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Liquid Gold

Look beyond the grapevines, and you'll find Paso Robles' other notable gift to California cuisine—olive oil *by* TANVI CHHEDA

The Arbequina olive doesn't like being bossed around, believes Clotilde Julien of the Spanish varietal dominating her orchard in Templeton, a tiny rural town along California's Central Coast near Paso Robles.

"As a tree, it's like a teenager—lazy and messy," she says laughingly, pointing to low-hanging branches dripping with yellowish green and purple fruit, on a short tree resembling an unwieldy bush. Describing the sustainable oils made from the trees, Julien adds, "It tastes like spring."

Sure enough, the Arbequina olive oil I sip in the tasting room at Olea Farm is complex, at once grassy and buttery, with a lingering, nutty finish. It's this passion for olives that immediately comes across when I meet Julien and her husband, Yves, on a dewy spring morning. It's no wonder anyone interested

in planting olives within a 50-mile radius talks to the French couple before doing so.

With its Mediterranean climate, the Central Coast has long been an agricultural region. With more than 180 wineries within the Paso Robles borders, it's perfect for growing grapes and olives as well—the latter usually thrive anywhere the former grow.

The region's hot, dry summers and mild, wet winters, coupled with rocky soil, make it similar to Tuscany, which might explain why almost all of the olive oil producers here grow some Tuscan-olive varietals. Driving along winding roads, past knobby oaks and rolling hills in the distance, I almost feel transported to the Italian countryside.

Similar to small-batch, family-run operations in Europe, production of olive oil in the Paso Robles area is more artisanal than

commercial. Here, handpicking is the norm. "You won't find big ranches with thousands of trees," says Ron Sanders of Alta Cresta Orchard, as we tour the orderly rows of his 1,151 olive trees on a high ridge overlooking a verdant valley. "It's small farming."

Situated on a south-facing slope, Sanders' Coratina, Frantoio, Leccino and Pendolino trees are hit daily with plenty of sunlight, which allows ripening of the fruit to its peak. Hardly uncommon in the region, Ron and his wife, Susan O'Reilly, also became innkeepers when they built an 875-square-foot cottage on the property.

In their pint-size tasting room, Susan emphasizes the importance of educating visitors and debunking myths. "People are amazed when they taste fresh olive oil, compared with what they buy at the store," she says. "You're not looking for age. The fresher and newer the olive oil, the more flavor you're going to get." Indeed, the Alta Cresta golden yellow extra-virgin blends are bold, robust...and a bit bitter.

Lest you think bitterness is bad, Joeli Yaguda of Pasolivo, the area's largest olive oil producer, contends, "Bitter is great in coffee, in arugula and in olive oil."

Two decades ago, when most newcomers to the Central Coast were putting in grapes, Yaguda's mother-in-law planted olive trees. Today, their 6,000-tree orchard includes 10 varietals planted across 45 acres. Within hours of picking, the olives are milled right on the premises by a state-of-the-art Italian press. Yaguda sees the parallels to Tuscany but goes on to clarify that the Central Coast is holding its own when it comes to olive oil production as a distinct vein from its overseas cousins. "We're not trying to make a faux Italian oil; we're trying to make an authentic American oil." (Four years ago, Paso Robles' olive growers got the best validation of all: In a blind tasting at the 2007 Los Angeles International Extra-Virgin Olive Oil competition, several of the top winners were from the Central Coast.)

As our kitchen cupboard attests, my husband and I are practically olive oil collectors. We've amassed oils from as far away as Crete and as near as Ojai, both cooking with them and pairing them with lemon juice or fig-flavored balsamic vinegar for instant salad dressings. In Pasolivo's cheerful tasting room, we start by sampling the milder California blend, made from Mission and Manzanillo olives, and then the Pasolivo blend, which features five Tuscan varietals.



b a b e t t e



My husband leans toward fresh herb-like flavors, while I'm won over by a great peppery bite. Yaguda insists we end the experience by dipping bread in her tangerine-infused oil mixed with a teaspoon of citrus-blossom honey—olive oil for dessert.

The concept of olive oil tastings is still a nascent one in the area. Most tourists in Paso Robles are oenophiles first and foremost. But olive oil producers are realizing the value of interacting with those attracted to any burgeoning culinary scene.

"People who are very much into wine are almost always into food," says Paul Hoover, owner of Still Waters Vineyards, just down the hill from Alta Cresta.

And among people who are curious about ingredients, an interest in olive oil can't be far behind. A former homestead, Hoover's plot came with 100-year-old Manzanillo, Sevillano and Ascolano olive trees, and they became the source for Still Waters oils. Hoover and his wife, Patricia, are not an exception in the area, as many Central Coast vintners are also dabbling in olives.

It was this atmosphere that prompted Olivas de Oro owners Frank and Marti Menacho to move more than a thousand hundred-year-old trees from Oroville in Northern California to Creston, 14 miles southeast of Paso Robles. There they opened a tasting room housed in a Craftsman-style barn earlier this year. "This is a place people are already coming to for wine tasting. We wanted to be in a region where we could grow olives *and* be part of tourism," says Marti.

Just one weekend in Paso Robles is enough to see why strong relationships are formed among local winemakers, farmers and chefs. In Paso's quaint downtown, blocks from our room at the equestrian-themed Hotel Cheval, is year-and-half-old Il Cortile, which has quietly (and deservedly) become a culinary darling of the area. Exquisite

dishes such as mint-and-ricotta-stuffed zucchini blossoms and black-truffle risotto are of a refined yet pure caliber, owing to the area harvests.

Having worked at the L.A. eateries Locanda del Lago and Via Veneto, executive chef Santos MacDonal moved north with his wife, Carole, to start the contemporary Italian restaurant. They rely heavily on nearby growers, fishermen and purveyors. "The true Italian way of cooking is locally grown fresh ingredients," Santos says. He uses the oils from We Olive, a nearby specialty store that sells everything from tapenades to soaps; its tasting bar offers up the olive harvests from all over San Luis Obispo County.

Nearby, Joe and Debbie Thomas opened Thomas Hill Organics as a place to proffer their farm's plums, sugar snap peas and heirloom tomatoes. Chef at the casual farm-to-table restaurant, with exposed-brick walls and baskets of onions and oranges on display, is Julie Simon, niece of Olea Farm's Clotilde and Yves Julien. Delighting in the combination of sweet and tart, I try to make each bite of their Cara Cara orange-and-beet salad, topped with sliced strawberries and sesame brittle, last as long as possible.

At first it might seem surprising to find such fine dining in a town that's often billed—quite unfairly—as more country bumpkin than highbrow foodie destination. But Paso Robles deserves to be as much on the map for epicureans and oenophiles as do its neighbors to the north, Napa and Sonoma counties. The fact that olives are now thriving here and world-class olive oil production is rising is just the natural progression of things in a region already known for its bounty.

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