



A story of olives

THE WESTERN CAPE HAS THE IDEAL CONDITIONS FOR GROWING OLIVES, WHICH IS WHY IT'S HOME TO SOME FIVE MILLION OLIVE TREES. TAKE A SELF-DRIVE ALONG THE OLIVE ROUTE AND VISIT BOUTIQUE OLIVE OIL PRODUCERS AS WELL AS SOME OF THE COUNTRY'S LARGEST COMMERCIAL FARMERS.

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In 1994 South Africa had about 1 000ha of olive trees, 10% of which were used for the production of olive oil. Twenty years later the industry had grown to about 6 000ha, of which 80% were used for olive oil," says Dax Villanueva of Olive Central. We're on a road trip across the Western Cape in search of South Africa's tastiest olive oils.

Archaeologists have found evidence that olives were being used to make oil as early as 6 000 BC. In South Africa, the tradition is younger and the production is smaller compared with the world's largest producers: Spain, Italy and Greece. However, in 2013 we exported olive oil to the value of R38 million. About 150 South African producers make 1.5 million litres (mostly extra-virgin) olive oil each year, and our top five export markets are Italy, Canada, Namibia, Botswana and Swaziland.

The last two decades have witnessed South Africans refine their taste for the flavoursome oil, especially for its health benefits and peppery bitter taste. It all started in 1992 with Giulio Bertrand, the father of the local olive industry, after he bought Morgenster Estate near Somerset West. Back then there was no culture of using olive oil at the table and it could only be bought from pharmacies. Whenever Giulio travelled to his Italian homeland, he brought bottles of olive oil in his hand luggage to drizzle over his salad, bruschetta and pasta.

He found that the Western Cape's terroir, especially its Mediterranean climate, made for ideal growing conditions. Today 90% of local growers are found here. Giulio brought 2 000 bare root olive plants from 17 cultivars such as Kalamata, Manzanilla and Mission, from regions stretching from Tuscany in the north to Sicily in the south. He continued bringing in olive plants for years, until his olive grove measured 50ha and his oil was being blended from 14 olive varieties.

After keen interest, particularly from the region's winemakers, he expanded his nursery and began supplying local growers. Between 1997 and 2014 he sold 1.1 million trees (some even went to Namibia and Zimbabwe) and it's his Italian varieties that make up the majority of South Africa's olive oil blends. Giulio's passion is apparent in the oil he produces, which has been awarded a top score of 98% at the international Flos Olei competition in Rome.

SOUTH AFRICAN OLIVE ROUTE

Dax and I make our way through the crevices and folds of the Boland along an unofficial self-drive olive route. We start in Cape Town and travel to Chaloner in Stellenbosch, through Franschhoek to Rio Largo and finally to Willow Creek in the Nuy Valley. Many olive estates offer olive-oil tastings and sell various olive-related goods and produce. We've come at the best time of year as the olives are being harvested – between March and July – and the season's oils will be on shelves by early spring.



A taste of what's to come. In the early 1990s Giulio Bertrand first brought olive plants into South Africa with the vision of producing olive oil on Morgenster Estate.

OLIVE OIL FACTS

- Look for the South African Olive Industry Association's Commitment to Compliance (CTC) quality seal on locally produced olive oils.
- Olive oil doesn't mature with age. Consume it within 24 months of the production date.
- Olive oil comes in a multitude of shades. Colour isn't an indication of quality.
- Quality olive oil is rich in antioxidants and has anti-inflammatory properties.
- Cold-pressed olive oil retains its aromas, natural antioxidants and minerals.
- Good-quality olive oil is mechanically (not chemically) processed.



CHALONER

The sun is inching its way over the Stellenbosch mountains when we arrive at Falcon's Nest farm – named for the peregrine falcons that flew overhead when the Chaloner family bought the farm. Perry Chaloner found the soil wasn't ideal for fruit. On a whim he planted 400 Mission olive trees as a filler crop, not knowing a thing about them. Nothing happened for seven years. "After the first crop I was running around. I didn't know what to do with them," he recalls. "In 2005 there was a craze and everyone started planting olives." Now he has 7 000 trees from nine cultivars planted on 11ha. As a boutique producer, Chaloner makes 500 unfiltered litres per harvest. Their olive oils sell on shop shelves in Europe side by side with their table olives, tapenades, marmalades and preserves.

As we walk through the olive grove, Perry explains that Kalamata table olives need to be hand-harvested so they don't bruise, while Mission olives, which are used for oils, are harvested with rakes and fall onto muslin cloth beneath the trees. The olives need to be cold-pressed within 24 hours after picking to prevent the oxidation process and retain their flavour. Unripe olives are also picked. They yield less oil but add a bitter flavour to the taste profile.

After I admit that until a few months ago I sought out internationally produced olive oil, Perry narrates a condensed version of the scandals of the global olive oil business: "The thing about the local industry is that we don't compete directly with each other, we compete with ignorance. We compete with people who go to the supermarket to buy a 'product of Italy' olive oil, while at times it actually comes from Morocco or Tunisia. The olives sit waiting to be pressed, go semi-vrot and then go through a massive refinery so the oil can be sold allegedly as extra-virgin olive oil made in Italy."

RIO LARGO

To find out more about the slippery nature of the olive-oil trade we visit Nick Wilkinson, owner of Rio Largo Estate in the Scherpenheuvel Valley on the southern banks of the Breede River. He is also the chairman of the South African Olive Industry Association (SAOIA), which oversees the local industry, enforces a quality standard among its members and judges the annual olive oil awards.

As a medium-size producer Nick holds his own. He farms 28 000ha (and another 20 000ha he hires), maintains a production rate of 400 tonnes of olives or 80 000 litres per season, and has numerous local and international awards to his name.

At his extraction plant he shows us how extra-virgin oil is made. The hand-harvested olives arrive in large crates. They are washed along a conveyor belt, and leaves and branches fall away. Then they are crushed into a paste in temperatures below 30 degrees, and mixed to allow oil droplets to collect. The oil is separated from the water and solids by centrifuges. Less than 30 minutes later, Nick hands us shot glasses of freshly pressed bright-green olive oil as it pours out the filter. The pungent peppery flavour winds me – with time, olive oil oxidises and loses its flavour and therefore its grading, which is why it's best to buy olive oil from the source and use it within 24 months of the production date.

"It's straight economics," says Nick. Extra-virgin olive oil is of the highest quality and commands the greatest price. Sometimes lower-grade oils – in decreasing order of quality: virgin, refined, refined and virgin blends, and olive-pomace – are labelled as extra-virgin and sold with the higher price tag, yet others are mislabelled as produced rather than packaged in Italy. South Africa has no stringent and regularly enforced control checks on imports.

Nick's advice is to buy local oils that carry the SA Olive sticker. They have undergone a voluntary quality control process to ensure utmost quality and appropriate labelling. "[The South African industry] has shown by its awards that we're able to compete with the best of the best," he concludes.

WILLOW CREEK

As we drive through the 220 000 olive trees at Willow Creek Estate that lie in the late afternoon shadow of Rabie Mountain, I get a sense of the size of one of South Africa's largest producers. Co-owner Andries Rabie says that since their first harvest in 2002 they've increased their production output 70-fold to 445 000 litres in 2015, and he estimates an output of close to 1 million litres in 2016. This comes with the help of mechanical tree shakers and canopy harvesters, alongside their workers.

Willow Creek is proof that there's an export market for South African olive oils. They export 15% of their production to countries such as China, the UAE, Sweden, Germany and India, with the number growing. Canada buys 24 flavours of Willow Creek's infused olive oils, while they only sell nine flavours to the local market. "There's no international oil that can compete with what we produce here, as there's not enough boutique production in the world," Andries says.

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