

Spanish Oils Streak



Marques de Valdueza from Merida

As a history major I have to admit to being moderately biased toward this oil. You'd be hard pressed to find any product that's a whole lot more rooted in family and national history than this. The family—formally known as the House of Alvarez de Toledo—has been a fixture in Spanish history for something like ten centuries (aka, a millennium). I can't tell you it's some romantic rags to riches story. At least for the last nine hundred years, the family has been hugely successful. Best I can tell, quality and care have been a part of most everything they seem to have done for hundreds years now, and this oil is no exception.

I got the visual of the whole history thing on my visit to the farm and to their "country home" in Ávila last fall. A drawing of the family tree is framed and hung on wall at the house. It's a pretty tall tree—if I have my notes straight (and I might not, but I'm sure they do since they've been carefully tracking this stuff for so long now) the earliest records of the Alvarez de Toledo family seem to start at the end of the 11th century, pointing, first, to one Pedro, Count of Carrión. By the time that Ferdinand and Isabella were finding their way to a full retaking of the Iberian Peninsula from the Moors in the 15th century, Fadrique Álvarez de Toledo (the second Duke of Alba) had advanced to become one of the King and Queen's key advisors. De Toledo took part in the process that culminated in Columbus' voyages. Columbus' son married Fadrique's daughter. His son, in turn, worked with Charles V, the Holy Roman Emperor. Family members have, at various times, administered parts of Naples, Sicily, Sardinia, Lombardia, Catalonia, Portugal, Perú, and the Netherlands. Later, family members married de Medicis, and many had their portraits done by little known (just kidding) painters like Goya and El Greco. In truth, I got the sense that I were to really look into it I'd probably find that pretty much most every meaningful moment of Spanish political history seems to have had an Alvarez de Toledo appearing in it.

The current Fadrique Álvarez de Toledo, my compatriot in the culinary world and the man who's pushed so hard to get this excellent olive oil going, is the 9th generation to formally carry the family crest forward. While I like and respect him a lot—both personally and professionally—it's pretty obvious up front that the two of us aren't exactly two peas from the same genetic, nor historical, pod. I mean, he's got his roots traced back to the eleventh century; I'm happy I can figure out how my grandparents got here from Eastern Europe a hundred or so years ago. Where my ancestors were in 1100 I couldn't even begin to guess. They probably weren't anywhere near Spain in 1492. Although I'd hardly hold it against Fadrique, if they had been there, they might have been sent out for expulsion by a distant de Toledo relative. While the Alvarez de Toledos seem to have worked with most every king and minister in Spain in the last nine hundred years, I don't think anyone in my family has ever even held a seat on a city council. When I visited Spain last fall, we started out at the 15th century home that the family has up in Ávila. It's like shrine to great hunting with all sorts of elegant heads of deer, ibex and other animals I'd really only recognize if they showed up on a menu. Hunting in my family was mostly done in department stores, and guns were things we saw on police shows. Personally, the closest I've been

Bill Clinton after we both spoke at the *Inc.* magazine 500 conference in Savannah a few years ago. In the sixty seconds or so we spent together I told him that we sold a lot of Arkansas peppered bacon; he smiled, shook my hand while they snapped the photo, and then the Secret Service moved me out and the next speaker in. Thinking about art, the only family "portraiture" I'm aware of among my relatives was by an Israeli artist named Alon Sneur, who sketched my little brother on a Howard Johnson's restaurant placemat when we were having dinner there some time in the late sixties. Granted Alon's a good artist and the "piece" is hanging in a simple frame in my parents' rec room but it ain't exactly El Greco.

But as much as our backgrounds are different, I actually think he and I also have a lot in common. Fadrique has clearly found a passion for food and for making special things happen. While I'm sure he doesn't really need to work, he clearly works very hard and very long hours and is very clearly committed to crafting a great oil. He's well versed in the technical end of things and has been travelling all over the world to far from glamorous food shows (from Moscow in the east to the Moscone Center in the West) to sell it. I guess, now that I really think about it, Fadrique is very much like his oil. Long history and heritage behind them both, but neither rests passively on reputation. Both the oil and the man have an elegance and a great sense of style about them, yet they remain really very user-friendly, accessible I think, to anyone who's interested in getting to know them. Neither has the sort of wild, almost over the top character (I say this lovingly) that's not all that uncommon in the food world. And, personally I like them both a lot.

Despite the centuries of family fame, Fadrique really is a very down to earth guy. "Nice" sounds simplistic but that's what he is, so why not say it? As we walk 'round the farm he greets most every one of the men and women working by name. The thing that struck me most was how excited he seems to be about the work—from the agronomy that surrounds the olives and the people handling them, all the way through from the picking on to pressing, bottling and selling.

Of course all that nice history is really of little value other than fodder for fancy pictures in history books unless the olive oil itself is very good. In our world, it's ultimately all about flavor, not stories of 15th century politics. It all comes down to good agriculture, good pressing technique and good taste. The farm on which the olives are grown has been in the family since 1624; given what I've already shared about their history, you won't be shocked to learn that they have records of oil being produced on the same farm as far back as the days of the Romans. If you're looking for it on the map, it's way out west, a bit west of the historic stone-walled town of Merida, something like 25 miles or so east of the Portuguese border.

The trees are grown with great care, with wider row spacing

with some caveat about how the oil tastes, but it's also seemed, in the interest of suggesting that it was a sort of low end, not particularly great product. It wasn't that Spanish oil was unusable. It was just that what was being sent out for the American market wasn't exactly best of class. Mass market jug wine we might say, in comparison to the exceptional estate-bottled Chianti Classicos that connoisseurs were seeking. Speaking of Tuscans, back in those days Italy was where it was at whether you were into the taste, the producers' technique or stories they could tell. If you were really in the know you might also opt for oils from the Italian Riviera. As we worked our way tastefully through the '90s, other Italian regions really came up as well—Umbria, the Marche, Lazio, Sicily, Sardinia, Puglia all "arrived" as outstanding options for those who love great oil. And all certainly remain so today.

With that as background, and acknowledging my long-standing (though oft-overcome) bias for most anything good and Italian, I have to say that in the last four or five years, the most upbeat energy in the olive oil world, I think, is coming, not from Italy, but from Spain. It's not really that surprising I guess now that I've said it. Because, when the subject of where the best food in Europe has been of late, I've been telling most everyone that, from my travels, the most excellent eating I've done in the last few years has come, consistently, in Spain. My main point here, I guess, is that the old images of Spanish oil are now radically out of date, nearly as far afield as 1950s photos of Franco and elderly grandmothers wrapped in black shawls. Spanish cooking today is alive, energized and creative. The regional origins and diversity of the peninsula's many cooking traditions are being celebrated in cities and small towns alike. If you want to eat well in Europe there are many places you can, of course, go. But if you can only pick one, and the cooking is what pushes you most to a particular country over another, I'd pretty certainly send you to Spain.

So...for the purposes of the public's perception, I'd like to use this year to mark a formal transition for something that actually is old news to those in the know. Spain has some truly superb olive oils to choose from. Single farms, small productions, exceptional flavors. Let's just say, for the fun of it, that 2008 is the Year of the Spanish Olive Oil.

Listed below are five special oils. All are on the cutting edge of the oil world. All are excellent. From gentlest to giant—all good, all special, all well-made. Try any one of them, or better yet, taste them all. I have, and I happily stand by—and serve—each of them.

in the southern part of the country. The olives for the Valdueza oil (they make others, but that's the top of the line), are pretty much all picked by hand, taken from the tree quite early in the autumn (especially by old-line Spanish standards) when yields are significantly lower, but the flavor of the oil is much more interesting. Because the milling is done right on the farm, the fruit is off the tree and headed in for pressing and centrifuging within an hour. The oil is carefully stored, like great wine, in nitrogen flush stainless tanks.

The Valdueza oil is very well made and it shows. No defects, long finish, good complexity. It's made from a unique blend of four different varieties that grow on the farm—by going in person last year I got to taste each of the varieties on its own, as well as the finished Valdueza coupage. Hojiblanca and Picual are standard varieties from southern Spain and are not uncommon out west as well. The former brings a soft, warm, nutty butteriness; the latter offers hints of artichoke, green asparagus, a bit of earthiness and a touch of black pepper in the finish. Arbequina arrived in the region only recently, planted for its good yields, and round soft flavor; here in Extremadura, at least on the Alvarez de Toledo family farm, it tastes a bit different than what I've experienced in Catalonia where it typically comes from—less apple, more olive. Most interesting to me, though, is the oil from the Morisca olives, which are unique to the area and offer a fair bit of pepper and interesting fruit—almost apricot in a way—with a touch of green grass and green tomato in there too.

For those of you who follow these things (and there are many!) I'd put the flavor profile of the finished oil in about the middle of the range—less green than the Tuscans, less earthy than most southern Spanish Picuals, a bit bolder flavor than Mariano's oil. All told they produce about 30,000 bottles a year—huge by the standards of artisan friend Mariano Sanz, but relatively modest by comparison to any large-scale commercial producer. This past autumn the weather was very dry—not great for yields, but generally, in my experience, very good for the flavor of the oil. As is true of all these high end, well-made oils, there's a complexity and an elegance (and a commensurate higher cost) that will likely mean you'll want to use it for finishing—at the table to drizzle on great greens from the market, on top of a bit of roasted meat or vegetables. At lunch at the Alvarez de Toledo family hunting house, they served an entire meal in which it was featured in every dish. The highlight I think for me though were the potatoes, tossed with a lot of the oil and a bit of salt, then roasted at high heat 'til they had a bit of a golden brown crust and a whole lot of flavor.

PS: Not that it changes the way the oil tastes, but it's also a nice looking bottle—a great light blue label that I like, in part, just because I love the color, but also because I've never seen it on any other olive oil. In an example of just how much Fadrique cares about how the quality of the entire project, he chose to spend significantly more per label in order to buy them with foil backing—it doesn't change the way the oil tastes but it means that when a bit of the oil drips onto the label it keeps its looks intact