

## WEEKEND ESCAPE



# The olive has its day in the sun

## In California wine country, olive oil may be the new Chardonnay. Producers are offering tours and tastings.

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Squished together like grapes in a harvesting crate, the weekend wine-tasters are crawling along clogged California 29 through the Napa Valley. The olive trees lining the road whisper of the Other Napa, but the Chardonnay sippers don't know to listen.

It's olive pressing season, time to taste a different type of vintage — the extra virgin kind. Across California, *frantoios* (that's Italian and insider lingo for an olive press) are coaxing liquid gold out of midnight-colored fruit. A few oil producers also are offering tastings and a crash course in the good life, Mediterranean-style.

The state has more than 6,100 acres devoted to olives, squeezing out a combined 750,000 gallons a year, about the same as France produces. Most of it comes from Butte and Tulare counties, but the industry is just starting to tap into tourism, so the best place for beginners is the visitor-friendly Napa and Sonoma valleys.

Even here, however, fewer than 20 producers are prepared to accommodate the public, and some only

through private tours. But each grower is a study in passion.

"Nobody's getting rich on olive oil, because you might get 1 gallon harvesting an entire tree," says Carol Ainsworth, owner of Great Olive Tours in St. Helena. "Sometimes it's even less than that. It's not an industry paying for itself right now. People are lucky to break even."

California's olive oil industry is in its infancy, most experts agree — about the same place as its wine producers were 30 years ago. Foodies, too, are just getting hip to oil and how to mull "tasting notes" of artichoke or mature grass. That means no guidebooks and no tourist maps of olive oil tasting rooms. You need a guide like Ainsworth or a telephone and some patience. But — as I found out during a September trip to Napa — it can be worth the effort.

Before the Spanish first brought those silvery, quintessentially Mediterranean trees to Catholic missions in California, America was the farthest thing from olive country. Thomas Jefferson tried cultivating a few trees at Monticello, but they failed in Virginia's winters. The padres had more success and seeded the missions from San Diego to Sonoma, starting in 1789. Many still have Mission variety olive trees on their grounds, as well as remnants of the mills they used to press oil.

By the late 1800s, the Golden State had 2,000 acres planted in olives. Over the decades, California has ripened into the nation's olive capital — more than 90% are grown here — but the gourmards still turned to Europe for their oil. It wasn't until the 1990s that California olive oil started to climb in prestige.

Some growers credit Lila Jaeger, a partner in the Rutherford Hill Winery, for the shift. She discovered an olive grove on her property in the early 1990s and pruned the century-old overgrowth into a productive orchard. About the same time, Nan Tucker McEvoy, part-owner of Chronicle Publishing, planted Tuscan varieties on 80 acres of her Petaluma ranch. Word spread that California might have something more to offer than just a nice Cabernet.

Ten harvests later, the McEvoy Ranch charges \$20 a head for its two-hour tasting tours. They're offered only 12 or so times a year, and they sell out weeks in advance.

But compared with vintners, olive growers in general haven't fully mastered the science of accommodating dilettantes. "I would say only 10% or 15% of our members have tasting rooms," says Patricia Darragh, executive director of the California Olive Oil Council.

Sonoma County's olive festival started in 2001 and has grown into a three-month celebration. This year's events began Saturday with the Blessing of the Olives ceremony at the Mission San Francisco Solano de Sonoma and continue with group olive harvests, tastings, seminars on curing and hikes overlooking the orchards.

A few miles north at the Olive Press, a communal *frantoio* in Glen Ellen, self-guided tours go on year-round — not just in the fall, when growers bring in their harvest for crushing. Visitors can gape at the press and even sample olive oils for free at a tasting bar. "The press is going 18 to 24 hours a day during the pressing season, from October through December and sometimes into January," Darragh says.

In Napa County, Round Pond lies off a peaceful two-lane street in Rutherford. It's one of the few producers in the area to have its own orchards and press. The estate, founded 20 years ago by the

MacDonnell family, produces five types of olive oil.

For \$20 per person, Round Pond offers visitors a generous, genteel atmosphere. The curious can touch the trees and fruit as well as learn the hallmarks of proper pruning (a canopy-shaped tree). There are no designated tour guides; instead, every staffer seems to have an encyclopedic knowledge. Before visitors arrive at the looming granite-and-metal press, they learn a bushel. It can take five years to get a decent crop from a young olive tree. Olives should be pressed within an hour of picking to avoid any flavor-killing fermentation.

"And you get about five times as much juice from a grape as you do oil from an olive," Rhonda Spencer, Round Pond's finance administrator, said during a recent tour. "This is a labor of love. People tell us they had no idea there was this much to it."

At the end of the tour, visitors gather around a wooden table laden with greens, fresh mozzarella, tomatoes, apples and wedges of French loaf. Guides pour the oils into squat, cobalt-blue tasting glasses and encourage guests to roll them over the tongue and palate. Round Pond also makes vinegars, sampled by dribbling onto sugar cubes.

Other growers require a private guide, such as Great Olive Tours' Ainsworth. Poplar Hill, run by William and Rachel Casey, is one such exclusive producer. But those on one of Ainsworth's \$65-an-hour tours get the royal treatment at the St. Helena estate. Rachel Casey feeds her guests a cake baked with her own olive oil. The Caseys also take pride in Poplar Hill's organic production: Carnivorous plants live among the branches, and guinea fowl roam the grounds, snacking on pests.

Villa Mille Rose (House of a Thousand Roses), in the Napa valley town of Oakville, is another of Ainsworth's stops. Here, Italian socialite Maria Manetti Farrow rules over an earthly paradise filled with grape vines, bonsai trees and gardens that seem to sing, thanks to the opera that Farrow pipes through outdoor speakers whenever she's in town. As Farrow's white poodle Gioia trots at her feet, the olive oil maker leads visitors around her grounds and even, when the season permits, sends them home with crates of surplus produce.

Farrow also leads olive oil tastings in the middle of the kitchen of her vast, Italian villa-style home. Even luckier visitors might get a gander at her home-barreled balsamic vinegars, which, like her oils, tend to sell out.

"I like to bring visitors joy — happiness," Farrow says, her voice all throaty generosity. "It's what life is about." That, and a good bottle of oil, to go.