

Spain's extra modern olive oil

An estate in western Spain is producing a truly masterful blend using the latest technology, finds Philippa Davenport

The year 1985 was a landmark for olive oil. The winter of 1984-85 was one of the harshest on record in the northern hemisphere, and in January 1985 a great frost descended on Tuscany, devastating thousands of trees whose fruit had oiled the wheels of local cooking for centuries.

Boldly defying the disaster that befell them, the owners of some of the Tuscan estates determined to invest their ventures afresh with concerted efforts to produce and market the most sought-after olive oils in the world. So it was that the first big press and trade tasting of extra virgin olive oils from Tuscany was held in London in the early spring of 1985.

No fewer than 18 extra virgin olive oils were presented for sampling by their shippers (mostly wine importers) and the estate owners. The combination of the great freeze drama, and many column inches devoted to the explosion of Tuscan olive oil tastes and aromas on the London scene, served simultaneously to generate the renaissance of Tuscan estates, and to act as the catalyst for many consumers to start thinking about good olive oil. Up until then the phrase extra virgin had led many Britons to think not of food but of girls who had never been kissed.

Now, in the winter of 2004-2005, everyone knows what extra virgin means, and estate olive oils are ladder staples in foodie households up and down the land. Tuscan olive oils remain at the forefront of our collective consciousness, and the best Tuscan oils are still considered undisputed aristocrats by some. However, the arena has widened greatly. Olive oils from elsewhere are increasing in stature and reputation. I have been following the birth of a potential new star in the olive oil firmament – an olive producing estate in Extremadura in western Spain.

The Marquis of Valdeuza has always grown olives and vines for family consumption, but commercial cultivation is new to him. Not a man to do things by halves, he is tackling the venture with gusto. No effort and no expense, it seems, are being spared. He aims to produce nothing less than top quality oil, to make a handsome financial success of his investment and maybe to challenge the supremacy of Italian olive oil makers. Perhaps his energy and determination have been given extra impetus by the knowledge that Spanish oil producers have traditionally majored on anonymous bulk export – and, until recently, a lot of it has ended up in bottles bearing Tuscan labels.

Marques de Valdeuza is not the first notable estate olive oil brand to emerge from Spain. Nunez de Prado of Baena (probably my all-time favourite olive oil from any country) has been exporting for more than a decade, but the impact of Valdeuza is remarkable because it is so modern and advancing so fast.

The project began by bringing in olive oil expert Cristino Lobillo Rios, by clearing old trees and laying underground irrigation on a 200 hectare estate near Merida, the provincial capital of Extremadura. The terrain, the microclimate, and the brief to produce a uniquely stylish Spanish oil with excellent fragrance, fresh fruity flavour, stability, balance and total harmony, led to the decision to plant four Spanish varieties of olive: Arbequina, Hojiblanca, Morisca and Picual. It led also to the decision to harvest early – not late, as is common Spanish custom – to capture some of the grassy-peppery

qualities made so popular by the Tuscans. A state-of-the-art modern mill was commissioned. Part of an old farmhouse on the estate was turned into the necessary offices. There is talk of opening a restaurant and shop on site in due course, and of adding estate produced vinegars and honey to the range. The Valdeuza team thinks big and thinks ahead, giving lie to the old belief that gentlemen and business do not mix.

Last season, when the product of its first full harvest was available, Valdeuza dipped a tentative toe in the export market. The Marquis'

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elder son, Fadrique Alvarez de Toledo y Argüelles, made exploratory sales trips to America and Japan. A key figure in olive oil circles in Britain, Charles Carey of The Oil Merchant, took a few cases, from which I received a sample bottle. I was struck by the deliciousness of the oil. It is not imitation Tuscan, it is distinctive and stylish in its own right, exhibiting some of the grassiness associated with Tuscan oil, yet retaining the rounder, sweeter, tropical fruit qualities that distinguish the best Spanish offerings. It is a uniquely sophisticated new generation Spanish olive oil. What is more, it is neatly priced to compete with Tuscan offerings, and is as elegantly presented as anything to come out of Italy. Designed by an Englishman, the tapered bottle stands out on a crowded shelf, and is not afraid to display blatant snob appeal. The label, shaped like a shield, bears the



name Marques de Valdeuza, his coat of arms and the words "estate bottled".

Last November I went to Extremadura to meet the Valdeuza team and to see the start of the new season's harvest. I had been warned. Nonetheless it came as a shock to find no venerable old groves, no picturesque millstones grinding the fruit, no esparto mats spread with paste for pressing. The noble Marquis has swept away the age old romance of olive oil production, in favour of brave new world technology. I had never seen anything like it.

Touring the groves, I was amazed by how young and small the trees were, unlikely yet to yield many kilos of olives each, and too juvenile, surely, to warrant the use of vibrating machines to shake the fruit from the branches into the nets. "The pickers need to learn these skills in readiness to cope with more mature trees and heavier crops in years to come," I was told. No one said so, but I suspect young men are more easily recruited by the prospect of working with machines than picking and raking by hand.

The Morisca olive groves were being harvested first (last season they were the third to ripen). Which variety would be next was uncertain. High-tech tests and analysis are done every few days, but ultimately everything depends on human judgment, the experience and skills of the master blender. Nothing is straightforward, there are unpredictable factors to consider, and nail-biting calculations are required to stagger the harvest successfully. Each olive variety must be cropped at its median peak, and milled without delay. Somehow, the timing of all four varieties must be dovetailed. If two varieties are ready simultaneously, taking on extra pickers and running the mill all night may be the only way to avoid a bottleneck, or risk spoiling one lot by holding it back between picking and crushing.

On the other hand, if no olives are ready, staff may have to be laid off. Lobillo Rios looked concerned, but not unduly worried – the magnificent Valdeuza mill includes a second production line "just in case".

The first room of the mill is canopied to protect against sun or rain beating down, but it has no walls, thus affording fine views on to the groves and allowing the breeze to fan through the olives as they cascade from the truck into a trough and on to a conveyor belt. The Moriscas coming in from the fields are blue-black, purple, brown, khaki and very green, some with leaves still attached. Jostling releases essential oils in the leaves, filling the air with a delicate olive oil scent, the promise of good things to come. The olives travel through a wind tunnel where leaves and twigs are removed. An optional shower and blow-dry follows. The fruit are weighed and carried on up to the mill hopper, where the conveyor belt journey ends and crushing begins.

The resultant pulp is piped indoors direct from the mill. There the mixture – looking like tapenade – is paddled to a homogenous mass in a vat that is wrapped in a cold water jacket to avoid spoiling the aromas. So it travels onwards, still untouched by human hands, through two centrifugal separators. The first removes the solids (the stones are recycled as fuel), the second separates oil from water. Finally, within just a few hours of picking, the oil comes to rest in an inner sanctum, a faintly echoing, cathedral-like chamber that houses five vast stainless steel tanks. One tank is for the oil of each variety of olive. The fifth is reserved for the blend of the first four, when it is made.

Each varietal oil must rest for at least 15 days after making so it recovers from processing, and develops its true character. Only when the last-picked variety has been milled and properly rested, only then, when the true strengths, the nose and the body of the four component parts of the recipe are known, can the creation of the new vintage blend take place.

By special request, earlier this month in London, in the company of The Oil Merchant and the olive oil buyer for Harvey Nichols, I was treated to a sneak preview of the four new season oils Valdeuza have produced to go into their blend. The colour, aroma, mouth-feel, length, depth of flavour, and aftertaste of each was astonishingly diverse. We stabbed a guess at what ratio of each might be used to create the new vintage Valdeuza blend. However, we are no olive oil alchemists. The true art of a master blender lies in his ability to assess and harmonise the qualities displayed in each oil when it is fresh, and, simultaneously, to take into account how each will change and interact with the others over the 12-month life of the oil.

Even as I write, olive oil alchemy is happening in Extremadura, a magic wand waved, the new creation born, bottled and packed for sale. Today may be the first time you have heard the name Marques de Valdeuza. I doubt it will be the last.

DETAILS

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