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In praise of the new

EXTRA VIRGINS



As the result of an exciting revolution in Spain, a whole new generation of extra-virgin olive oils are now available which culinary experts acknowledge are just sheer perfection. **Edward Owen** gets it straight from the horse's mouth.

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technology. Some 30% of Spanish olive oil is now extra-virgin". "The quality of the fruit is much better since it used to be collected after falling to the ground but now it's picked earlier straight from the tree. Producers now ensure that extra-virgin olive oil is a completely natural fruit juice".

Single Variety or Coupage?

The key to the success of Spanish olive oils are their individual properties and now their different nuances, bouquets and tastes are far more evident than before. In Spain there are over 250 olive varieties of which just over half a dozen are best known. (Alongside we list details of these main varieties with their characteristics and their suggested culinary applications). The most popular oil type is the versatile Picual, which accounts for 82% of all Spanish olive oil and is mainly grown in Andalusia, southern Spain (Dominus from Monva SA, Jaén, is a prize-winner). Next are Cornicabra, Hojiblanca, Empeltre,

Arbequina (L'Estornell and L'Estornell Ecológico from Veà, Lleida, in Catalonia, are excellent) and Picudo. Three top chefs in Madrid, Jean Pierre Vandelle of El Olivo, Sergi Arola (trained by fellow Catalan, Ferran Adrià, described in 2003 by the NYT as the world's greatest chef), at La Broche, with two Michelin stars, and Abraham García of Viridiana, all advocate using at least three single variety oils in season in the kitchen with coupage oils by the dining table.

"As we have two extremes in Spain, between very fruity olive oils to those with intense tastes, I mainly work with three. They are Arbequina for vinaigrettes, mayonnaise and foams; Picual for general cooking and light frying; and Cornicabra for deeper frying", says Vandelle. "In the kitchen we only use single variety oils and not coupage – those are on our restaurant trolley", says Arola. "Arbequina is my mother oil because I'm Catalan. It's very good for dressings, it has no acidity, so sometimes I add salt or a little tomato. Cornicabra from Toledo has developed most in Spain, evolving from

quantity to quality. It's the oil of the future. I use it mainly for gentle cooking". "Empeltre is like Arbequina but lasts longer and is best crude in marinades, sauces and with aperitifs. Picual and Picudo are for frying and Hojiblanca forms part of the culture of the *gazpacho*, Andalusian cold soups", he adds. "Olive oil is one of the national characteristics of Spain", he says. "It is one of the fundamental axis around which revolve all the conceptions of taste and the treatment of products in the Spanish kitchen – especially in contemporary Spanish cooking. You can't understand the concepts of good taste in the majority of preparations without first understanding the exact role of specific oils".

Exquisite Oils for Epicures

Several elite Spanish producers are now marketing their oils as *aceites de pago* – the equivalent to single estate bottled wine – with smooth, exquisite blends from their own olive groves. Francisco Núñez de Prado is the seventh generation of olive oil producers in Baena, near

Córdoba. His ecological Núñez de Prado extra-virgin olive oil has been sold in the United States since 1979 and he produces a million liters a year from his 160,000 trees on 4,275 acres. The smooth, fruity oil is a coupage of 90% Picudo, Picual and Hojiblanca with 10% of 14 other varieties. The classic oil is obtained from the first cold pressing of handpicked olives. "The oil is blended as a coupage just like a great wine", says Núñez de Prado. "You'd normally use it instead of butter in the kitchen but it is also exquisite crude with pasta, salads, boiled vegetables, as an ice cream or with sliced orange and honey". Cristóbal Lovera Prieto, whose family has been making oils near Córdoba since the 19th-century, is acknowledged as one of the great Spanish olive oil gurus and his oils are marketed in the United States as Hacienda 1917 and Fuencubierta. "Our basic philosophy is to make harmonic oil by the coupage method, blending our own oils and not just bottling one variety. We like to harmonise with different varieties to make a dignified

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The new superlative purity and freshness of single variety or well-balanced coupage (blended) extra-virgin Spanish oils, with varying aromas and tastes, have given gourmets and chefs, especially those in the vanguard, a whole new series of ingredients and additives to bring out the very best in their culinary creations.

The arrival of the flawless liquid gold from the world's largest producer (40% of total) coincides with a whole raft of respected studies that recommend extra-virgin olive oil for improved health and longevity and a new appreciation of such subtle oils for gourmet cuisine. Olive oil is an integral part of the Mediterranean diet, proven to be the healthiest in the world, and extra-virgin oil, made from the first pressing of the fruit, naturally contains large quantities of monounsaturated fatty acid, Oleic acid, other powerful anti-oxidants and vitamin E. Basically, those who regularly consume extra-virgin olive oil tend to live longer. It fights arteriosclerosis and hypertension by reducing harmful low-density lipoproteins (LDL), the

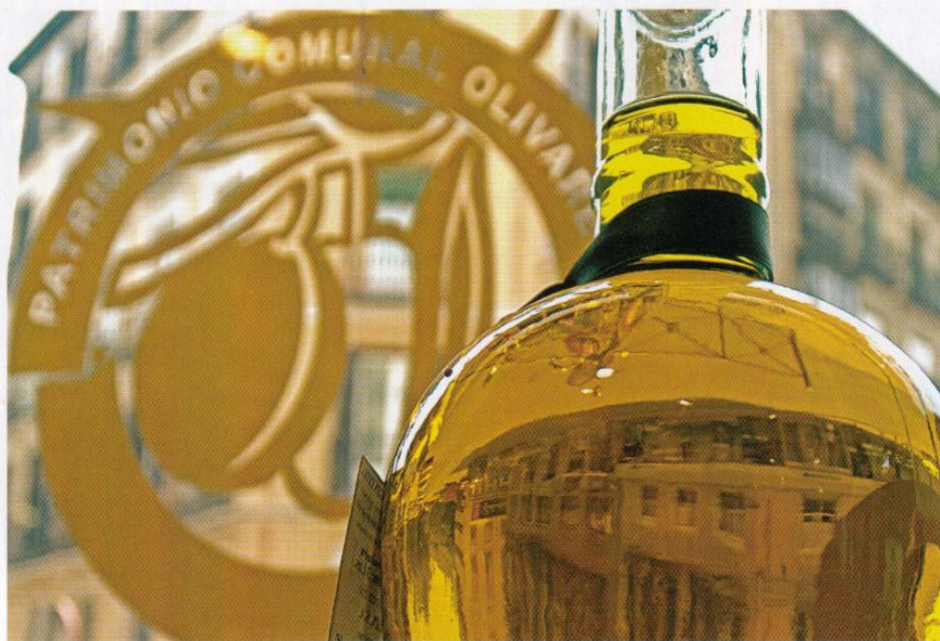
damaging part of cholesterol that can block arteries, but favors healthy high-density (HDL) cholesterol that removes excess cholesterol from the artery walls. It may also reduce glucose levels in diabetic patients and the risks of breast cancer, stomach ulcers, constipation, cancer and Alzheimer's. (Olive oil soaps, gels and skincare products are also becoming popular).

"The Best in the World"

"We have to give a round of applause to all in the Spanish olive oil profession for the new generation of oils. They are impeccable; the best in the world", says Jean Pierre Vandelle, a French chef who pioneered the appreciation of Spanish varietal olive oils in his elegant Madrid restaurant, El Olivo, when he opened 20 years ago.

Clients can choose from among 50 fresh oils from his trolley to titillate their palates and buy them from his adjoining shop. He stresses that most of these oils are usually only at their best for six months to two years – labels show expiry dates – and should be stored in a dark, cool place.

He explains that "the same expertise now being used in making great wines has been applied to olive oil. Spanish producers now cultivate and



Gallons of olive oil await the shopper at Patrimonio Comunal Olivarero shop in Madrid

harvest with space-age accuracy and ecological respect to achieve the greatest freshness and purity".

José Manuel Coca del Pozo, a director of the Spanish olive oil industry's Fundación Patrimonio Comunal that represents all sectors of the industry, talks of "the revolution".

He points out that Spain's best extra-virgin olive oils now come in fancy glass bottles and even presentation cases but

only a few years ago the bottles were plastic and before that most oils were sold in bulk.

Just a decade ago there were only six *Denominaciones de Origen* (Denominations of Origin, D.O.) for olive oil production; six government approved areas where quality control is monitored and guaranteed. Now there are 30 D.O.s with responsibility for over 1,500 brands. Annual production from 5.19 million

acres of olive groves has risen from 363,000 metric tons to over 1.5 million tons in recent years.

He does not deny that Spain learned a hard lesson from the Italians who still account for most of Spanish olive oil exports. The Italians mix some of the hardier Spanish olive oil varieties, such as Andalusia's Picual, with their own, less stable types to make it last longer and then resell around the world.

"As much as 50% of olive oil sold as Italian actually still comes from Spain", claims José Manuel Coca del Pozo. "One can estimate the figure by subtracting the actual amount of Italian olive oil produced and the much larger amount eventually bottled".

"But now our new *maestros de almazara* (mill owners) have completely changed previous cultivation and extraction methods, using the latest scientific research and

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oil", he explains. "We use up to four varieties which are Picual, Hojiblanca, Arbequina and Ocal. The Picual gives longevity to the blend. The Ocal has been popular for many years as a large table olive and is bitter sweet, with a harmonious taste of fruits and almonds".

"Our clients in the United States want smooth, harmonic, well-balanced oils where the different sensations give a pleasant, intensely fragrant bouquet. There are about a dozen of us who only make oils from our own groves, using only hand picking and manual selection as well as the latest technology for extraction. There is complete control from tree to bottle to ensure maximum quality", he says with pride.

Grandes Pagos de Olivar is a relatively new association formed by exclusive olive oil brands Abbae de Queiles, Dauro de L'Empordá and Dauro d'Aubocassa, Marqués de Griñón and Marqués de

Valdeza. Most of them have adapted their know-how in making great wines to creating sensational olive oils.

"We applied our concept of enology to the world of the olive", says Agustín Santolaya, director of Bodegas Roda in La Rioja. Roda's Círcion wine was rated in the May 2006 Forbes magazine as one of the best 20 reds in the world in the \$100+ bracket.

Roda started from scratch in 1996 by planting Arbequina in Majorca to produce the single variety Aubocassa and planted Arbequina, Hojiblanca and Koroneiki in Catalonia for the coupage Dauro de L'Empordá. Both oils have won Spain's top prizes and have the cachet of being used for the Nobel Prize Gala dinners in Stockholm.

Perhaps the most astonishing new Spanish extra-virgin olive oil is Castillo de Tabernas from 100,000 olive trees planted in 500 hectares of

desert in Almería, near where David Lean filmed Lawrence of Arabia.

The audacity of Rafael Úbeda, who irrigates his young trees from springs in the nearby mountains, has paid off with plaudits from, and sales in, the top gourmet stores in Europe and the States.

With the same brand name, Castillo de Tabernas, he markets a single variety Picual – great with fish – and a coupage from his own Picual, Hojiblanca and Arbequina – perfect for salads.

Edward Owen is a foreign correspondent in Spain for The Times and The Sunday Times of London and also writes on Spanish gastronomy, wines and restaurants for various magazines.

Ed. note: For further information on Spanish olive oils log on to www.oliveoilfromspain.com

WHERE TO BUY



Olive oils from Spain can be found at fine retailers like:

Whole Foods throughout the US

Central Market in Texas

Bristol Farms in LA, California

Draegers in SF, California

Fairways in NYC

Zabars in NYC

Dean and DeLuca in NYC

D'Agostinos in NYC

Kings Supermarkets in NJ

A Southern Season, Raleigh, North Carolina

Fox and Obel Chicago, Illinois

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