

Oiling the wheels of export success

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Spain is the world's leading exporter of olive oil, with markets such as the United States, Britain and China set for continued growth

Anyone travelling through Spain cannot fail to have noticed the great oceans of silver-leaved olive groves, clambering up hillsides in some places, or massing across a plain in others. Olive oil, the liquid gold that pours forth from these plantations, is not only tasty and healthy; it is an elixir for Spain's economy, with exports alone accounting for 0.3 per cent of the country's GDP thanks to around three billion euros in annual overseas sales.

While in the past, high-quality Spanish olive oil was less visible than its Italian equivalent, the sector has got its marketing act together in recent times as Spain has become a bigger hitter on the international stage in general. Now Spain is the world's leading exporter of olive oil, with markets such as the United States, Britain and China set for continued growth as consumers acquire an understanding of this unique ingredient.

The reason for this international success is quality: The World's Best Olive Oils online ranking last year included nine Spanish products among its global top ten, with just one Italian oil in sixth place preventing a clean sweep by Andalusian and Extremaduran producers.

"Spain is the leading producer in the world, and the biggest exporter. We have 2.5 million hectares of olive groves in the country, and this figure is growing. Thirty years ago we were producing 550,000 or 600,000 tonnes of oil a year; now it has more than doubled to 1.3 or 1.4 million. One year we topped 1.8 million," says Pedro

Barato, chairman of the Interprofessional of Spanish Olive Oil Organization in Spain.

But, says Mr Barato, there is no danger of the global market for this mostly monounsaturated fat becoming, well, saturated. "We are only at two per cent of oils used, so there is another 98 per cent to go."

Britain is the fifth-biggest destination for Spanish olive oil, behind Italy, the United States, Portugal and France. "The UK is a top-level market for us," explains Mr Barato, himself a farmer in Spain's Castilla-La Mancha region. "What I mean by that is that it is not just about quantity there, but rather about marketing the product, emphasising different oils' designations of origin and promoting organic produce. Olive oil used to be little known in Britain, but we have seen a complete turnaround in the last five or six years. So, of course, we are a little concerned about Brexit."

The amount of Spanish oil imported by the UK over the past two years has remained steady at 42,000 tonnes. But British consumers also feature prominently among the millions of tourists who visit Spain every year. Almost 18 million of the record 76 million foreign visitors to the country in 2016 came from the UK, with projections for 2017 anticipating another ceiling-busting influx of more than 80 million. According to Mr Barato, some 10 million put Spain's gastronomy down as the chief reason for their choice. "So it's incredibly important that we continue to do things well as we have been up to now.



Spain's landscape has been shaped by centuries of olive cultivation

People are coming here because of our food products and they will be taking some back home with them, too.”

So what olive oil should people enjoy? Mr Barato says all of Spain’s produce is good quality, but for a real taste of liquid gold, it is important to choose extra virgin oil, obtained mechanically from prime-quality fruit and without any chemical processing. Lower-category oils are more suited to cooking or other uses.

There are more than 260 varieties of olives grown in Spain, but four different types dominate production, with their highly distinctive tastes. *Picual* is strong and sweet in flavour, while the *Arbequina* olive is famously smooth. If you like spicy notes, go for oil made with the *Cornicabra* variety, while the fruity *Hojiblanca* olive is the celebrated taste of Andalusia, a key ingredient in the region’s delicious gazpacho or salmorejo cold soups.

Consumers, olive oil enthusiasts say, do well to make the switch to dressing salads and cooking with the green stuff. It is the type of fat found in the olive that gives it

many of its beneficial properties. Between 70 per cent and 80 per cent of this fat is oleic acid, a healthy-heart kind of oil.

“Regular consumption of olive oil acts in the prevention of these diseases reducing the risk of suffering hypertension, diabetes, disorders of cholesterol levels and obesity,” says Lluís Serra Majem, a physician professor and researcher who is also chairman of the International Foundation of the Mediterranean Diet (IFMeD). “It also reduces the complications caused by cardiovascular diseases. Furthermore, it has been shown that olive oil has beneficial effects on digestive health, a protective effect against some types of cancer, and reduces the risk of dementia and Alzheimer’s. And some studies also show protection against osteoporosis. The benefits are always greater with extra virgin olive oil than with refined products.”

So much is the interest in the healthful properties of olive oil that the Autonomous University of Barcelona

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Cornicabra – This type of olive is the second Spanish variety in terms of cultivated area. It is mainly found in the provinces of Toledo, Ciudad Real and Madrid, but it can also be found in the provinces of Cáceres and Badajoz. Its name refers to the curved shape of the fruit, which is reminiscent of a goat horn.

Its extra-virgin olive oils are highly aromatic, with notes of fruity olive and other fruits including apple. Herbal olive leaf notes can be appreciated on the palate, with a slightly bitter taste.



Arbequina – This variety is characteristic of Catalonia (Tarragona and Lleida) and Alto Aragon, although its growth has spread to practically the entire country. It takes its name from the town of Leridana de Arbeca.

It produces a very fluid and sweet oil, in which it is almost impossible to perceive bitter or peppery flavors. Its olive oil has a fruity aroma of olives, apple, banana and almond.



Hojiblanca – Its growth extends mainly in the provinces of Málaga, Córdoba, Granada and Seville. Its name refers to the white color of the leaves. This variety has the particularity of being used to obtain both oil and as table olives.

It is characterized by its taste and aroma of freshly cut grass, artichoke and aromatic plants. Its entrance on the palate is sweet, with a slight bitterness and a peppery finish in the mouth.



Picual – the most abundant variety in Spain and the world. There are currently approximately 900,000 hectares of production area in our country, mainly in Jaén, Córdoba and Granada, although its growth has spread to other production areas such as Castilla-La Mancha. Its name refers to the fruit’s pointed tip shape.

Its oil is prized for its high stability (resistance to oxidation) which gives it great resistance to high temperatures, and it is ideal for preserving raw or cooked foods.

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(UAB) is researching its possible impact on breast cancer in a project supported by the Interprofessional of Spanish Olive Oil Organization in Spain and the Olive Growers' Heritage Foundation. So far, UAB researchers have observed that while breast cancer is not caused by the consumption of unhealthy fats, some can accelerate the disease's clinical advance, while moderate consumption of others, such as extra virgin olive oil, slows the spread of cancer cells.

Professor Serra Majem insists on the importance for countries like Spain – second in Europe (behind the UK) in terms of the proportion of the population suffering from obesity – of returning to the healthy properties of a traditional Mediterranean diet, a balanced mix of fresh vegetables and fruit, with legumes, fish and a moderate amount of meat and carbohydrates. And, of course, olive oil to bind the flavours together.

“As well as being one of the healthiest dietary patterns in the world, it is also – unlike others – very sustainable in terms of the environment. The food in the ‘dietary pyramid’ should preferably be locally produced, as it preserves its nutritional, organoleptic and culinary properties, reduces the environmental impact of transport and reactivates the local economy. Fruits and vegetables grown on land close to the consumer respect seasonality and require less of a conservation process, leading them to better maintain their properties,” Professor Serra Majem explains.

Spain's landscape is heavily influenced by some 300 million olive trees, dominant in the south and in particular Andalusian provinces such as Jaén, but also prominent along the Mediterranean corridor north to Catalonia, as well as in inland regions such as Extremadura, Aragon and the Castillas. According to the Interprofessional of Spanish Olive Oil Organization in Spain, there are 300,000 grove owners, big and small, who give work to around half a million people directly involved in olive production. Maintaining a grove is work-intensive, due to the need for pruning and pest control, besides the harvesting process, often done using long sticks to

beat the branches so that the fruit falls onto a blanket spread under the tree.

Oil mills, known in Spanish as *almazaras*, dot the landscape in 34 of the country's 50 provinces, piping pungent odours across the land once the winter harvest is underway. “We are part of the landscape and help to limit the impact of the global warming as the trees absorb carbon dioxide,” notes Mr Barato, who admits that water scarcity, especially in the era of climate change, is a challenge growers must rise to meet by optimising resource use. “As well as informing about the product, we have to tell consumers how important it is to have a living countryside, a productive countryside.”

Even in Spain, the land of olive oil, the industry is aiming to expand, particularly with the incorporation of the product into processed foods, such as cakes, dressings and ice cream, making them healthier at the same time. But Mr Barato says that Spaniards will never turn their backs on the tasty traditional olive oil moments in their daily lives. “There is simply nothing better than a typical Spanish breakfast: coffee, bread and olive oil.” What else does one need? P

