

Cheese CONNOISSEUR

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THE OLIVE ESTATES OF SOUTH AFRICA

An exceptional and unexpected culinary journey.

BY SHARON OLSON

Cheese, wine, charcuterie, bread and olive oil, the essentials of a satisfying culinary experience enjoyed with friends—even if the pleasure is shared virtually like it has been for so many this year. Whether it is delivered from a favorite restaurant or house-made, the satisfaction is undeniable. Attention to flavor, provenance and terroir can make the experience exceptional, yet few really consider the impact of a high-quality extra virgin olive oil with its own unique character and substance. Even fewer would have an olive oil from South Africa among their considerations.

An unintended enlightenment of the global pandemic has resulted from the lockdown in South Africa. Here, the globally-recognized wine business was shut down for months, yet the food supply chain remained almost



At Rio Largo, shedding olives is hard work.



uninterrupted, with farms as an essential business. International airports have remained closed for months, yet the opening of inter-province travel created the opportunity to visit some of the many olive farms and explore the extra virgin olive oils (EVOO) of South Africa that are gaining attention by winning a significant number of international awards.

The logistics of lockdown with ever changing restrictions made it a challenge to have full tasting experiences at some places, but we were welcomed at the end of harvest season in August for conversations with owners and employees at some of the most notable estates.

There is an intensity to the harvest season that is palpable, as most of the farms handpick their olives and press them within hours of harvest. Speed is crucial to freshness, yet care and attention to detail in every aspect of the harvest cannot be overlooked.

One quickly learns that the settings and experiences for olive oil tasting are just as breathtaking and captivating as one would expect from visiting one of the world class vineyards in the Western Cape of South Africa. In fact, many of the olive farms are on the same estate as the wineries.

To make the most of the journey ahead, Nicholas Coleman, noted oleologist and co-founder of Grove and Vine in New York, shared some professional insight on the



Willow Creek's olive oil operations.



Nick and Brenda Wilkinson in the Rio Largo fields.



The Morgenster estate has a distinctive micro climate because of its proximity to the Atlantic and Indian oceans.



Photo courtesy of Morgenster

characteristics that define exceptional olive oil throughout the world. Coleman's company delivers fresh olive oil from both hemispheres direct to consumers that are personally curated from his travels and tastings around the world. He advised that the best olive oils come from single estate growers. Simply put, what grows together goes together. Great olive oil can come from anywhere in the world with the right climate and growing conditions. It is not the country of origin that matters; it is the practices of the individual producer and their attention to everything from growing to distribution that make the difference.

A few tips from Coleman on what to look for when choosing premium EVOO can simplify the task for consumers. Look for a dark bottle, a harvest date (not an expiration date) that is no more than two years ago, the type or types of olives and the estate or region it comes from, not just the country. Once opened, consume the oil within three months—don't buy an exquisite extra virgin olive oil and hold it. Unlike wine, olive oil is best consumed fresh and quickly.

Morgenster

The journey begins at family-owned and run Morgenster located in the southernmost tip of the famous Stellenbosch wine region. The estate has a distinctive micro climate because of its proximity to the Atlantic and Indian oceans. The founder of the estate, Giulio Bertrand is often considered the Father of Olive Oil in South Africa. The majority of the olive trees planted in South Africa for production of olive oil originate from the first 2,000 trees imported by the Bertrand family.

Today, Federica Bertrand leads the business with a passion and a quiet intensity focused on making the best extra virgin olive oil possible. She loves walking the grounds, mindful of every detail that surrounds her. You can often find her talking to the experts working on the farm. Her insatiable curiosity about all aspects of olive farming makes her an inspiration. Over coffee and a morning conversation, she shared one of her favorite olive oil and cheese combinations—a beautiful aged Pecorino, generously drizzled with an intensive olive oil and pepper.

Olive oils from Morgenster are available in the U.S. and one very special place to find them is City Olive in Chicago. Owner, Karen Rose, has been curating a constantly evolving selection of the finest olive oils from around the globe for almost 14 years. According to Rose, "just like wine, each oil tells a different story on your palate."

Globally, EVOO is not well regulated. Consumers struggle with uncertainty about adulterated oils and often rely on a trusted expert like Rose or Coleman to provide learning and guide them. The final decision is the taste. Consumers are encouraged to hold their glass to warm it, inhale the fragrance, taste it and learn what they like. When City Olive conducts tastings, they serve slices of green apple to cleanse the palate.

Rio Largo Olive Estates

The next stop of the journey is Rio Largo Olive Estates, another major producer of exceptional extra virgin olive oils. Here, the uncompromising commitment to quality from owners Nick and Brenda Wilkinson is evident in everything from their state-of-the-art, custom-designed processing facility to the commissioned artwork on their packaging that maintains the integrity of their oils. Exclusive bag-in-box technology keeps light and air away from the oil, which substantially extends the shelf life of their EVOO over even those packaged in darkened glass bottles.

Following an illustrious 20-year career in agri-business in central Africa, Nick Wilkinson decided it was time for a new adventure. He and his wife purchased the estate in 2010. After their first harvest, they sent a sample of their EVOO to the SA Olive Association, as they were about to have their annual competition. They were surprised and delighted to receive an award, and one that had never been issued before, a Double Gold. Today, olive oils from Rio Largo consistently win international awards.

Giving back and paying it forward are what inspire everything from the farming practices to the philanthropy at Rio Largo. Their sustainable farming methods are evidence of their promise to put back more than they take out. When asked about the many philanthropic efforts that the couple support, Mr. Wilkinson says little more than it is, of course, the right thing to do.

Lapithos Olive Growers

Just down the road from Rio Largo is a very special boutique producer. Lapithos Olive Growers produces 20,000 liters of extra virgin olive oil a year and sells only a limited quantity under their own label. Despite limited production, the EVOO from Lapithos have received numerous international awards. Situated in the beautiful Breede River Valley in the Scherpenheuvel District near Worcester, the climate and the terroir make this home to several of the most acclaimed extra virgin olive oils in the country.



Just like wine, olive oil is distinctive on the palate.



Alex Kearney and son Mike-Alec of Lapithos do all the blending of cultivars.



Lapithos' olive groves.



Lapithos' Mpumelelo (Elvis) Papa, 11 years on the farm.

Everything at Lapithos has an interesting story, and the owners immediately make guests feel at home in the picturesque surroundings. The trees in their olive groves were painstakingly planted by friends and family over the years, and the name of the estate honors a beloved family member. Their small processing facility is just steps away from home, so every detail can be observed and managed throughout the process.

The hospitality offered by Alexis and Mariaan Kearney make it hard to leave this idyllic setting. Their son, Mike-Alec is responsible for all of the blending of their cultivars. The motto proudly displayed on Lapithos' packaging says, "fueled by family and inspired to share." It is a perfect description.

The health benefits of EVOO are well known. At Mardouw Olive Estate in Swellendam, it was the passion for health and wellness that inspired owner, André Verder to cultivate an olive farm in this remarkable climate that produces a full range of EVOO. Its flagship, Mardouw XXV Intense EVOO, is made from a single Coratina cultivar and is an international award winner. The Coratina cultivar is known to be very bitter and peppery, and it is often blended with other varieties. The resident olive maker, Chris van Niekerk, produces this single cultivar EVOO that is remarkably complex, but well-balanced, fruity, bitter and peppery.

Willow Creek

Willow Creek is one of the largest producers of EVOO in South Africa with 160,000 olive trees on 200 hectares in the Nuy Valley in the Western Cape region, which has an ideal terroir and micro climate for growing olives. Willow

Creek is the only producer reviewed that machine harvests their olives, which allows them to minimize the amount of time from harvest to oil extraction to about six hours. The EVOO produced by Willow Creek continues to win international awards.

Product innovation is important at Willow Creek, and their newly-introduced red fig and vanilla infused balsamic reduction is delicious drizzled over a soft ripened cheese like Brie or Camembert.

South Africa's extra virgin olive oils may be among the best kept secrets in the culinary world, but one taste is all it takes to inspire one to seek out these treasures of the southern hemisphere. The good news is that although exports are limited, some of these exceptional oils are available in the U.S. through specialty retailers like City Olive www.cityolive.com in Chicago, subscription services like Grove and Vine www.groveandvine.com and retail supermarkets, delis and gourmet food shops.



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