

TAKE AN INSIDE LOOK AT THE ANCIENT KITCHEN STAPLE THAT BECAME A MODERN FOODIE FAVORITE.

BY BRET LOVE

Ithough its fame in North America, from tastings to the bounty of specialty options, didn't reach current levels until the last decade, the value of quality extra-virgin olive oil (EVOO) has been celebrated throughout the Mediterranean region for many centuries.

Originating in ancient Greece, wild olive trees were first harvested by Neolithic peoples as early as the eighth millennium B.C. While the exact dates are not known, archeological evidence suggests that cultivated olives were being grown in Crete by the year 2500 B.C., and historians believe that olive oil was being produced as early as 4000 B.C.

Olive oil soon played a growing role in the global economy: In addition to cooking, the oil was used as fuel for lamps, medicine, skin care products (the Greeks rubbed it on their bodies before exercising), soap, and as an element in religious rituals. Eventually, olive oil came to be regarded as a sign of wealth, so perhaps it's no surprise that gourmet varieties are prized among fashionable food enthusiasts today.

With a growing interest in the health aspects of the Mediterranean diet, olive oil production has spread around the world, from traditional Mediterranean hotspots to upstarts such as Australia, Argentina, South Africa, and the United States. Here, we take a look at some of the most respected growing regions and talk to experts about what distinguishes a good olive oil from a great one.

# Spain

Home to important varieties such as Picual, Arbequina, Hojiblanca, and Manzanillo de Jaén, Spain is the world's top olive oil producer, creating approximately 30% of the overall supply. Masía el Altet's Premium Extra Virgin Olive Oil has been ranked No. 2 in the world, and their farm has been cultivating olive trees since the 18th century. But in 1995, according to General Manager Jorge Petit, the company refined its approach, changing its fertilization methods, upgrading to a drip irrigation system, and



Oasis Olives

increasing the variety of olive trees to enable better use of the soil. Asked what makes his brand unique in the region, Petit explains, "We underline the extreme care in olive cultivation, daily monitoring of the harvest, and use of the latest machinery for the extraction of olive oil by natural means." The resulting quality, he says, "is the same difference you can find between bottles of wine that cost  $\in$ 5 (US\$6.50) and a Chateau Petrus or Chateau d'Yquem."

### Italy

Italy is second to Spain in terms of olive oil production, with key regions such as Lucca and Florence referred to as Città dell'Olio, or "cities of oil." Frantoio Franci's Villa Magra variety is grown in Tuscany, on a farm that has been in owner Giorgio Franci's family for generations. Franci is quick to point out the health benefits of extra-virgin olive oil over saturated fats, explaining how the polyphenols in olive oil work as a natural antioxidant to help prevent cellular aging. He's also outspoken about the differences between his product and the more budgetfriendly olive oil you'll find in your local supermarket: "The ridiculously low prices for certain bottles of 'olive' oil is justified by their production process," he says. "We pay attention to harvest and storage practices, picking olives when green (which leads to lower yields, but excellent quality oil) and processing them the very same day. ... Good olive oil must have a fresh aroma and a definitive taste, with intense piquant and bitter notes."

### Greece

OURTESY

Although Greece ranks third behind Spain and Italy in terms of olive oil production, it's No. 1 for extra-virgin olive oil, which comprises 80% of its total output (as opposed to Italy's 45% and Spain's 30%). The difference between extra-virgin and lesser oils is the acidity and boldness of flavor: Quality extra-virgin olive oil has an acidity level of 0.8% or lower, while regular olive oil can be up to 2% acidity and lacks a pronounced flavor. Dimitris Traiforos, sales manager of the Cretebased Elona Corporation, explains how the oil extraction method for their hand-picked olives produces a higher quality product: "We mill the fruits the same day we collect them," he says, "so that the olives do not capture moisture, smells, and other stuff from the environment. The mill presses the olives at a temperature of about 27 degrees Celsius without any chemical process. This keeps the acidity low, retains all the natural flavor, and maintains the health benefits."

### Portugal

Portugal produces only 5% of the world's olive oil, but Sociedade Agrícola Ouro Vegetal (SAOV) is earning rave reviews for its Cabeco das Nogueiras brand of extravirgin olive oil. CEO Alberto Serralha, a fourth-generation olive oil maker who recalls playing around the oil mill during his childhood, started helping his grandfather with the family business 20 years ago, and never looked back. He cautions

# **GLOBAL GOURMET**



that even oils considered extra-virgin under International Olive Council (IOC) regulations are not necessarily created equal. "The current standard allows a wide range of olive oils to be in that category," he says. "Oils with low sensorial quality will get the same title as a more fruity and complex oil. Common [extra-virgin olive oil] is obtained with no special care about the harvest period or extraction process, and then packed in cheap, bright bottles. ... In the past, our region of Ribatejo was seen as producing mildly flavored oils, but our work has been recognized in the most important olive oil competitions all around the world."

### Turkey

Though Turkey can't rival its neighbors in terms of sheer production volume, companies such as SOM Olive Oil have distinguished themselves in international competitions on the strength of the Mentese family's 110 years in the business. Company Director Aaron Martin echoes his peers in pointing out the importance of hand-picking green olives and cold pressing them within a few hours to ensure ultimate freshness. But he also points out the importance of water in the production process. "Once at the press, good olive oil is continuously cleaned with fresh, cold water," Martin says. "Bulk oil reprocesses its cleaning water and heats the water to increase yield at the expense of quality. Another big differentiator is cleanliness: Boutique operations clean everything every evening, while big factories operate 24/7 and clean out the presses weekly or seasonally, which leaves residue in the presses to rot."

### Australia

Australia has been rising up the ranks of olive oil-producing countries in recent years, though a substantial portion of its companies focus more on oils for the general market. Oasis Olives is one of the more distinguished Australian companies, having won gold medals at the 2012 Los Angeles International Extra Virgin Olive Oil Competition and 2012 Australian Olive Association Awards. Oasis Olives Director John Symington explains that the company's oils are largely based on frantoio olives from Tuscany, using traditional techniques learned from a European oil maker. But he adds that their farm in the Goulburn Strathbogie region produces particularly high quality oils due to the hot, dry summers, and cool, slower ripening and harvesting period. Asked what the surging popularity of extra-virgin olive oil says about the world's eating habits, Symington explains, "Everyone loves good food, and using a high quality olive oil can really lift a dish to another level. I don't think many people outside traditional olive-growing areas were particularly aware of this until recently. Perhaps the sight of television chefs

splashing olive oil on their dishes has contributed to better awareness."

### California, USA

The United States may be the new kid on the olive oil block, but the rocky soil, rolling hills, and climate of Northern California has proven conducive to producing a high quality extra-virgin olive oil similar to that of the Mediterranean. Founded by Laurie Schuler-Flynn and Amy DelBondiotwo women with Italian grandmothers and an admiration for small-batch olive oil production-Hillstone Olive Oil has won gold medals and "Best of Show" recognition from several prestigious competitions, including the 2009 Los Angeles International Extra Virgin Olive **Oil Competition.** 

"The popularity of olive oil is reflective of healthy Americans becoming more aware and knowledgeable about the wonderful high quality oils available," Schuler-Flynn says. "Consumers are eager to find local foods, including different olive oil varietals, that can be used in their cooking in distinctive ways to open a new door in creative, freshtasting, healthy foods."

As more people continue to discover the health and culinary benefits of olive oil, don't be surprised to see more producers of high quality extra-virgin olive oil products popping up in other parts of the world. PL

# Where to Stay



Porto Elounda Golf & Spa Resort; Montebello Splendid; Altis Belém Hotel & Spa

### **SPAIN**

In the heart of downtown Barcelona lies a five-star, boutique luxury hotel with unique amenities and top-tier service. On the site of the former palace of the first Count of Barcelona, the **Ohla Hotel** has 74 guestrooms, a terrace with a swimming pool from which guests can enjoy the city lights, and some of the best gastronomic delights Barcelona has to offer.

### ITALY

Located in Florence, **Montebello Splendid** is a traditional 19th-century villa that has been fully renovated and restored into a luxury, five-star boutique hotel surrounded by relaxing courtyards. The hotel's Capriccio Restaurant features authentic dishes rich with ingredients grown in the Tuscan countryside, from meat raised on nearby farms to extra-virgin olive oils from the groves surrounding Florence.

### GREECE

Situated along the coast of Elounda on the island of Crete, **Porto Elounda Golf & Spa Resort** offers a seaside paradise of modern luxury in an ancient setting. The golf course and spa provide ample opportunities for rest and relaxation, while the Children's World offers little ones a place to play. Try the Odysseus Tavern or Playiada restaurant for a taste of traditional Mediterranean cuisine.

### PORTUGAL

Lisbon's **Altis Belém Hotel & Spa** is a uniquely designed boutique hotel: Each of the 50 guestrooms features a lavishly illustrated panel depicting a scene from a different part of the world, taking guests on an imaginary journey without leaving their suites. The hotel's Feitoria Restaurant & Wine Bar offers an elaborate olive oil tasting for groups of six with advance reservations.

## TURKEY

Named "The Most Excellent Charming Hotel of Europe and the Mediterranean" by *Condé Nast Traveler*, **Divan Bodrum** is located on the Bodrum peninsula where the Aegean Sea meets the Mediterranean. Its Iskele Restaurant affords stunning sea views, offering a menu that mixes local ingredients such as artisanal olive oil and heirloom tomatoes to create incredibly flavorful dishes.

### **AUSTRALIA**

At **Lyall Hotel and Spa** in Melbourne, each floor has an art gallery (showcasing original works of renowned artist Thierry B.), a gym offering "Life Fitness" equipment, and a full service spa. Bistro Lyall offers elegant contemporary cuisine highlighting multicultural influences and local ingredients.

### CALIFORNIA, USA

Set on the banks of the Sacramento River, **Le Rivage** is inspired by European architecture, and offers private balconies and picturesque views. Amenities include Spa LaLé and the four-star Scott's Seafood on the River, which uses local ingredients and extra-virgin olive oil in many of its criticallyacclaimed dishes.

For further information and reservations, visit PreferredHotelGroup.com



Le Rivage



Divan Bodrum