LIQUID GOLD
(From left) The courtyard at The Olive Press; olive orchards increasingly share acreage with Sonoma’s famed vineyards; springtime in oil country.

FOOD & DRINK | SONOMA, CALIFORNIA

Acquaint your palate with California’s latest taste sensation, premium olive oil. By Matt Villano

With thousands upon thousands of acres of vineyards producing some of the world’s great wines, it’s no wonder people refer to the northern California destinations of Sonoma and Napa counties as Wine Country. But if current trends continue, by 2025 the region might have a second name: Olive Country.

Statistics from the California Olive Oil Council (COOC), which certifies California Extra Virgin Olive Oil (EVOO), indicate that California produces 99 percent of the country’s olive oil with Sonoma and Napa booming with artisan producers. The appeal, according to COOC executive director Patricia Darragh, is that “olive trees are more cost-effective than many crops from a farming point of view. They like dry weather and need very little water.”

For farmers, this means greater diversification and more crops. For visitors to the area, it means something entirely different: A growing number of olive-oriented luxury experiences to enjoy at more than a half-dozen artisan olive-oil purveyors in the region, providing travelers with ample opportunity to embrace the region’s next big crop. ➔
CALIFORNIA’S OLIVE ROOTS

Records indicate that Franciscan monks planted the Golden State’s first olive trees at the San Diego Mission in 1769. The same monks took cuttings with them as they moved north; every time they founded another mission (there are 21 in all), more olive trees were planted. Olive cultivation continued in pockets until the latter half of last century, when producers such as Long Meadow Ranch, The Olive Press and McEvoy Ranch in Marin County started bottling the very best oils.

The COOC was born in 1992. Several years later, it started a certification program as a way to hold local oils to a higher standard and give consumers the confidence that California oils are what they say they are. (There had been issues with European olive oil producers mislabelling oils in the news.) In addition to testing the oils, producers sign two legally binding documents stipulating that the oil is produced locally.

“I'm not aware of other countries that have standards like ours,” Darragh says, explaining that California maintains some of the highest quality standards in the world.

THE TASTING EXPERIENCE

There’s nothing particularly graceful about tasting olive oil. Sure, the place settings usually are set with Riedel stemware and Mediterranean-looking ceramic plates. And, yes, most local purveyors usually offer some sort of nibbles. When it’s go-time, however, and your host tells you to throw back that first sip of golden unctuousness, she will instruct you to let the oil run over your lips, feel it coat your tongue and—at the very moment it is about to slip into the back of your mouth—slurp it down. Loudly.

There are scientific reasons for this approach; experts say that slurping aerates the oil and therefore gives you more surface area to taste. The same experts partially rate oils by the effect they have on your throat after that—the more you cough, they say, the better the elixir actually is.

The whole cough scale has to do with chemical compounds called oleocanthal. These compounds are directly related to the pungency of an oil—the more of these compounds that an oil possesses, the more pungent that oil will be. The most pungent oils create the sensation of a spicy kick at the back of your throat—a sensation that can be so intense it prompts a cough (or two, or three).

Then, of course, there’s the oil itself. Whereas that other Wine Country product is best when you let it age, olive oil is actually best if you eat it while it’s young, within two years of being pressed. The freshest oil tastes more like a shot of wheatgrass than the oil you’d pour into a frying pan for sauteeing mushrooms. According to Vicki Zancanella, a biologist and the tasting-room lead guide at The Olive Press in Sonoma, olive oil oxidizes even...
more quickly than wine and should be consumed as soon as it’s opened. “We always say that the enemies of a bottle of fresh olive oil are light, heat and air,” she says. “The longer your bottle is open, the more those enemies become a problem.”

TASTING SAMPLER
If anybody knows olive oil, it’s Zancanella, the woman behind the tour program at The Olive Press, an award-winning producer that sources its fruit from orchards within a 150-mile radius. Her $5 tour starts at the mill’s Pieralisi equipment that was imported from Italy and walks visitors through the process, from the de-leafer to the hammer mill and on to the centrifuge. For all that, olive oil is a low-yield product; 1,000 pounds of olives result in only 152 pounds of oil.

Round Pond Estate’s $45-tour of the orchard located in the Napa Valley town of Rutherford concludes at the renovated tractor shed that serves as the estate’s millhouse. But from there it moves into a stark and modern tasting room, where guests can compare Round Pond’s Italian Varietal EVOO to their Spanish Varietal EVOO, as well as flavored olive oils and a number of other house specialties, including red-wine vinegars and citrus syrups. As part of this tasting, guests are brought heaping portions of food—cheese, vegetables, fruits and even roasted chicken.

“We encourage visitors to make salads and try our oils and vinegars on just about everything,” explains Round Pond’s wine and olive oil educator Ann Catterlin. “The crazier the concoctions, the better.”

Sampling olive oil at Jordan Winery in Healdsburg in Sonoma is memorable in different ways. All visitors to the winery’s tour and tasting are invited to sample estate oil, blended fresh each year by executive chef Todd Knoll. Those who participate in the $120 estate tour, which includes a ride around the nearly 1,200-acre property, enjoy a food-and-wine pairing featuring their Chardonnay with their estate oil and a sushi-like stone fruit nigiri with tasty vegetable escabeche.

OIL FUTURES
Other local olive-oil hotspots—including Long Meadow Ranch in St. Helena, DaVero Farms & Winery in Healdsburg and the mom-and-pop-operated Napa Olive Oil Manufacturing Company in St. Helena—enable visitors to get up close and personal with oils as well. Even the Culinary Institute of America at Greystone has an olive oil tasting at its Flavor Bar.

Cristopher Hall, executive vice president of Long Meadow Ranch, home to trees planted in the 1800s, said that as people become more interested in the origin of the food they eat, the appetite for artisan products will continue to grow. “My gut tells me that as a product, as an industry, artisan olive oil is about to get huge,” he says. “People want food with a story, a heritage, and olive oil is the perfect answer.”

Matt Villano writes from Healdsburg, Calif.
**SONOMA STATE OF MIND**

**Willow Stream Spa**  Natural mineral hot springs and a Watsu® pool highlight this award-winning spa, part of the Fairmont Sonoma Mission Inn. Most packages include use of the on-site fitness facilities, as well as access to an exfoliating shower, a therapeutic bath, an herbal steam room and more.

**CornerStone Gardens**  Inspired by the International Garden Festival at Chaumont-sur-Loire in France, this Sonoma spot celebrates art, architecture and nature with more than 20 gardens by famous artists and designers. Stop by for the shopping, bocce ball, lunch at Park 121 or wine tastings at any of the intimate tasting rooms.

**Oxbow Market**  Situated along the Napa River and Napa River Trail, the Oxbow is the epicenter of the valley’s organic and sustainably-produced local produce and artisan foods.

**Partake by K-J**  Yes, this Healdsburg hotspot from Kendall-Jackson does tastings, but it’s the menu that keeps locals coming back. One highlight: red wine french fries, sliced potatoes that are slow poached in Cabernet Sauvignon and then crisped to crunchy perfection.

**Lagunitas Brewing Company**  Microbrewing is an art form at this Petaluma institution, and at the TapRoom and Beer Sanctuary, which is open Wednesday–Sunday, visitors can find some of the most original brews anywhere in America such as a sweet brown sugar ale and a cappuccino stout.

**Sonoma Golf Club**  Playing just over 7,100 yards from the championship tees, this course’s classic layout, designed in 1928 by Olympic Club Lake Course architect Sam Whiting, offers strategic choices and challenges that excite golfers today, just as it did when players were carrying wooden clubs more than 75 years ago.

**Wine Country Polo**  Held every weekend during the summer on the field in Oakmont, right off Hwy 12.

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**Sonoma**

**Desiree Stinson’s picks**

**EAT:** In Sonoma, don’t miss breakfast or lunch at Fremont Diner, the hippest in roadside eateries.

**DAY TRIP:** Head to Dillon Beach and Nick’s Cove, specifically, for their Hog Island oysters.

Napa Valley’s Castillo di Amorosa, an authentic recreation of a 13th-century castle set among its namesake vineyard.

Jul. 19-20  **GLORIA FERRER CATALAN FESTIVAL**  In Sonoma, this Spanish festival invites attendees to join in and stomp grapes.

Jul. 24-Aug. 10  **SONOMA COUNTY FAIR**  The home to vineyards and artisan-minded foodies is also home to the fair voted tops in the country.
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