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Illustration: Elen Winata for News UK

GOLD STANDARD

WHY OLIVE OIL IS SPAIN'S SECRET SUPERPOWER

Renowned for its health benefits and culinary versatility, the Mediterranean kitchen staple is inspiring a new generation of Spanish chefs, says **Renate Ruge**

Rolling hills stretch for miles to verdant horizons neatly dotted with olive trees that bask in the hot sun, their fruit ripening from green to black. As you travel through Spain, it's easy to see why the warm climate makes rich pickings for olive farmers. Mild winters, long summers and smart irrigation provide perfect growing conditions for more than 260 native varieties.

Some 340 million olive trees carpet the country, from the mountainous north down to Andalusia in the south, the heartland for growers. Spain is the world's leading olive oil producer, responsible for 45 per cent of the global supply, and its farmers are sticklers for quality, adhering to stringent controls.

Extra virgin olive oil is made without any chemical processes

As with good wine, producing excellent olive oil relies on myriad variables, such as growing conditions, harvest time and using the best varieties of fruit. The highest grade – extra virgin or "EVOO" – is made by crushing olives and extracting the juice, with no chemical processes involved. Rich in polyunsaturated and monounsaturated fatty acids, and full of antioxidants and vitamins A, E and K, it's the secret to Spain's traditional Mediterranean diet and key to the country's avant garde gastronomy.

A taste of Spanish history

Top of the crops

Serving up a twist on tradition

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A TASTE OF SPANISH HISTORY

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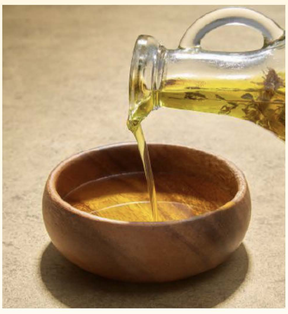
A taste of Spanish history

Tracing the heritage of the olive-growing tradition reveals how central it is to Spain's culture

Olive oil has flavoured Spanish cooking for millennia. Trace the flow back to the Phoenicians, who introduced it to Southern Spain in around 1100BC. The Romans are widely credited for its spread, making the country a production powerhouse, and down the ages, the Iberian Peninsula's many influences have left a lasting impact, including shaping the landscape, thanks to 2.75 million hectares of olive groves – the largest olive surface on the planet.

Olive oil now plays a central role in Spain's gastronomy. The country's chefs have been obsessed with native ingredients since the "*nueva cocina vasca*" (new Basque cuisine) movement, with olive oil the flavourful star of many iconic dishes, including Martín Berasategui's alternative ice cream, Dani García's golden pearls of "olive oil semolina" and Ferran Adrià's extra virgin olive oil "caviar".

Olive oil now plays a central role in Spain's gastronomy, with the country's chefs making it the flavourful star of many iconic dishes



Going for gold The quality of Spanish olive oil can be judged by taste and aroma

Transformative technology and scientific advances in pressing methods and storage have accelerated positive changes, revolutionising Spain's oil industry in recent decades to keep up with soaring demand. The distinction between olive oil and extra virgin olive oil has also shifted the focus to quality. "Fruity", "nutty", "grassy" and "spicy" became buzzwords, with aroma and taste the measures of excellence.

Today's modern *almazaras* (mills) opt for early picking to prevent fruit over-ripening, yielding fresh, aromatic extra virgin olive oils. Harvesting techniques mirror those in wineries and now fruit collection even happens at night so processing can begin as little as 45 minutes later. Sustainable farming practices and organic production are improving the quality of the olives on the trees, and drones track and monitor plantations in Andalusia.

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Top of the crops

Just as terroir is vital in winemaking, olive oil is also a product of the land, soil, climate and native varieties. The official Protected Designation of Origin (PDO) marker recognises high quality areas of production, and the number of PDOs for extra virgin oils in Spain has shot up from just four in 1965 to 32 at the last count.

The secret to making great olive oil starts with the quality of the fruit. Blessed with hundreds of different types, Spain's map of native olives encompasses around 260 varieties, including top-tier varietals such as picual, cornicabra, arbequina, hojiblanca, picudo and empeltre, each with its own flavour profile.

Whether you want to dip, dunk, drizzle, fry or simply add pep to your cooking repertoire, here's what to look for.

1 Picual

Spain's most abundant olive variety is also its best known, grown specifically to make oil and accounting for half the country's production. It's one of the most nutritious too, packed with health-giving antioxidants. It grows over an expansive cultivation area that spreads south from Castile-La Mancha to Andalusia and its flavour profile changes according to the fluctuating terroir. The olives are picked between November and February.

Hearty picual oils are usually robust with good body, so they are versatile in cooking, holding up well to high heat and better for frying and roasting than more delicate varieties. Traditionally, hints of fig with a slightly bitter purgency were distinguishing features, but today's earlier harvest results in more fragrant and fruity oils, with just a touch of bitterness and notes of green tomatoes and unripe almonds. They will add a flourish to chilled soups like gazpacho and are a good match for cold cuts and cheeses.

2 Cornicabra

Hailing from central Spain, primarily grown across the sun-drenched region of Castile-La Mancha, cornicabra olives are the second most cultivated after picual and comparable in fruitiness. The name means "goat horn", due to their shape, and they are also known as cornal, cornalito and cornicho. The fact they are more difficult to pick mechanically is sometimes reflected in the price tag, and they often appear in premium oils.

Also robust, cornicabra oils are similarly good for cooking. The flavour profile is more intense, and although the aroma of apple might imply sweetness, the oil has bitter peppery undertones, which stand up to other bold flavours. There is a spicy bite on the finish that goes well with roasted meats - drizzle over a leg of lamb before slow roasting on a bed of Spanish potatoes.

3 Arbequina

While some olives can be bitter, the arbequina variety tends to be milder, its fruity sweetness appealing to most palates. The small greenish-brown olives are mostly grown in Catalonia and Aragon, where the climate is cooler than that of its southern cousins, lending more layers to the taste. Despite its Catalonian origins, the arbequina olive variety flourishes throughout Spain as both a single variety and part of a blend.

Its oil stands up less well to frying at high temperatures but can be used in baking as a healthier alternative to butter as the arbequina contains a high concentration of oleic acid, which helps to reduce bad cholesterol.

Key characteristics include delicate apple and almond notes. Popular for their mellow and nuanced flavour, arbequina oils are also suited to dips, for dunking freshly baked bread, and use in salad dressings. They are also good with cooked over vegetables and seafood, including steamed white fish, and won't leave a harsh aftertaste.

4 Hojiblanca

The third most planted olive variety in Spain is named after the hardy tree it grows on, whose leaves are white ("blanca") on the underside, giving a shimmering halo effect in sunlight. Originating in Córdoba, Seville and Málaga and sprawling across vast swathes of Andalusia, the trees are threatened by tough winters but they are drought-resistant and adapt well to limestone terroir, so they thrive in mountainous climes.

The fruit is tasty with a firm texture, and often eaten as a table olive. When ripe, it has a reddish hue, but milling it when green can result in notes of leaves or freshly cut grass, with a sweetness and spice that's reminiscent of green peppercorns and a gently bitter, nutty finish.

The oil is a great all-rounder, useful in pasts for its high fat content, which helps dough stay supple and smooth. Perfect as an appetiser, it also brings out the flavours in fish like salmon and tuna and rounds off pan con tomate nicely.

5 Picudo

This reddish-hued fruit has a slightly pointed almond shape and grows on swathes of trees all over Andalusia, with a significant presence in Córdoba, Granada, Málaga, Jaén and around the small town of Baena, where the local economy and culture is so drenched in olive production that there's even a dedicated museum. The oil is prized for its aromatic qualities, with flavours of green fruit like apples and more exotic overtones such as banana. Low levels of bitterness mean picudo olives are a joy in warm salads and make great table oils.

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SERVING UP A TWIST ON TRADITION

Spanish chef Marcos Morán on why his homeland's olive oil is one of the best ingredients in a cook's arsenal

Marcos Morán is the fifth generation chef of Michelin-starred Casa Gerardo in Asturias, Spain, where he shares the kitchen with his father, Pedro Morán. The restaurant has been awarded three "Suns" by the Repsol Guide (the highest rating for restaurants in Spain).

Morán is also gastronomic director of the Hispania restaurants in London and Brussels, which offer a true taste of Spanish haute cuisine, from stellar tapas to signature dishes like roasted suckling pig. His innovative food is rooted in tradition, and here he explains why he's a firm fan of his homeland's olive oil:

"It doesn't always follow that quantity and quality go together, but in the case of Spanish olive oil, we produce the most and have the best. It's special primarily for its versatility: it can be used in so many ways, in many recipes. It also travels well, so when I'm cooking abroad, I make sure there's plenty in my destination kitchen.

"For any cook, ingredients are our best weapons and as a Spanish chef, olive oil's one of the best in our arsenal. More than just something you cook with, it's at the heart of our dishes, part of us, in our DNA and emblematic of Spanish cuisine.

"Hispania is the biggest Spanish restaurant chain in Europe outside of Spain, so it follows that Spanish olive oils are our preferred cooking fat. They are the first thing we instinctively put in a pan for frying, stews, seasoning and finishing touches, or to mark the start of a meal as an appetiser with freshly baked bread.

"My favourite extra virgin oil varieties are picual, as it has personality without being overpowering, and arbequina, for its smooth elegance. Arbosana, with its peppery, nutty notes, and royal, with its fruity hints of fig, are also special. I like to showcase rarer varieties to enhance the authentic Spanish experience we give our guests.

Look at the harvest date – it should be within the past year

"When it comes to high temperature cooking, picual works best, though frying fresh products with arbequina doesn't overpower ingredients but improves flavour, like in our *salpicón* [a tasty seafood salad with egg yolk vinaigrette].

"Plates at Hispania often get their final touches at the table, with waiters drizzling fresh extra virgin olive oil on to tuna or steak or tartare in front of guests, which heightens the diners' senses.

"Aside from olive oil's special flavour, it offers health benefits you can't find in other fats and integrates well on the plate to enhance the whole dish.

"I love it when you can smell the terroir in herbaceous notes or aromas of almonds, dried fruit or green tomatoes. Sometimes you'll get fruity flavours and sweet scents of banana or mango coming through.

"My tips for choosing the best extra virgin olive oil? The easiest way to check for authenticity is to find the Protected Designation of Origin marker on the label and look at the harvest date, which tells you when the olives were picked – it should be within the past year. Then use your nose. Sometimes the scent gives you a better sense of what's good, given that taste starts in the nose.

"Remember to store it in a dark place, out of the sun or light, and buy smaller bottles to make sure you use it all while it's at its best."

Plate up

Signature Spanish dishes to delight, straight from Marcos Morán's kitchen

HISPANIA STEAK TARTAR

FRITOS DE PIXÍN – MONKFISH BITES

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HISPANIA STEAK TARTAR

SERVES 4

INGREDIENTS

8g sweet and sour gherkin
8g red onion
8g capers
1g chives
1 egg yolk
20ml Spanish extra virgin olive oil (in our opinion picual or arbequina varieties work best)
50g sirloin steak, cut finely with a sharp knife
5ml soya sauce
2g sharp mustard
0.5g pinch salt
0.2g pinch ground black pepper
2 drops Tabasco
5 drops Worcester sauce

METHOD

1. Chop the gherkin, onion, capers and chives into very fine "*brunoise*" and set aside.
2. Emulsify the egg yolk with the Spanish extra virgin olive oil, using a whisk. Once emulsified, add it to the meat.
3. Add the rest of the ingredients and combine.
4. Beat energetically with a spoon until all the ingredients are well integrated and the mixture looks uniform.
5. Taste and season with salt if desired. Plate up the steak tartare in patties.
6. Serve immediately, with a drizzle of olive oil at the table in front of your dinner guests.

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FRITOS DE PIXÍN – MONKFISH BITES

(ON THE MENU AT HISPANIA)
SERVES 4

Pixín is the name of monkfish in Asturias, the coastal region of Spain where Marcos Morán lives, where these juicy morsels of fish are served just fried and dusted with salt in fishermen's cafes. A simple fish dish, it transports flavours from Marcos's homeland to his restaurant. Try these tasty bites at London's Hispania or make them at home.

INGREDIENTS

1 monkfish tail (from your local fishmonger)
Salt
1 egg
Cup of flour
Arbequina olive oil
Jar of preserved piquillo peppers (confited in olive oil)

METHOD

1. First, cut a fresh monkfish tail into small pieces of about 3cm each.
2. Season with salt.
3. Beat the egg.
4. Dredge the pieces of fish in a separate bowl of flour and then in the beaten egg.
5. Fry in a shallow frying pan with arbequina olive oil.
6. Drain and place on an absorbent paper to remove the excess fat.
7. Serve with piquillo peppers.

OLIVE OIL NOTE

We usually use picual olive oil for general use – frying and roasting – in the kitchen and arbequina to finish some dishes. Hearty picual oils are usually robust and versatile in cooking, holding up well to high heat, better in roasted dishes than more delicate varieties as they have a higher smoke point.

The arbequina variety of oils tend to be milder, the natural fruity sweetness appealing to most palates, and therefore a good match with delicate fish dishes, especially white fish and seafood as there's not a trace of harsh aftertaste.

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