Oil Council in Madrid. For more information please see Certification Program at this site. We also have a list of producers who have received the COOC seal certification.



And, according to Wikipedia ...

Olive Oyl is a cartoon character created by Elzie Crisler Segar in 1919 for his comic strip Thimble Theater. Thimble Theater later became Popeye after the sailor character became the most popular member of the comic strip's cast. Olive Oyl was a character in the strip for 10 years before the first appearance of Popeye in 1929.

Last, but not least ... keeping up with the Oscar Meyers

Evidently, processed pork products have their own "mobile." Yes, I have seen the Spam Truck! It was at an art show in Scottsdale last year (go figure), and yes, of course, I tried the

