

San Francisco

THE INGREDIENT



Essential oil

Celebrating the fleeting pleasure of new olive oil.

BY DANIEL PATTERSON

PHOTOGRAPHS BY GEOFFREY MOORE

There are times when Bay Area renditions of traditional European foods make me pine for the old country. Aioli is not made by whipping store-bought mayonnaise and garlic in a blender; properly cooked confit should not shred like carnitas; and watery mashed potatoes topped with melted cheese should never bear the moniker *aligot*. But sometimes we get it right: Like in December, when local markets fill their shelves with Tuscan-inspired, just pressed local olive oils.

New olive oil, called *olio nuovo* in Italian, is an important tradition in Tuscany, where it is used immediately on, well, everything. New oils can be stunning—green, vibrant, intensely peppery. The fall olive harvest marks the end of the region's growing season, and dinners and festivals featuring the oil are held throughout Tuscany to celebrate the last bounty of summer.

Olive trees are not new to California, either: The first ones were planted by missionaries who settled here in the 18th century. Those original trees were later joined by a variety of cultivars, and by the late 1800s, California was producing world-class olive oils. But the local industry collapsed in the early 20th century, when Italy flooded the California market with inexpensive products. Over time, many of the local groves were torn out, and production shifted to black, ripe "table" olives—a misnomer, given that most of them were destined to be sliced into the flavorless, washerlike rings commonly found in salad bars and on commercial pizzas.

In the early 1990s, however, the California olive-oil industry began to change. A few small producers, determined to make oil

Four new oils to try

DAVERO: Sharp and intense. DAVERO.COM

MCEVOY: Powerful notes of artichoke and fresh-cut grass, with complex aromatics. MCEVOYRANCH.COM

SCIABICA'S: One of the oldest, most venerable producers in the state. Look for the sevellano, which is lovely and fruity, with a bit of peppery bite on the finish. SCIABICA.COM

SYLVERLEAF: Soft, delicate oil from Yuba County. SYLVERLEAF.COM

that rivaled the best in the world, found a supportive clientele in our increasingly savvy and Eurocentric local food culture. **Bruce Cohn**, the manager of the Doobie Brothers, makes excellent (albeit astonishingly pricey) oil from the picholine trees on his winery property, which sells out as quickly as it is bottled. **Ridgely Evers**, co-owner of **DaVero**, brought in trees from Italy to make delicious Tuscan-style oil. And on a vast estate nestled into the rolling hills west of Petaluma, **Nan McEvoy** began producing oil that many now consider the finest made in California.

McEvoy originally bought a 550-acre property in 1990 as a vacation home, but soon discovered that strict zoning laws required her to use the property for an agricultural purpose. Inspired by *Feast of the Olive*, a book by Oliveto co-owner Maggie Blyth Klein, and by her own love of Tuscan cuisine, McEvoy hired Italian olive-oil consultant Maurizio Castelli to create an estate oil. The initial 100 Italian olive trees they brought in grew to more than 18,000, and today, they run a nursery that sells young trees grown from their cuttings. The ranch also imported state-of-the-art Italian crushing equipment that includes both a traditional stone press and a sinolea, which uses slow-moving metal blades that dip into the olive paste to extract the oil.

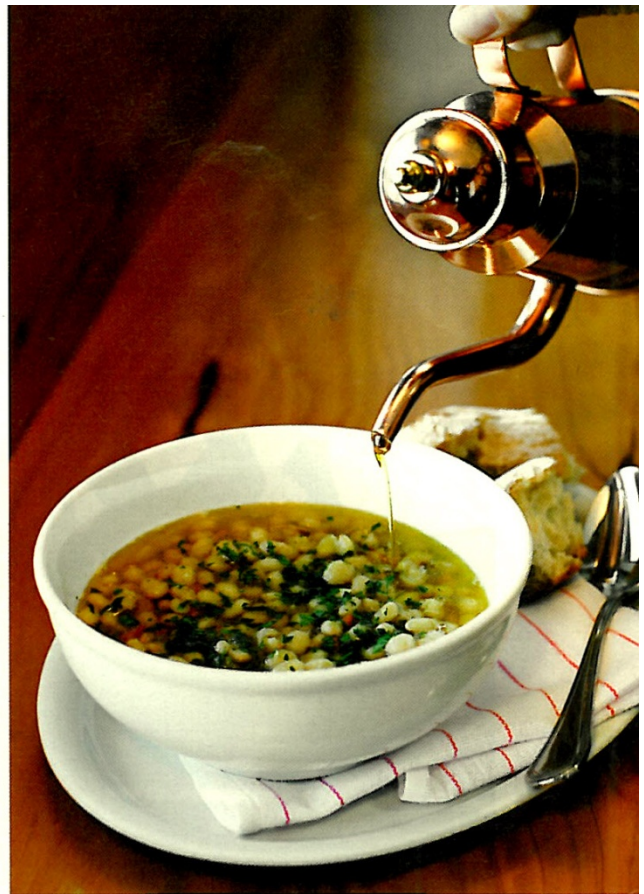
New olive oils are one of the great joys of late fall, as fleeting and intense as the fading sunlight. They're expensive, but do not confuse them with fine wines: Because the sediment has not been removed, the shelf life for these oils is a few months at most. They should be used quickly after being opened, and with abandon—on vegetables, salads, soups, beans, crostini, and even as a sauce for meat (especially braised) or fish. What you should *not* do with new olive oil is cook it, which will destroy the qualities that make it special. Use it only as a finishing sauce, and the simpler the accompaniments, the better.

Our local oils have yet to surpass the best Italian ones, although they're getting close. If you'd like to compare production here with some of the highest quality that Italy has to offer, the **Rare Wine Company**, in Sonoma, brings in a well-chosen selection of Italian oils every year.

New olive oil has a primal, dominant flavor that requires no recipe. But for a local take on a Tuscan classic, Lauren Kiino, my partner at Cane Rosso, makes a stew of white beans with chopped carrots, onions, fennel, and sage. Ladle it into bowls, douse it with new olive oil, and serve it with grilled bread rubbed with a garlic clove—and feel thankful for the harvest, for our Mediterranean climate, and for a few people who are taking the best European traditions and making them our own. ■

DANIEL PATTERSON IS THE CHEF-OWNER OF COI AND A PARTNER AT CANE ROSSO.

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LAUREN KIINO'S

White beans with soffrito and olio nuovo

INGREDIENTS

1 cup dried white beans, such as manteca beans from Iacopi Farms, or drained and rinsed canned beans
 ¼ cup olive oil
 ½ cup finely minced onion
 ¼ cup finely minced carrot
 ¼ cup finely minced celery or fennel bulb
 4 whole garlic cloves
 2 sprigs fresh sage
 Fine sea salt, to taste
 2 Tbsp. chopped flat-leaf parsley
 Olio nuovo, to taste

DIRECTIONS

1. If using dried beans, cover with water and let soak overnight.
2. In a large, heavy-bottomed pot, warm the olive oil over medium heat. Add the onion, carrot, and celery or fennel and cook until tender, about 10 minutes.
3. Drain the beans, add them to the pot, and cover with 6 cups fresh water. Add the garlic cloves and sage, bring to a simmer, and cook over low heat until the beans are tender, about 2 hours. Add more water if necessary. The beans should always be covered with at least half an inch of water. Salt to taste.
4. Ladle into warmed bowls, garnish with parsley, and drizzle with olio nuovo.

MAKES ABOUT 4 SERVINGS