



THE OTHER NECTAR OF THE GODS

Olive oil and wine have long defined the gastronomic cultures and trading ties of the Mediterranean basin. Why are they such inseparable companions?

STORY INES SALPICO

Dream of Tuscany, Andalucia or Alentejo and you will likely see rolling hills dotted by sculptural olive trees, interspersed with vineyards of gnarly old vines. Olive groves and vines have defined the culture and landscapes of the Mediterranean basin for centuries, inseparable companions across southern Europe and the Middle East. Geopolitics, trade and nature have all played a part in the relationship.

Vines and olive trees thrive in some of the most challenging areas within the 30° and 45° parallels, having adapted to drought and mineral-poor soils where other crops perish. 'Other trees struggle on the rocky soils in which vines perform best,' says Adrian Bridge, CEO of The Fladgate Partnership, owner of Quinta de Vargellas, an iconic Douro estate where olive oil is still produced. 'But olive trees have shallow roots and can survive, for centuries, on inhospitable soils.' While at the same time preventing erosion and improving soil structure. 'This, and the fact that they provided shade for the field workers, is why they were planted along the Douro's roads and slope edges.'

Both olives and vines were domesticated in and around Asia Minor some 6,000 years ago and then propagated by the Phoenicians across the Greek mainland and islands, where they became cornerstones of the Hellenic and Roman cultures. The expansion of the Roman empire would establish them all around the Mediterranean, consolidating the economic importance of both wine and olive oil, consumed as foodstuffs as well as for cosmetic, medicinal and religious purposes. Olive trees also provided fuel. 'Olive oil was, for centuries, the main if not the only cooking fat used in the Douro,' says Bridge. 'And it was the only source of light; we used olive oil lamps at Vargellas up until electricity arrived in 1977.'

CHAMPIONING BIODIVERSITY

If technological development and the aftermath of phylloxera conspired to support the hegemony of international grape varieties, a worldwide (re)discovery of olive oil also threatened the diversity of olive plant material. The growth of southern European immigrant communities in north America in the 19th and early 20th centuries, and the promotion of the health benefits of the Mediterranean diet in the 1980s, catalysed a global increase in demand, to which industrial producers responded with high-density monovarietal plantations.

These olive groves, which now cover large areas in Spain, Portugal and California, shape a very different landscape from that of postcard Mediterranean. Even though more than 700 olive varieties have been identified worldwide, the

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— Ana Carrilho, Herdade do Esporão

International Olive Council estimates that only 139 account for roughly 85% of olive oil production. It should therefore come as no surprise that – as has happened with indigenous, often forgotten, grape varieties – it has fallen upon quality-minded, terroir-driven wine producers to preserve the patrimony of old olive trees that have, for centuries, shared the land with their vines.

The Torres family, for instance, carefully preserves the productivity of centennial olive trees in its Purgatori estate, in Costers del Segre. From the 89ha of vineyards, three olive oils are produced, including one from a 400-year-old plot and a blend of two local, nearly extinct varieties.

TERROIR EXPRESSION

Olive oil is the only commercially and nutritionally significant vegetable oil to be extracted from fruits rather than seeds. This means that the quality of the raw material is paramount, as are the varieties used, maturity at harvest and the conditions of each growing season. In other words, terroir and vintage shape, as in wine, the nature of each olive harvest.

Sicilian powerhouse Donnafugata discovered the parallel when expanding its estate portfolio to Pantelleria (1989) and then Etna (2016). In each of the dramatically different Sicilian regions, two local olive varieties, Biancolilla and Nocellara Etna, produce oils that are as characterfully distinct as the wines of their territorial grape counterparts. The olive groves in each of the regions also show how the trees have evolved with the territory, their shape and size sculpted by the different winds, microclimates and soils.

The team at Castello di Meleto (Chianti Classico, Tuscany) have also encountered a striking parallel between the character of the oils of each of their olive groves and that of the adjacent vineyards. 'It's fascinating to see how oil and wine from the same terroir show the same finesse, florality, concentration and/or power,' says Michele Contartese, general manager at Meleto. 'This is why we harvest and extract the oils separately, plot by plot, and then make a final blend.'



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Donnafugata – like Torres, Meleto, Fladgate and indeed most oil-producing wine estates – relies on external olive mills to press its fruit. The amount of oil pressed does not usually justify the investment in dedicated infrastructure and machinery.

Some estates have, however, decided to invest in their own milling facilities, therefore controlling quality from olive to oil, as they do from grape to glass. Herdade do Esporão (Alentejo, Portugal) saw this as an absolute requirement for quality when deciding to start commercial olive oil production in 1997. The estate bought an existing olive mill in Serpa to start with, before designing and building its own mill in 2016, a stone’s throw from the estate’s cellar and Michelin-starred restaurant, where, unsurprisingly, the company’s oils take centre stage.

EDUCATING CONSUMERS

‘It’s a shame that olive oil isn’t fully understood, either by consumers or the industry, as a high-quality product rather than a commodity,’ says Ana Carrilho, Esporão’s head of olive oil production. ‘Producing a quality oil depends on a set of variables – harvest time, varieties, quick processing, terroir and so on – that are very similar to wine. I hope that one day olive oil will be perceived in all its diversity and complexity, just like wine, and that people understand the differences in price.’

For Carrilho, the need to preserve old trees and varieties is not just motivated by faithfulness to a cultural lineage. As climate change looms large, it

HOW TO TASTE OLIVE OIL

Like wine, tasting olive oil requires a specific skill set and vocabulary, developed through the understanding of both qualities and defects.

Colour is not, except in cases of obvious oxidation, an indication of quality; whether an oil is green, gold or even orange-hued is merely a function of variety, growing conditions and harvest time. This is why professional oil tasters use cobalt blue glasses, not letting colour influence their organoleptic perception and quality assessment. Some producers decide to bottle their oils unfiltered, so **cloudiness** is also not necessarily a defect.

The full range of volatile components is only released at 28°C, so the first step is, after pouring a tablespoon of oil in a lidded tasting cup, to cradle it in one’s hand to bring the **temperature** up. Following which the lid can be removed for a first sniff of the aromas and **defects** (see right). To assess the palate, it is

important to sip enough to roll around the mouth and **cover the tongue**, mixing the oil with saliva, which in turn allows body and texture, in addition to flavour, to be judged. Experienced tasters will also suck in air to release more aromas.

It is essential to **swallow** some of the oil to assess its pungency, bitterness and spiciness, only clearly felt in the back of the throat. Green apple and water (never bread!) are the best palate cleansers to reset the palate between oils.

Main aroma/flavour categories: apple (colour, ripeness?); tomato (type, berry, leaf?); artichoke; nuts (almond, walnuts etc – fresh or toasted?); grass (freshly cut, dried?); herbs (fresh, dried?); fruits (banana, pineapple, peach, pear etc); bitterness; spice.

Main defects: rancidity, oxidation, mustiness, sludgy/fustiness, heated/burnt, metallic, winy (wine or vinegar aftertaste).

is important to understand that ‘we need to be humble’. Older trees, local varieties, biodiversity and considered planting density are, for olive trees and for vines, key to promoting adaptiveness and effective resource management. At stake is the survival of two of nature’s most precious nectars, and of the cultures that have evolved with them.

To see more olive oils from wine producers, such as Bodegas Roda, Quinta do Noval and Recaredo, and tasting notes for some of their wines, go to [decanter.com](#)



Torres produces three olive oils from its Purgatori estate in the Costers del Segre DO



Donnafugata’s olive plantings on the island of Pantelleria, where it has made wine since 1989

Olive oils from wine estates: six delicious examples to try

- ① **Donnafugata, Biancolilla Extra Virgin Olive Oil, Pantelleria, Sicily, Italy**
£21.09/50cl* [donnafugata.it](#)
Variety: 100% Biancolilla. A pure example of the variety, grown on Pantelleria’s windswept groves, with its gentle florality and vibrant fruit notes underpinned by the vegetal freshness of cherry tomatoes and the herbal earthiness of rosemary, lavender and thyme. A great way to understand – especially if tasted alongside the estate’s Nocellara Etnea (earthier, spicier and more robust) – how olive oils can be so varietal and terroir expressive.
- ② **Herdade do Esporão, Organic Extra Virgin Olive Oil, Alentejo, Portugal**
£21.95/50cl [Fortnum & Mason](#)
Variety: Galega. This is a pure and vibrant example of Portugal’s flagship variety Galega. Very balanced, with a fruit-led attack dominated by green apple, crunchy pear and almond shells. The finish is moreish and gently spicy with lingering flavours of walnuts and toasted almonds.
- ③ **Castello di Meleto, Extra Virgin Olive Oil, Tuscany, Italy**
£18/50cl* [castellomeleto.com](#)
Varieties: Frantoio, Moraiolo, Leccino, Pendolino. Castello de Meleto is committed to traditional farming methods and the preservation of the existing biodiversity. ‘A vacuum is always dangerous,’ says Giacomo Sensi, chief agronomist at the

Chianti Classico estate, referring to monoculture, ‘because it doesn’t exist in nature.’ Instead, Meleto seeks balance through precision organic farming, crop rotation and the introduction of bee colonies to fight pests and promote pollination. Its oil hails from 10ha on four different terroirs. Low yields and old trees result in a robust and deeply aromatic oil, with a citrus lift and almondy finish.

④ **Sant’Or, Extra Virgin Olive Oil, Patra, Greece**
£13/50cl [Pure Wines](#)
Varieties: Patrinia, Stafiloelies. Having inherited his father’s land in the Peloponnese and then converted it

to biodynamic practices, Panagiotis Dimitropoulos of Sant’Or Wines has become the committed guardian of a unique heritage and is determined to preserve the rare indigenous Mavrodaphne and Santameriana grapes, as well as these local olive varieties. Stafiloelies produces an intense and textural oil, with rich aromas of artichokes, milk thistle and fresh almonds, topped by mint, rosemary and black pepper.

- ⑤ **Familia Torres, El Silencio Extra Virgin Olive Oil, Catalonia, Spain**
£12.20/50cl [The Fine Cheese Co](#)
Varieties: Arbequina. It wouldn’t be either fair or accurate to call this the entry-level oil in the range produced by Torres at its Purgatori estate in Costers del Segre. Granted, it is the cheapest and the more widely available oil, but it hails from 400-year-old Arbequina trees and is extremely balanced and elegant. The nose is fresh and complex, with herbal, vegetal and citrus nuances. Flavours of artichoke, tomato leaf and blanched almonds are followed by a subtle, spicy lift.
- ⑥ **Taylor’s, Quinta de Vargellas Extra Virgin Olive Oil, Douro, Portugal**
£10.95-£15.95/50cl [Cotswold Port Co](#), [Dunell’s](#), [The Secret Bottle Shop](#)
Varieties: Madural, Cordovil, Verdeal. Produced from the 3,000 olive trees that have, for centuries, lined the edge of roads and vineyard slopes of the iconic Douro estate. Elegantly grassy, with notes of freshly cut grass and asparagus, it unfolds with a fruity and smooth-textured mid-palate, followed by a gently spicy finish. **D**



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