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Five Spanish Oils Streak to the Top of the Heap

Spanish cooking today is alive, energized and creative. The regional origins and diversity of the peninsula's many cooking traditions are being celebrated in cities and small towns alike. If you want to eat well in Europe there are many places you can, go to. But if you can only pick one, and the cooking is what pushes you most to a particularly country over another, I'd pretty certainly send you to Spain.

'11 is the "Year of the Spanish Olive Oil."

Listed below are five special oils. All are on the cutting edge of the oil world. All are excellent. From gentlest to giant – all good, all special, all well made, all at the cutting edge. Try any one of them, or better yet, taste them all. I have, and I happily stand by – and serve – all of them.

Mariano's Oil from the Sierra de Gretos

This oil is really pretty much a prototype for what we like to sell here at Zingerman's – great flavor, fantastic people, and a great story line, all packed into one very limited and very tasty product. Since it's the gentlest and most elegant of this bunch of Spanish oils I opted to use it to lead off this essay.

This oil is made in such small quantities that I'm actually slightly reluctant to talk about it here. While there's more now than there was when we started buying it ten years or so ago, there's still very little to be had – what started with a 100 liters a year is now up to the superbly tiny quantity of 250. But the thing is that the man who makes it – Mariano Sanz Pech – is such a wonderful person, such a staunch champion of traditional foods, his oil is so distinctive, and his entire food and tradition-loving family so fantastic that I want to give credit where credit is due even if supplies are short.

I've known Mariano for probably nearly twenty years now; we first met I think over a table of traditional Spanish cheeses, then and now one of his big causes. At the time the cheeses were almost unknown in the U.S., but I'd read all about them and was excited to find someone who was ready to actually sell them to us!

Personally, I can't help but be swayed by the man's enthusiasm and dedication to great food, history and tradition – every time we meet up (which seems to be every couple years) I come back with ever-greater commitment to supporting his work.

Tasting the oil is, actually, much like meeting Mariano. It starts out softly, down to earth but still surprisingly suave, almost sweet. But as you spend more time with it you realize that it's well grounded, complex, anything but one-dimensional, with a surprisingly peppery and rather opinionated finish. I've used it for salads, with grilled vegetables, on cooked beans (a favorite of the region), or soups. Pour it onto a thick slice of toasted country bread, sprinkle on a pinch of sea salt and add a couple roasted red Piquillo peppers from the Spanish Basque country. It's surprisingly good on the Roadhouse bread – its sweet, subtle pepperiness blends beautifully with the cornmeal and molasses. There's a touch of banana and maybe even kiwi in the flavor of the oil that make it a particularly good pairing with fruit – drizzle some onto slices of ripe apples, pears or plums this fall. Better yet, toss the fruit with the oil and roast it at high



temperature. Serve the roasted fruit with cheese, a glass of dessert wine, or even gelato.

Naturvie Olive Oil from Spain

This oil comes from the western part of Spain (the land of Iberico ham if you're into great pork), from a family-owned farm just a bit south of the beautiful walled town of Merida. The farm is run by Fernando Sanchez-Mohino — he made his career success as an attorney, but decided later in life to pursue his passion, to take on the production of olive oil. The family has run the farm for three generations now and he's spent years working on improving the quality of the oil. They're doing a very nice job of mindful, sustainable farming with a bit of an eye towards biodynamics. As, I suppose, is fitting, the oil's following around here is growing as well.

The oil is from the Cornezuela varietal, an interesting old-school olive that's unique to that area. All the olives for this oil are taken from trees planted no later than the year 1800. You read that right — all the trees in use are over two hundred years old. This isn't just a romantic marketing tale — old trees of this sort have very low yields but produce oils with very interesting complex flavors. The olives are handpicked and then delivered to the press in under three hours. The complexity of the oil's flavor reflects the age of the trees, the care taken in handling and the quickness of the press. (The Les Costes oil from Catalunya comes from the other end of the country, but is also made with olives from very old (four hundred years-plus, in this case) trees.

The flavor of the Naturvie oil is an interesting blend of sweet and spicy, almond and olive... really a very nice oil and one that's little known in the US. It's not the boldest oil of our bunch; if you want to get a big dose of big (which I like a lot by the way), I'd go with La Spineta from Puglia, Pasolivo from Central California, or the Canena from southern Spain. By contrast the Naturvie oil is... a bit more careful, not controlled but not out of control either. More like an elder statesman of the jazz world who's spent a lifetime figuring out how to pack more complexity into a coda, keeping it all in a tight space, but moving marvelously around it with a lot of subtle but significant, edgy and very interesting energy. If you want to make a meaningful friend with a new olive oil, one that you're likely to like the more time you spend with it, make a note to taste the Naturvie next time you're in.

Marqués de Valdueza from Mérida

I have to admit to being moderately biased toward this oil — you'd be hard pressed to find any product that's a whole lot more rooted in family and national history. The family — formally known as the House of Álvarez de Toledo — has been a fixture in Spanish history for something like ten centuries. I can't tell you it's some romantic rags to riches story — at least for the last nine hundred years, the family has been hugely successful. Best I can tell, quality and care have been a part of most everything they seem to have done, and this oil is no exception.

The Valdueza oil is composed from a unique blend of four different varietals that grow on the farm: Hojiblanca and Picual are standard varietals from southern Spain and are not uncommon out west as well. The former brings a soft, warm, nutty butteriness; the latter offers hints of artichoke, green asparagus, a bit of earthiness and a touch of black pepper in the finish. Arbequina arrived in the region only recently, planted for its good yields and



round soft flavor; here in Extremadura, at least on the Álvarez de Toledo family farm, it tastes a bit different than what I've experienced in Catalonia, where it typically comes from — less appley, more olivey.



Most interesting to me though is the oil from the Morisca olives, which are unique to the area; this variety offers a fair bit of pepper, and interesting fruit, almost apricot in a way, with a touch of green grass and green tomato in there, too.

All told they produce about 30,000 bottles a year — huge by the standards of artisan friend Mariano Sanz, but relatively modest by comparison to any large-scale commercial producer. As is true of all these high-end, well-made, oils, there's a complexity and an elegance (and a commensurate higher cost) that will likely mean that you'll want to use it for finishing — at the table: drizzled on great greens from the market, or on top of a bit of roasted meat or vegetables.

Marques De Griñon from Toledo

I like this oil now as much — actually more I think — than I did when we first got it. It probably didn't hurt that I got the chance to visit the farm, nor that, because of the Falco family's drive to make everything they do better each year, new tweaks to their already strong technology have helped make what was already really good even better still.

Carlos Falco gets the credit for getting it going. An agricultural engineer who went to study oenology at UC Davis back in the early seventies, he did a lot of pioneering work with both grape growing and winemaking — he was the first to use drip irrigation in grape growing and the first to plant Syrah and Petit Verdot grapes in Spain. The quality of his work is widely recognized — you'll find Griñon wines on many a top list.

More recently, he turned his attention to olive oil, with equally excellent results. Over his years in the wine world Carlos had befriended the Marchesi Antinori, one of the big innovators in Tuscany for both high quality wine and oil. Marchesi encouraged Falco to get going on the oil and linked him up with an Italian oil consultant by the name of Marco Mugelli. Falco talked Mugelli — who was reluctant to work with Spain — into coming to help him at the Griñon estate. Mugelli forgot to go and missed the flight and the meeting never happened. For many folks that would be the end of things, but to their credit both parties kept going and I'm glad they did since the Griñon oil is so darned good, with a remarkably big, fresh flavor and long finish that will add to most any dish you use it with.

A blend of Arbequina and Picual olives, all grown on the farm, the oil has a big, big aroma and the flavor follows right along — it's not overpowering in the least but it is big, lusciously smooth, eye-opening, well-balanced, savory, green and very, very, very good. In truth, I think this oil's got all those flavor notes that people look for (or, I could say, I look for) in big green oils — hints of raw artichoke, green tomato, olives of course, a bit of pepper. I don't want to get caught up in excessive adjectivization — just taste it.

Castillo de Canena Oil from Andalusia

The last, biggest, and boldest of this quintet of top-quality, cutting-edge Spanish oils, the Canena comes here from Jaen, in the southwestern region of Andalusia, the area of Spain that produces more oil than any other, by far. The harvest starts very, very early by typical Spanish standards, meaning, again, high flavor, low yield. The fruit is taken from the tree by hand and the olives are at the press in less than three hours

after they leave the trees, minimizing the risk of oxidation, protecting the flavor of the oil that emerges. Once pressed, the oil goes into nitrogen flush stainless steel tanks in cooled cellars, which again acts to protect the quality of the oil. Bottling is done to order, always with a quick flush of nitrogen to keep the oil intact after it's left the estate.

The Canena oil is made from Picual olives, the variety that's unique to this region of the world (though, of course, others have now planted it elsewhere). The Picual olive produces distinctive oil, generally very earthy and big of flavor. Unfortunately, in too many cases that earthiness can be overbearing. I've probably tasted hundreds of Picual oils from Andalucia over the last twenty years, but the Canena oil is not only likeable, it's got me as passionate as I've been on this region's offerings. It's got all the things I like about this sort of oil — it's earthy, it's well-rounded, it's big but still really balanced, its aroma is pretty amazing, and the finish is very fine. On the flip side, it avoids all those off flavors and out of balance earthiness that are excessively present in so many Picual oils from the area.

Unlike some of the other oils above, I've not yet been to the estate, so my passion comes only from tasting, not from a first hand bonding with the people and the land. However, I can tell you truthfully that over the two years since I first tasted it, I've consistently gone out of my way to taste it over and over again. You should ask for a taste next time you're at the Deli!

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September 2011 « **Zingerman's Deli** says:

September 7, 2011 at 9:51 am

[...] September Features Spanish Cheeses Ortiz Anchovies Iberico de Bellota Ari's Five Spanish Oils [...]

Marion Sproul says:

September 28, 2011 at 7:18 pm



Coincidentally, I will be at Zingermans on Wed. Oct. 4 demoing products from Spain that we Import and will have the Castillo de Canena Picual oil and Arbequina oil there for tasting!!!!

Marion Sproul
Culinary Collective.

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