

WAITROSE FOOD ILLUSTRATED

ISSUE 98 · JUNE 2007 · £2.50

FREE TO WAITROSE/JOHN LEWIS & PARTNERSHIP CARD-HOLDERS · ONE PER CARD-HOLDER · ACC3858/£££4381/PAR3957/VCH4350

Summer cool

Simple recipes for
blueberry cordial,
mint lemonade
and ginger beer

How to make the perfect *!@*\$!

Clarissa Dickson Wright
slams the recipe bores

Broader beans

Brilliant matches
for pappardelle,
hot-smoked salmon,
soup and more

Where to eat in Madrid

In praise of retsina

Andrew Jefford salutes
a much-maligned wine

Dig in!

Sam Clark's dishes to share on sunny days

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With love from...

EXTREMADURA

The austere, southwestern region of Spain that bred the toughest conquistadors is also home to the aristocratic father and son who now press the country's finest olive oil. Kevin Gould doffs his cap out of respect for a great oil and its equally classy makers



I AM INTRODUCED TO THE honourable Alonso Alvarez de Toledo y Urquijo, Marqués of Valdehaza, by his son, Fadrique Alvarez de Toledo. "I'm not much of a one for grand titles," I offer. "So please call me Kevin." Their excellencies are the prime movers behind the Marqués de Valdehaza extra virgin, first-pressing,

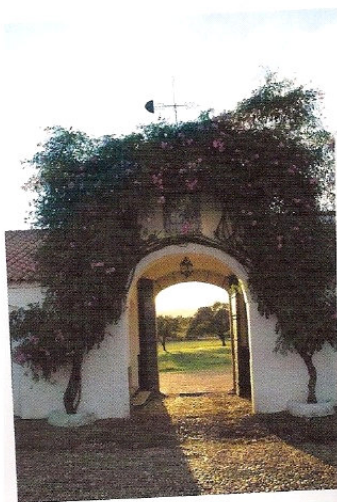
single-estate olive oil — an oil so fine that I've agreed to journey down to one of the family estates in southwest Spain to slum it with them. Fadrique has driven us the 400km from Madrid, arrowing towards signs for Portugal. We pause en route for a high-fat, high-salt, high-sugar lunch at the 14th-century *parador* at Oropesa, a pile built by one of the Valdehazas' ancestors. What else did he do? "Oh, conquering Peru, mostly," thinks Fadrique.

Near Badajoz, and under the open skies of Extremadura, we approach the family olive groves at Los Perales. Parching hot in summer and raw in winter, this is in the region the Romans called Lusitania, and from where they recruited their toughest centurions. It was here, too, that the kings of Spain found their most fearless conquistadors. Survive Extremadura, they thought,

and the perils of South America are as nought. This landscape has a strength and raw beauty that reminds you regularly that you are, in the natural scheme of things, puny in the extreme. There are Roman ruins and medieval walled cities but mostly there is *dehesa*. This word describes the scrub beneath the *encina* trees — holm oaks — that greenly punctuate the view. It is on this acorn-rich herbage that black-foot pigs feed, thus sweetening the pretty-ankled hind legs that will become Ibérico hams.

We celebrate our arrival at Los Perales with a plate of this rare ham, the slices garnet and richly, deeply, meltingly savoury. "Extremadura is famous for her hams, but not yet for her oil," says Fadrique. Alonso and he pour small wineglasses of their new-season oil and toast each other. In their waisted jackets, with their combed, curly hair, fine noses and full beards, they pause for a moment, the better to appreciate their oil's fine aromas, looking for all the world as if posing for Velázquez. I sleep the night serenaded by the barking of hounds and hinds, in a four-poster hung with fine nets gathered under a brass coronet.

The world we wake to is biblically bright. In one direction, substantial pigs and sheep branded with the family 'V' truffle about the *dehesa*. To the west, the voluptuous hills of the Los Perales olive groves appear as if ordered by the giant rake of a Japanese gardener. Shaggy with fruit, the trees caterpillar over

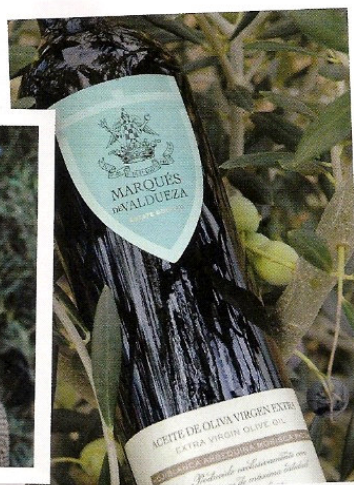
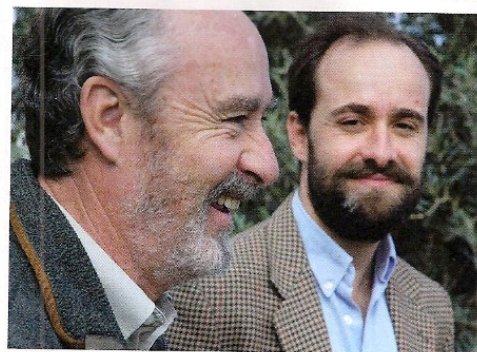
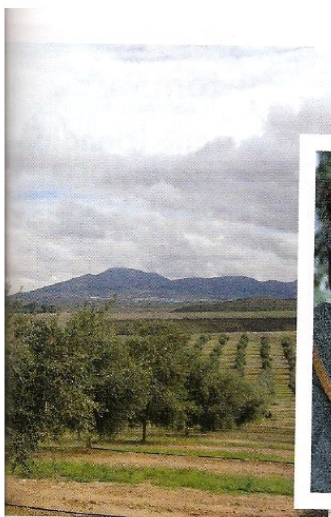


A white arch marks the entrance to the family estate, *below left*; pickers drag away the filled nets, *below right*; father and son, Alonso and Fadrique, share a joke, *opposite*

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the horizon: red earth, green trees, red, green, red, green until the eye tires of this order and alights on a jumbled stork's nest perched on a power pylon. After a prodigious breakfast of toast, olive oil, fruit and ham, we stalk around the groves and are greeted by olive pickers – burly girls and blokes with ancient faces who work quickly, expertly and swap sweaty winks.

“Our idea,” announces the Marqués in elegant, lisping English, “is to grow four types of olive, and make a blend that exhibits the finest qualities of each. We have *morisca* – brought by the Moors – sweet, not peppery, and not so stable. And *arbequina*: a little sour, very aromatic, with a flavour that fades quickly. This we balance with *hojiblanca* – fruity, sweet and a little peppery. Lastly, *picual*. What it lacks in fruit flavour, it makes up with strength and bite. Altogether, we intend a balanced blend.”

Nets are laid beneath the trees. A man with flamenco eyes and a machine held in a harness affixes its grab arm to the tree trunk and stands firm while the apparatus shakes the fruit off the tree. Helpers with small rakes relieve the boughs of any remaining olives and the net is then folded and dragged to a venerable tractor. The Marqués has invested in a new oil press, to which the olives are trundled through the groves. I reflect that the Valdeuezas are excellent, sensitive farmers. “We have looked after this land for 600 years,” agrees Fadrique.

Quality is all – only the best 30 per cent of oil from any batch makes it into the Marqués de Valdeueza brand. Time plays a part too – the fruit is pressed within very few hours of picking – as does heat, too much of which will spoil the oil. I taste the 2007 blend in the pressing room, and find it to be beautifully balanced. It is an aristocrat among olive oils, and is, like Marqués and son, carefully bred and gently insistent. Looking to give it a name, I pronounce it “*Estupendo!*” and “*Fenomenal!*”. But whatever you call it, Marqués de Valdeueza is the name in Spanish olive oil.

Andante Travels includes Extremadura in its Roman Lusitania trip, an eight-day tour of this little-explored part of Iberia. For more information, call Andante Travels on 01722 713880 or visit andantetravels.co.uk

Kevin

HOW TO USE MARQUES DE VALDUEZA OLIVE OIL

● At breakfast, or mid-morning, the done thing is to anoint a slice of good toast with the oil. Rub the bread with ripe tomato first, and sprinkle over a little sea salt to enhance the flavour.

● A plate of plain boiled vegetables – cauliflower, broccoli and leafy greens, for example – is made infinitely more classy with a judicious drizzling of this golden oil.

● The Marqués likes his oil with grilled fish. Hake and halibut are his favourites, though I particularly enjoyed the way that it encouraged fresh, grilled sardines to taste so brilliant and sparkly.

● The Marquésa, Alonso's lady wife, gave me some recipes that bring out the qualities of the olive oil. The first is a local *pisto*, a splendid vegetable dish that serves 12. Gently sauté 2 diced, white onions in 225ml olive oil, then add 2 green peppers and 2kg courgettes, all diced. Whizz up 1kg tomatoes, then add them, with a little salt if needed, to the pot. Warm through and serve warm or cold, crowned with a hard-boiled egg or mashed tuna if you like, plus a dash of sherry vinegar and some more oil.

● The Marquésa also offers this classic gazpacho, which makes an elegant starter for 12. Take 2kg tomatoes and ½kg peeled cucumber. Add ¼ green pepper and 1 mild onion – both chopped – some sea salt and 115ml sherry vinegar. Blend until the mixture's as smooth as a viceroys salute, then mix in 225ml olive oil. Refrigerate, and serve with a courtly bow.

PHOTOGRAPH BY SHANNON