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FOOD

Domestic Reserves

Americans no longer need to look abroad to satisfy their need for oil—Tuscan-style olive oil, that is

BY CORBY KUMMER

California olive oil is a tough sell. As made in the wine country north of San Francisco, it's in the Tuscan style, meaning pungent and bitter. Even cooks and eaters who have come to prize these qualities—who realize that both mean freshness, and that both are considered positive attributes—often balk at the Tuscan-style price, choosing instead a Spanish or a moderately priced Italian oil. Why pay so much for locally made oil?

One answer to my question presented itself beside a row of olive trees on the high hillsides of McEvoy Ranch, in Marin County near the border with Sonoma, an especially beautiful part of a famously beautiful area. It was early November, just as the harvest was getting under way, and the orchards were in a mild frenzy; the farm workers were checking trees every day to decide when to start picking. Following the suggestion of Shari DeJoseph, the orchard manager, I picked an olive, crushed it between my fingers, and rubbed the oil, juice, and reddish-green pulp over the back of my hand. The fragrance was grassy and fresh but rich, too. The oil and pulp felt marvelously emollient on my hands, and also a bit sticky from the sugars that fresh olives contain, along with the very bitter substances that surprise first-time pickers who pop the berrylike fruit into their mouths. I licked off a bit of the oil (I like bitterness). This incomparable freshness is the best reason to buy California oil, and you'll be supporting an industry that after a decade of baby steps is taking its first strides.

The arrival of these very trees—now taller than I, with pert, tiny, glinting silver-green leaves and firm fruit almost ready to be picked—had been foretold in the early nineties, when I visited Tuscany's poshest olive-oil consultant, Maurizio Castelli, at one of the grand wineries he worked with. Castelli was instructing me on the olive varieties and harvesting methods that produce Tuscan oil's characteristic rasping catch in the back of the throat, often heralded by an emerald-green tinge to the familiar gold. The Tuscan style of oil—powerfully fruity, challenging, and a bit rough—was then all the rage, and Tuscany was pushing Provence off the map of Edens for the well-heeled (could it be incidental that Provençal oil is mild and smooth?). Proponents of the Mediterranean diet were urging people to look for that bright green, which indicates the presence of chlorophyll and other artery-clearing antioxidants. If olives were part of the beautiful life of Tuscan winemakers, why shouldn't Californians in their own paradise plant olives where grapes grew?

Castelli guided me through a tasting he had carefully designed to show peppery Tuscan oils to maximum advantage, and to make me see non-green oils as dull, flaccid, and wimpy. At the end he told me he was very excited about one forward-looking Californian: "We've sent a woman in San Francisco a lot of plants, and we'll go over and produce oil for her." Tuscan oil made right in California, he said, would be the breakthrough that would educate American palates acculturated to wan, rancid oil.

The Californian was Nan McEvoy, a San Francisco newspaperwoman looking for her next adventure. The land on the Marin ranch she had bought was

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restricted to agricultural use. Rather than buy more of the cows the previous owners had grazed on the hillsides, she thought of the Tuscan oils she had long loved, and ordered olive trees of the varieties Castelli recommended. She installed a crushing-and-processing mill right on the property: ideally, olives should be pressed immediately after being picked, before they can oxidize and begin to turn rancid.

Other landowners were trying to revive California's flagging industry, which began producing oil in the 1870s but had long ago turned mostly to curing and canning table olives. The chief exponents of Tuscan oil were McEvoy and Ridgely Evers. At the same time that McEvoy's trees were arriving in containers from Italian nurseries, Evers, who had done quite well as a software developer, was planting Tuscan varieties at DaVero, his property an hour or so north in Healdsburg, a Sonoma County town that was then still free of the Italianate gloss of Napa County. (It has since succumbed. Clothing and ceramics boutiques and gourmet markets outnumber the seventies-vintage general stores and barbershops that long persisted in Healdsburg's main square. But a few of its businesses are independent and even funky. You can still get what might be the country's best-made cappuccino at the Flying Goat, and my favorite muffin—really a cake doughnut, baked rather than fried—at the Downtown Bakery and Creamery.)

Planting and pressing olives requires very deep pockets. Several of the high-level hobbyists whose oils I tasted and admired in the first wave of the olive-oil revival (including my favorite of the time, Harrison Vineyards) have either gone out of business or gone back to growing the grapes they'd grown before. The industry is changing hands, from well-to-do dreamers with vision and taste to businesspeople intent on making oil pay.

I heard more about the economics when I joined the annual pick-your-own fest at DaVero, where dozens of guests meet on a November Sunday to strap on plastic buckets and try to fill them with olives. I was of course laughably

McEvoy Ranch olives just before harvest

slow compared with professional pickers, but even they can go only so fast. Unless trees are spaced and pruned to be mechanically harvested, as Colleen McGlynn, Evers's wife and partner, explained while we searched branches for hidden fruit, labor costs are prohibitive anywhere in this country. DaVero does not use machines to shake the trees, as many European growers do; the most mechanical help its crews get comes from vibrating combs on long broom handles, which they use to rake fruit off the branches and onto tarps spread on the ground. A pro working as we did would presumably fill a half-gallon bucket—the size we amateurs were using—in a fraction of the forty-five minutes it took me and two visiting San Francisco chefs to fill ours. (The buckets were a bit of Marie Antoinette milkmaidery; pros empty the tarps into big plastic crates.) Our forty-five minutes of labor would result at best, McGlynn estimated, in a tablespoon of oil.

To make us feel better, she pointed out the differences between picking olives and picking grapes. Olives are picked singly, grapes in bunches; in one day a crew of a dozen or so workers can pick three tons of olives, but just one worker can harvest two and a half tons of grapes. "The return on grapes is *sooo* much better," McGlynn said. "Why do you think Sonoma and Napa are planted in grapes? The minute they don't pay for themselves, a house goes up." And any oil producer must face the consumption discrepancy between wine and oil. People often pay $35 to $40 for a bottle of wine and then finish it in an evening. The same buyers will balk at spending the same amount for a bottle of oil—one it would take them several months to finish. "It's very, very hard to make money on olives," McGlynn said, sighing. "Maybe someday."

Nonetheless, membership in the California Olive Oil Council has expanded from barely two dozen ten years ago to 350, as Albert Katz, one of the first sellers of California oil and now a producer himself, pointed out in a recent conversation. (The council uses international standards to certify oil as extra-virgin—a designation that guarantees careful processing and the absence of defects more than it guarantees flavor. The term as yet has no legal meaning here, but the council has petitioned the U.S. Department of Agriculture to define it.) The new producers expect to break even—and are learning from the previous generation's experience. The first lesson is to avoid wine country, where land often costs $20,000 to $30,000 an acre. Small producers like Katz are also leasing instead of buying land, keeping down production costs, and focusing their marketing efforts. Several large producers have consolidated, hoping to find economies of scale. The largest—California Olive Ranch, in the Central Valley—has adopted a Spanish system (the owners are Spanish) of trellised trees for easy mechanical harvesting.

Katz told me that next year the state's output will most likely surpass that of France. "Yes, they aren't one of the biggest producers," he said. "But we never thought we'd be a player." (Spain, Italy, and Greece are the world's largest producers, followed by Tunisia, whose oil is often bottled in other countries and labeled as if it had been made there—something unscrupulous Californians have been caught doing too. Chile and New Zealand are the news in quality oil. As for bulk oil, the word in California is that China has planted 1.5 million trees, and though even California has almost double that number, any move the Chinese make worries the rest of the world.) Katz points to California Olive Ranch as an example of a Califor-

FIVE CALIFORNIA OLIVE OIL PRODUCERS

California Olive Ranch
Oroville, CA, 530-846-8000, www.californiaoliveranch.com. The state's largest producer, it uses mechanical harvesting to compete with bulk oils in price—and still guarantee freshness.

DaVero
Healdsburg, CA, 888-431-8008, www.davero.com. Carefully made Tuscan-style oils from Sonoma, including practically the only tolerable flavored oil, pressed with Meyer lemons.

McEvoy Ranch
Petaluma, CA, 866-617-6779, www.mcevoyranch.com. Especially peppery Tuscan-style oil, pressed at perhaps the state's most sophisticated olive mill.

Nick Sciabica & Sons
Modesto, CA, 800-551-9612, www.sciabica.com. A San Joaquin Valley family firm that kept the olive-oil business alive almost single-handedly for decades, making mostly mild oils from traditional California varieties.

Stonehouse
Berkeley, CA, 800-865-4836, www.stonehouseoliveoil.com. Central Valley oil made from mostly traditional California varieties; the "house oil" is blended to be smooth and mild but not dull.

nia producer aiming to compete on the world market. "You can get a half liter at Trader Joe's for five dollars," he said. "And that's decent oil! It's certainly better than ninety-nine percent of imports, which probably aren't extra-virgin anyway. Ten years ago you couldn't have found a half liter of California oil for *fifteen* dollars."

Tastes have changed too. Tuscany will ever be popular, and the green antioxidant polyphenols that Tuscan-style oils contain will probably be found year by year to be yet more healthful. But even if they are lower in antioxidants, the milder, golden oils that traditional California table olives produce are perfectly good too—especially if the olives are harvested earlier and more carefully, as Tuscan producers have shown longtime California producers how to do. Regions with climates warmer than Tuscany's, such as Puglia and Sicily, can pick much later, and historically they have, because riper olives produce more oil. For the same reason, growers in California's Central Valley, which has a warmer climate than Sonoma or Napa, historically picked late too. But earlier harvest makes for a brighter-tasting oil, even with varieties that will never have that Tuscan pungency.

"The American consumer prefers oils that are not bitter or pungent," says Darrell Corti, of Corti Brothers, in Sacramento, an authority on all foods and wines, especially those of California and Italy. He points out that after years of Tuscan experimentation, Californians interested in Italian olives are turning to southern varieties that might be better suited to the dry local climates (it rains in summer in Tuscany). As McEvoy Ranch and DaVero continue to take on Tuscany, fine-tuning vividly flavored "finishing" oils that are best drizzled on salads or thick soups (or, as Shari DeJoseph recommends, fried and poached eggs), other Californians are taking on much of the rest of Europe—and potentially satisfying the many Americans who like soft, easy oils.

Freshness, and a dash of patriotism, will sell California oil. So will the greatly improved overall quality I found on my recent trip, in a wide variety of styles and prices. But nothing sells oil better than olio nuovo, "new oil," and now is the time to order the last of this season's. As much a sauce as an oil, olio nuovo is unfiltered and contains bits of crushed fruit. It is irresistible on rustic bread that has been toasted and rubbed with a cut garlic clove to make the Tuscan *fettunta*, a celebratory seasonal snack. The flavors of olio nuovo are so lively and changeable that Ridgely Evers compares it to a teenager.

That freshness means volatility, so olio nuovo should be used fast—by the first flowering of spring, when the season's full-fledged oil, filtered and allowed to settle for a few months, appears. By that time the sediment in olio nuovo will have begun to oxidize in a dark pool at the bottom of the bottle, and the oil will become rancid. Some producers resist selling olio nuovo for fear that customers will open a bottle after May and wonder what went wrong. But a number of the state's most notable producers take the risk, and it's worth calling (see box) to see who still has some available. Olio nuovo is like an instant snapshot of the season's oil; the first of the season's oil is like a fresh finished portrait. I plan to order bottles of each kind from DaVero: I intend to taste that tablespoon I picked.

OLIVE OIL AND WINE

Suggestions for keeping it all Californian

On the theory that things that grow together taste good together, I asked Darrell Corti what wine would go well with a dish that features olive oil prominently—say, braised fennel with lemon and chicken stock, a dish that always brightens my winters, from the recipe in Barbara Kafka's encyclopedic new *Vegetable Love*, a book rich in olive-oil suggestions.

Corti recommended one from the foothills of the Sierras in the San Joaquin Valley, near olive orchards: President's Reserve Primitivo, made from the grape that is the genetic ancestor of Zinfandel. The name refers to the president of California State University at Fresno, the only four-year university with a commercial winery that operates as a teaching laboratory. Unlike the better-known teaching winery at the University of California at Davis, Fresno can sell its wine—which is made entirely by (supervised) students. They're doing well in their studies, as both Corti and Ken Fugelsang, a professor and the Fresno "winemaster," told me recently. The Primitivo won best of class in the Italian-varietals division of the 2002 LA County Fair, whose prizes carry weight for both wine and olive oil.

Fugelsang describes Primitivo as a subtler, better-integrated version of the familiar, powerfully fruity California Zinfandel. It's also much cheaper, at about $10 a bottle (call 559-278-9463 to order it). Corti also highly recommends Fresno's "magisterial" Barbera, a usually expensive Piedmontese wine that sells for only $13 a bottle. It would go well with the osso buco from Kafka's book—cooked, of course, with olive oil.

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