

L I F E S T Y L E T R A V E L

BROUGHTON

Q U A R T E R L Y

FALL 2006
VOL. 1 NO. 4

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Labor of love: Olives are mostly handpicked, often by owners like John Copeland, shown here handling the harvest at Rancho Olivos, in the Santa Ynez Valley.

On The Olive Oil Trail

Touring and tasting around Santa Barbara County

Aristotle philosophized about them. Hippocrates himself called their oil “the great therapeutic.” Long before they perked up the first martini, olives were used as everything from currency to contraceptives. When Jeanne Calment, then the world’s oldest living person, turned 121, she revealed her coveted secret of longevity: Olive oil. It went into nearly everything she ate, and she rubbed a healthy dollop into her skin each day. “I have only one wrinkle,” she said, “and I am sitting on it.”

Olive oil has lubricated the wheels of human civilization since Asia was still a minor, over 1000 years before the development of a written language. Americans were on the program right up until the turn of the 20th century, when a flood of cheap Italian oil sent the legendary panacea spiraling into a 90-year hiatus of popularity. It took hand-etched designer bottles to pique our interest again, in the early 1990s. Now the olive oil renaissance has taken a new turn: A handful of olive oil producers, particularly those in California’s wine country, have begun to offer tours and tastings as a sober alternative to winery hopping.

“The traffic in our tasting room is exploding,” says Karen Guth, the president of the California Olive Oil Council and co-owner of Pasolivo, an oil producer in San Luis Obispo County. “We’ve noticed a dramatic uptick recently...It follows along with what the wineries are experiencing.”

Predictably, ground zero for olive oil touring and tasting is around the celebrated Napa and Sonoma valleys of Northern California. But many experts see the future in the Tri-Counties—Santa Barbara, San Luis Obispo, Ventura. “It has the same latitude and a similar climate to the prime olive oil regions in France,” one producer told me confidently.

Don’t expect to find any guidebooks or maps of olive oil tasting rooms just yet. I inquired at the visitor information office in Solvang—the heart of Santa Ynez Valley wine country—but the young man sitting behind the counter had clearly never heard of such a thing. He pondered the concept for a moment, then exclaimed, “What a great idea! I should start a business like that.”

In hopes of keeping ahead of the curve (think Santa Ynez pre-*Sideways*), my wife and I armed ourselves with baguettes and took to the olive oil trail. We spent a full day meandering in a counter-clockwise loop, starting with Danish Waffles for breakfast in Solvang and ending at an Italian restaurant in Santa Barbara.

The Euro-getaway fantasy was in full swing at Solvang’s Wine Valley Inn, where we spent the night in an ivy-covered cottage reminiscent of a Copenhagen B&B. Outside our bedroom, the silvery tinkle of a courtyard fountain lulled us to sleep. And in the morning, it gently nudged us to get on the road.

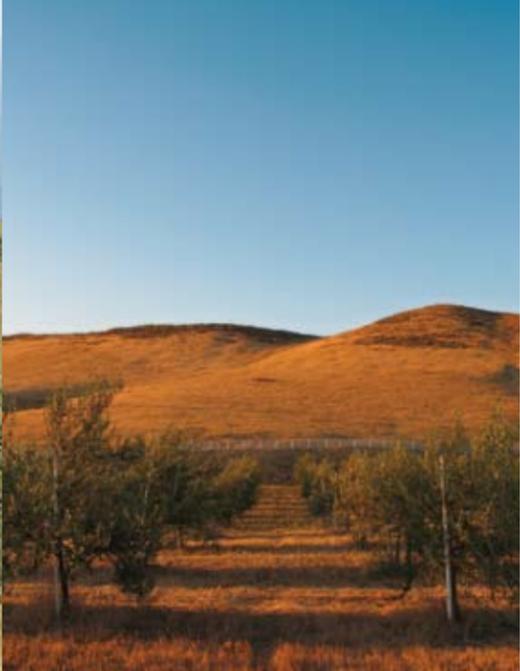
We followed the dust cloud of a tour bus down an otherwise sleepy country lane in nearby Los Olivos, wondering if perhaps we were too late.

Could olive oil tasting already be trendy? I lapsed into a waking nightmare of Miles and Maya and the rest of the *Sideways* crew comparing olive oil “tasting notes,” but as the bus turned left into Brander Vineyards, we went right—into Rancho Olivos, where Shannon Casey was waiting at what appeared to be a simple lemonade stand.

She poured us a sampling of four oil varieties. As we dipped bread, the ranch dogs broke into a chorus of yips and howls, announcing the arrival of a local jeep tour—a rugged version of Napa’s wine tasting by Limousine. Several couples spilled out of the bright yellow jeep, eager to cleanse



The extra virgin lineup in the Pasolivo tasting room, where six varieties of olive oil provide a sober alternative to wine.



Clockwise from top left: Harvesting by hand at Rancho Olivos; a bird's eye view of home and orchard at Santa Barbara Olive Co; an evening perspective at Figueroa Farms; the Addison's dreamy spread in Happy Valley; the tasting room at Pasolivo; labels waiting for bottles; olive groves and grapevines, growing side by side in the Santa Ynez Valley; a leaning ladder at harvest time.



their wine-soaked palates and to try something new. It was the first time any of us had experienced an olive oil tasting.

California olives date back to the mid-1700s, when Spanish colonialists planted a grove at the state's first mission—San Diego de Alcalá. But the evolution of olive oil in the Golden State skipped a century or so, thanks primarily to the cheap Italian flood, and its industry is still playing catch-up. Experts compare California's olive oil industry today to the place its wine producers held 30 years ago—which isn't necessarily a bad thing.

"The industry is so young here that everything is state-of-the-art," explains Shawn Addison, who, along with his French wife, Antoinette, owns Figueroa Farms—a 106-acre property in dreamy Happy Canyon. "We also grow olives in the south of France, but we make much better oil here."

I asked the Addisons to explain proper olive oil tasting technique. Not the bread-dipping method we've all come to know and love, but the serious modus operandi of aficionados like *IMastri Oleari*—the Masters of Oil—an esteemed Italian tasting panel. "From an enjoyment standpoint, it's not the best way," Shawn warned me. "But if you really want to analyze the oil, it's the only way."

Olive oil experts rate three characteristics—fruitiness, bitterness, and pungency—on a scale of 1 to 10, with the goal being an even balance. One first warms a pear-shaped goblet, then takes enough oil to coat the inside of the mouth and pulls it forcefully through the teeth with a rousing *shuurrp* of air. It's just the sort of routine that lets casual epicureans know this is weighty business—the olive oil equivalent of dramatically swirling the wine glass. Experienced palates can detect notes of fresh cut balsamic, ripe tomatoes, basil, sage, pepper, citrus, and myriad other subtleties. The bitterness of the oil on the tongue is next to be evaluated. And the grand finale comes when it is actually swallowed ("Catastrophic at 120 calories a tablespoon!" laments Antoinette). Diets be damned; one must assess the oil's pungency—the tactile sensation on the throat.

"I see olive oil in a whole new light," my wife commented

as we drove toward Pasolivo, an acclaimed producer in the Adelaida region of Paso Robles. The tasting room here has all the darling charm of a country cottage, and the drive alone was worth the trip. Along Highway 46, deer dashed to and fro through native grasses that undulated in the late-summer breeze, appearing to roll across the hills and between the oaks like a vast pale-colored wave.

Karen Guth began planting olive trees on the 140-acre Willow Creek Olive Ranch in 1996. "It started with a trip to Italy," she told me. "The place I was visiting looked exactly like Paso Robles...It seemed like a natural thing to do in this area." Turns out she was right. San Luis Obispo County is currently the third largest producer of olive oil in California.



"The murmur of an olive grove has something very intimate, immensely old. It is too beautiful for me to try to conceive of it or dare to paint it."

Vincent van Gogh, 1889, Provence

"We've turned a corner in educating American consumers about the virtues of fresh olive oil," Guth explained. "Now that people have had the opportunity to taste these oils, they've gotten pretty excited."

I'd booked a hotel room at the Inn at East Beach, in Santa Barbara, and my wife was eager to arrive with enough time to clean up for dinner at our favorite Italian restaurant.

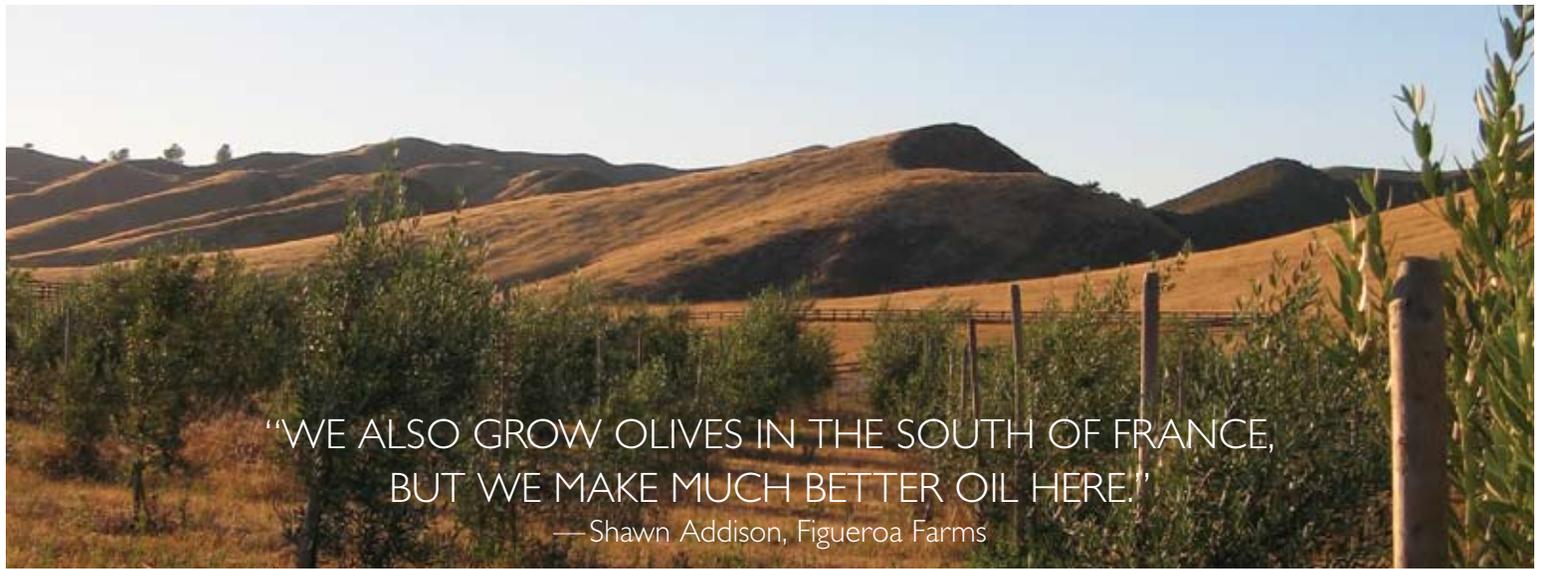
So we headed east and picked up Highway 1 between Cambria and Cayucos. An hour or so later, we looped through the narrow Gaviota Gorge Tunnel to reconnect with the coast. The morning fog had long since retreated, and now beat against the backside of the Channel Islands, spilling into view over the tops of Santa Cruz and Santa Rosa.

Near Refugio, we visited Santa Barbara Olive Co.—the largest specialty olive producer in the U.S. Everything from chili peppers to anchovies finds its way into olives here, mainly large green sevallanos. "Stuffed by hand, one by one," explained Craig Makela, who, along with his wife, Cindy, owns the company.

Craig's great-great-grandfather, John Emile Goux, was something of a California olive pioneer, having planted Santa Barbara County's first commercial olive grove, in 1851. But the heritage of olive farming fell to the wayside, as subsequent generations traded in their work boots for white collars. "My wife and I resurrected the business in 1982," he



WE NIBBLED KALAMATAS AND SAMPLED A FRESH BATCH OF OIL, USING A TURKEY BASTER TO DRAW IT STRAIGHT FROM THE BARREL.



“WE ALSO GROW OLIVES IN THE SOUTH OF FRANCE,
BUT WE MAKE MUCH BETTER OIL HERE.”

—Shawn Addison, Figueroa Farms

said, explaining how the couple began their venture with olive oil, but soon shifted the focus toward marketing table olives.

Keeping in step with olive oil’s growing popularity, Santa Barbara Olive Co. in 2003 produced the first batch of oil milled at its current location. And it was only in 2006 that the company had what Makela calls its “first year of serious production.”

We nibbled kalamatas and sampled a fresh batch of oil—a blend of the property’s seven olive varieties—using a turkey baster to draw it straight from the barrel. Mr. Makela explained the company’s organic farming and processing system, and sang the praises of California agriculture. “What we’re doing here is so advanced,” he said. “I love Europe, but with our innovation, we’ve surpassed them in many ways. Their methodology of farming is ancient.”

Nearly every olive oil producer I spoke with mused on this same point, and with the same diplomatic mixture of deference and pride. Even Antoinette Addison said in her singsong accent, “Being French, I get to criticize the French; a lot of operations in California make better olive oil than many in France.” She then quickly drizzled a caveat over her comment: “The best oil I’ve ever tasted was French, but the average is better here.”

Perhaps reverence is the only ingredient separating California extra virgin from Europe’s finest. The French refer to the olive as *l’arbre roi*—the regal tree. Writer Aldous Huxley elevated a particularly striking specimen in Provence to a “manifest god.” In America, we named a cartoon character Olive Oyl. We earned our place in olive lore when an American bartender plopped one into a glass of gin and vermouth. The Spaniards have embraced the Martini, but they refuse to take olive oil’s name in vain: They call Popeye’s toothpick of a gal, “Rosario.”

One thing is certain. Like wine, the best olive oil is the one most enjoyed at a given moment, whether bread-dipped or drizzled over fresh tomatoes, or even quaffed from a warm snifter—pulled forcefully through the teeth with a rousing *sluurrrp* of air, of course. 🌀

TOURING & TASTING

Learning about olive oil can fit into several hours or take a lifetime. There’s currently no fee for touring and tasting in the Tri-Counties. Availability varies. Contact producers prior to visiting.

RESOURCES

Keep up-to-date with the Olive Oil Source www.OliveOilSource.com and the California Olive Oil Council www.Cooc.com.

OLIVE OIL PRODUCERS

(Five of our favorites, not a complete list)

Santa Barbara County

Rancho Olivos www.RanchoOlivos.com

Figueroa Farms www.FigueroaFarms.com

(Private tours only. Call first regarding availability)

Santa Barbara Olive Co. www.SBOlive.com

San Luis Obispo County

Pasolivo www.Pasolivo.com

Ventura County

Ojai Olive Co. www.OjaiOliveOil.com

WHERE TO STAY

Wine Valley Inn

Old-World hospitality in Solvang. Walking distance to wine tasting rooms and a short drive to olive oil producers. Accommodations to suit every taste and budget. *From \$89, 805.688.2111, www.WineValleyInn.com.*

The Inn at East Beach

SB’s best beachside value, just steps from the sand. Legendary personal service, with rooms and suites overlooking the pool. *From \$89, 805.965.0546, www.InnAtEastBeach.com.*

Inn of the Spanish Garden

Luxurious Spanish-Mediterranean design located downtown. Walking distance to SB’s premier restaurants, shops, museums, theaters. *From \$235, 805.564.4700, www.SpanishGardenInn.com.*