

Fine, Finer, Finest

World-class olive oil isn't always imported

Of all the excesses in our consumption culture, at least one is good for us: olive oil. Americans drizzle 60 million gallons annually, 7.5 times more than in 1982. Most comes from Europe, yet low-grade Turkish hazelnut oil has recently been found in a shocking number of Italian olive oils. No wonder connoisseurs are turning to olive oils from California. Inspired by the trend of local artisanal foods, producers have perfected varieties and blends complex enough to match the region's finest wines. Regulations here are strict: Extra-virgin oils are pressed within 24 hours of harvesting and pass taste tests more stringent than those in Europe. **MAX ALEXANDER**

FINE | JOVIA FARMS ARBEQUINA, \$15

(Top) Most olive groves are still harvested by hand because the trees aren't planted densely enough or pruned short enough for mechanical harvesters. Jon Fadhl, of Jovia Farms, bucked that tradition and packed 9,000 trees onto 20 acres near Sacramento so that machines could collect his Arbequina olives—a small, fruity Spanish cultivar that yields higher volumes of oil than larger varieties that contain more water. The technique results in a high-end elixir that costs much less than its rich, buttery-tasting flavor implies. joviagroves.com

FINER | ROUND POND ITALIAN VARIETAL, \$25

(Middle) The Napa Valley estate Round Pond may devote 30 times more acreage to wine grapes than olives, but it takes its oil seriously. Five Italian cultivars—Frantoio, Maurino, Leccino, Pendolino, and Coratina—are individually picked at their ripest, pressed separately at Round Pond's two-ton stone mill, and then blended and stored inside nitrogen-cooled tanks until bottled. These are bold, Tuscan-style olives with an herbaceous kick that lends the blended oil a grassy nose and spicy aftertaste. roundpond.com

FINEST | LONG MEADOW RANCH PRATO LUNGO, \$45

(Bottom) This is quite possibly the most sophisticated oil you'll ever taste...and exactly why is something of a mystery. These European trees probably came to the United States by boat around Cape Horn in 1870, but a second-growth forest concealed them until the 1990s. DNA tests have yet to match the trees to any known variety, but they have the character of French olives, particularly those from the Var region of Provence, with hints of citrus and apple and aromas of the earth, making it an ideal condiment oil. longmeadowranch.com



RENAISSANCE MAN Elevate your cooking with basil-infused olive oil



1 BLEND

Combine 4 cups of packed basil leaves and 2 cups of virgin olive oil (the flavors of extra-virgin olive oil will compete too much) in a blender. Puree the mixture until smooth.



2 SIMMER, STRAIN, AND STAND

In a saucepan, simmer the olive oil and basil puree over medium heat for 45 seconds. Pour the heated mixture through a fine-mesh strainer into a bowl to remove the basil. Let the mixture sit for a few hours.



3 BOTTLE

Pour the oil into an airtight jar (don't include the dark liquid at the bottom of the bowl, which is water mixed with finely ground basil). Use oil as a marinade, condiment, or substitute for herbs when cooking. **ALISON KOTCH**