



Oil of life: a look at Spain's world-class olives and olive oils

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Find out more about the unique and varied olives (and the oils made from them) coming out of Spain – the world's leading source of 'liquid gold'.



Great British Chefs is a team of passionate food lovers dedicated to bringing you the latest food stories, news and reviews.

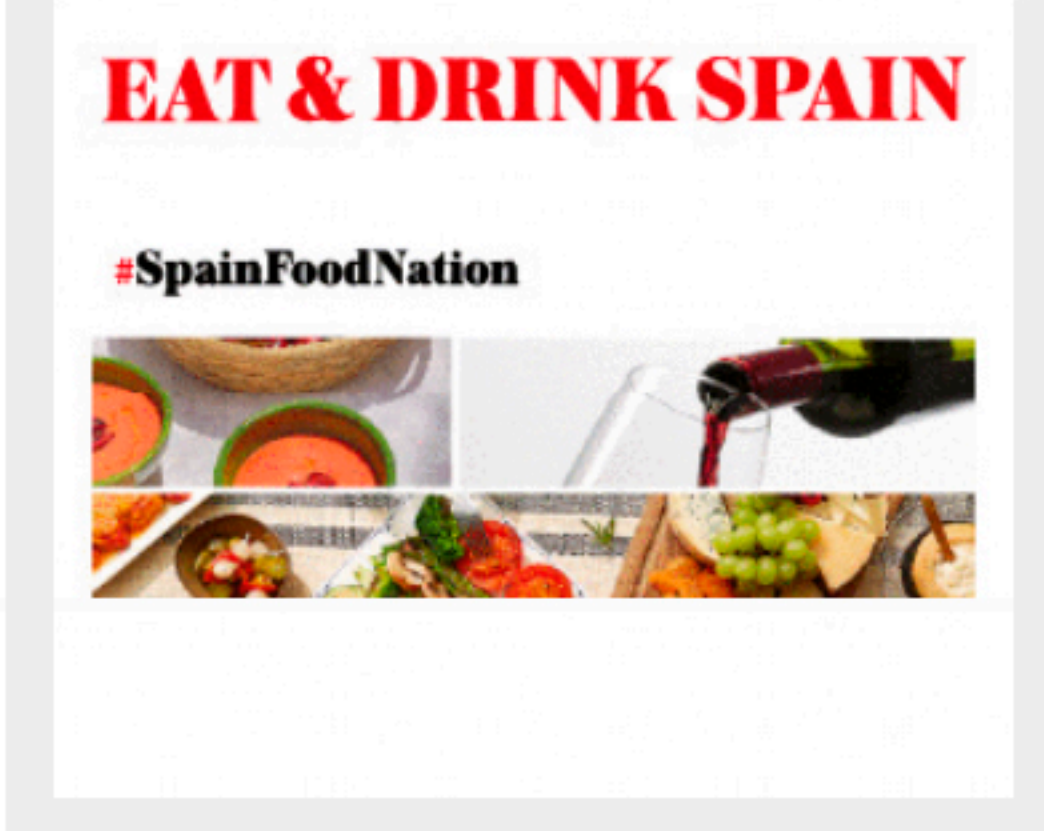
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Olive oil has been the lifeblood of European cooking for two millennia now, and when it comes to olive growing, few countries can claim the same heritage as Spain. For starters, Spain boasts the largest expanse of olive trees in the world – nearly 300 million trees carpet the Spanish countryside, from north to south, east to west. The majority of these groves are concentrated in the centre and south of the country where the mountainous relief and long, scorching summers are perfect for olive cultivation, but wherever you go in Spain, you're never far from an olive tree.

Spain produces about half of the world's olive oil and exports nearly half of that, making it the world's biggest olive oil producer and exporter – perhaps no surprise given the blanket of olive trees that covers the country. But Spain doesn't just produce olive oil in quantity – it also produces olives of outstanding quality. The wide spectrum of landscapes and climates across the country means that Spain's native olive varieties – 268 of them to be exact – all have distinct differences in flavour and aroma. The Cornicabra olives which grow primarily in Castile-La Mancha in central Spain produce fruity, robust oils that stand up well to cooking. Head south into Andalusia or east into Catalonia and you'll come across very different olive varieties, such as Picual or Arbequina, each with their own unique characteristics. Spain's geographical diversity is what makes its olives and olive oils truly special, so it pays to know a bit about the different olives before you buy!

With that in mind, here's our rundown on the Spanish olive and olive oil varieties to look out for, including the four major varieties that you'll come across most often and a few lesser known gems too.



Picual



With a litany of different names and a huge geographical cultivation area that spreads from Castile-La Mancha to Andalusia, Picual is the bedrock of Spanish olives and the most abundant olive variety in the world, grown exclusively to make oil (rather than eat). The flavour of Picual olive oils can vary greatly because of the wide variety of terroirs it grows in, but on the whole Picual oils are hearty and robust, often with a touch of astringency and herbaceous notes like green tomatoes or green almonds.

Picual olive oils are also famously great for cooking, as they hold up to high temperatures better than more delicate oil varieties.

Arbequina



Generally speaking, olives are very bitter and most olive oils reflect that bitterness, but Arbequina olive oil has found a lot of popularity as an extraordinarily fruity olive oil that tends towards sweetness, rather than bitterness. Originally from the Catalan town of Arbaca, hence the name, Arbequina olives are mostly grown in Catalonia and Aragon; the climate here is milder than the deep south of the country and that results in a much mellower, more nuanced olive oil that suits better to dipping and dressing than cooking. You can also eat Arbequina olives – they're a popular variety because despite being relatively small, they're packed with meaty, buttery and fruity flavours.

Cornicabra



Cornicabra olives are the second most cultivated after Picual. Cornicabra oils are comparable in many ways to those made with Picual olives but they're generally more intense. The aroma can be a little misleading – they're often said to smell of Granny Smith apples, but the flavour is pleasingly bitter and peppery. As a result, Cornicabra olives make excellent cooking and dressing oils, with a strong flavour that can stand up to other bold ingredients.

Like Picual olives, Cornicabra are known by many other names – Cornal, Cornatillo, Corniche, Longar and Osnal, most of which refer to the 'goat horn' shape of the olive. While the olives themselves are less commonly found for eating, you will often see them on the tables of restaurants in the areas in which the trees grow.

Hojiblanca



Originally from around Cordoba, Sevilla and Malaga, Hojiblanca olive trees are highly valued because they're extremely hardy and productive, even in less productive years. In more recent years, Hojiblanca olive oils have become just as lauded, winning a multitude of awards in olive oil competitions across Europe. Hojiblanca oils have a gentler bitterness than Cornicabra and Picual, but they're also fresh and aromatic with notes of cut grass and green peppercorns. A fantastic all-rounder that can be used for cooking and dressing – definitely worth searching out. The olives themselves also taste fantastic, with a pleasant bittersweet flavour and firm texture.

Picudo



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Empeltre trees are typical of the area around Aragon, but in recent times they have been introduced to the Balearic Islands. These olives (which are grown to be eaten too) make oils that have mild sweetness and bitterness, but also boast an intense fruitiness – Empeltre olive oils are often said to have pronounced apple and almond flavours. The name appears to come from the Catalan word 'empelt' which means 'graft' – a reference to the fact that Empeltre trees have poor natural root systems, so they are all grafted onto harder rootstock.

Lechín de Sevilla



Another widespread Andalusian variety – unsurprisingly common around Sevilla – Lechín olive oils are extremely balanced and well-rounded, walking a line between grassy, peppery and bitter notes. Though Lechín makes very high quality olive oils, they're not the most common – Lechín trees are not very productive, and the olives have to be hand-picked as they're not easily harvested by machine. These olives tend to be grown exclusively for olive oil production.

Royal



Native to the province of Jaén, Royal trees are limited to the northern mountains of the province but the olives produce fantastic olive oil. These large black olives can look similar to Picuals but the difference in the oils couldn't be more prominent – Royal oils are sweet and fruity with barely a hint of bitterness.



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