

Wine country's other crop : Olive oil tastings offered around Santa Ynez Valley

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Sauntering up to the sleek alderwood counter of a tasting room in Los Olivos on a recent weekday, Blue Stoehr, a Los Angeles resident on a wine-tasting trip with her husband, was eager to sample the wares.

"We'll start mild and go to more bold," Ashley Russell, manager of Olive Hill Farm, told her, while pouring the first product, locally sourced from the Santa Ynez Valley. "This is going to be mild, light and fruity."

She wasn't talking about one of the region's award-winning syrahs or sauvignon blancs. The glass bottles lined up behind the counter were actually filled with grassy-hued varietals of olive oil.

In the mid-2000s, wine-tasting rooms sprouted up throughout the Valley in a surge of post-"Sideways" popularity. In recent years, olive oil tastings have started cropping up. Sometimes they're offered in the same rooms as wine tastings.

"It's a complementary crop because they like a dry, arid climate," Shannon Casey, co-owner of Rancho Olivos, an olive farm in Solvang, said of olives.

Similar to grapes, they do well in the Central Coast's Mediterranean-like climate and were cultivated by Spanish missionaries, who brought over cuttings and produced olive oil into the early 19th century. (The town of Los Olivos itself — "the olives" — was named after a local ranch with some 5,000 trees.)

These days, local vintners, from Clos Pepe Vineyards in the Santa Rita Hills to Stolpman Vineyard and Winery in Ballard Canyon, have planted olive trees.

Proprietors say olive oil tastings give tourists a break from wine and target a similar crowd: food-savvy people with discerning palates (and income to spend on the finer things in life).

They typically showcase about four to six olive oils, flavored and unflavored, that can be used in cooking, drizzled over a dish, or simply savored as an accompaniment to bread.

Here's a roundup of some of the main olive oil tasting rooms in the Valley. All of them feature EVOO — or extra-virgin olive oil.

Rancho Olivos

2390 Refugio Road in Santa Ynez

686-9653 or www.ranchoolivos.com

Hours: Noon to 4 p.m. daily

Tastings: No charge to try the olive oils

Shannon Casey and John Copeland started planting their six-and-a-half-acre farm in Santa Ynez with Spanish and Italian olive varieties about a decade ago.

"I'm food-obsessed and when we bought the property, I initially wanted to plant wine grapes but that was going to be way too expensive and too much maintenance," said Ms. Casey, who's the ranch's grower and does consulting for other olive farms. "I knew olives grew in the same climate and it was a complementary crop." (She once worked in visual effects for TV and she and her husband, Mr. Copeland, a documentary filmmaker, both worked on the sci-fi show "Babylon 5.")

Rancho Olivos' bucolic farm stand offers tastings amid the olive trees. While more people are becoming aware about the availability of local olive oil, Ms. Casey still finds herself educating customers. Unlike some of the mass imports from Europe, which aren't 100 percent olive oil, "fresh olive oil has a flavor, should have a flavor," she said.

"And obviously it's good for you. It lowers your cholesterol and cleans your arteries."

She feels that, unlike wine, the differences in olive oils come more from the variety rather than terroir. "If I planted an Arbequina in Happy Canyon or Santa Barbara, it's going to taste like Arbequina," she said. "What alters the flavor is how green the olives are when picked ... and the milling process more than where it's planted.

"I know there are people that disagree with me," she added, "but I don't care. I've tasted a lot of olive oil!"

IF YOU GO

Global Gardens will host its fifth anniversary party 5:30 to 7:30 p.m. July 23. It will feature wine, music and food. The store is at 2477 Alamo Pintado Ave. in Los Olivos.