

Like An Extra Virgin!

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It's used to flavor ragouts and daubes, to marinade meat and fish before cooking, to dress vegetables and salads, to add a distinctive Provençal je ne sais quoi to breads such as fougasse, and even to certain cakes and pastries

The cuisine of Provence would be inconceivable without olive oil!

Introduced into Provence by Greek traders nearly 3,000 years ago, the olive tree has come to symbolize many things: light, wisdom, chastity, immortality. The olive branch is a universal emblem of peace and harmony. And don't forget that it was an olive branch that the dove brought back to Noah as a sign that the long ordeal of the Flood was finally over.

Growing and cultivating olive trees has never been an easy task. They demand years – even generations – of care, attention and nurture, taking over 35 years to reach maximum growth and to finally yield a plentiful harvest.

The harvest usually begins in September, and can continue through to February, depending on the type and color of the olives being gathered. Age-old traditional methods are still used extensively to harvest the fruit. Some olive-growers pick the olives by hand in order to ensure that the delicate fruit is not bruised. Others use a special hazel pole to knock the olives on to sheets spread out under the trees.

Even after the fruit has been harvested, the process is still an intensely labor someone. The olives have to be sorted, washed, rinsed and then ground into a thick paste between huge granite wheels.

The resulting olive pulp is hydraulically pressed between sheets of hemp or sisal, and then separated by centrifugal force into oil and juice.

This is the point in the process which determines the type and quality of the oil being extracted. The finest olive oil – the huile d'olive vierge, produit naturel, 1ere pression a froid (virgin olive oil, natural product, first cold press) is the result of this first, natural, chemical-and -additive-free process. This is the olive oil with the finest flavor and the highest pedigree: the connoisseur's choice.

It's the natural acidity of the final product that determines its "virgin" status. Oil with an acidity of less than 0.8 per cent can proudly boast the "extra virgin" label. Oils with an acidity of between 0.8 per cent and 2 per cent are just everyday virgins!

In Provence the best olive oils are reputed to come from Nyons, which is situated at the base of Mont Ventoux , but, speaking personally, I have always preferred the olive oil from la vallée des Baux in the Bouches-du-Rhone. It has a particularly unique flavor that has been variously described as 'green fruit', 'artichoke', 'cut hay' - even 'wet grass'!

I accept that my preference may be an emotional, rather than a rational, one. I have spent a lot of time in that area of Provence, and have used vallée des Baux olive oils for cooking and flavoring for many years.

Having said that, the area was awarded appellation contrôlée status for its olives and olive oil in 1997 – so my loyalty has been well-vindicated.

The local olive oil is used extensively (and to great effect) in local restaurants, such as the world-famous Oustau de Baumaniere, its younger sibling Le Cabro d'Or (both situated in the incredibly beautiful village of Les Baux-de-Provence itself) and the elegant Le Rigalido in the nearby village of Fontvieille.

If you happen to find yourself in this lovely region, several of the local olive merchants happily open their olive mills (and their shops) to visitors. Try the famous Castelas olive mill in Les Baux or the Moulin de Saint-Jean and Chateau d'Estoublon sites, both on the Maussane/ Fonvieille road.

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