

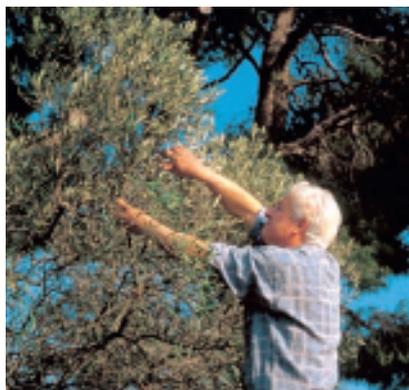
The green gold of the hills

Saint-Rémy-de-Provence, Spring 2009. In this picture postcard France of luxurious farmhouses and gastronomic bistros, a road surrounded by wild grass meanders through the chalky hills. Soon, an alleyway appears, lined with olive trees with young leaves that quiver under the caress of the wind. Welcome to Moulin du Calanquet, a family farm resuscitated by a thirtysomething brother and sister, Anne and Gilles Brun. They did not want these 6,000 abandoned olive trees to die. So they rolled up their sleeves, making the sceptics smile as they worked under the silvery foliage.



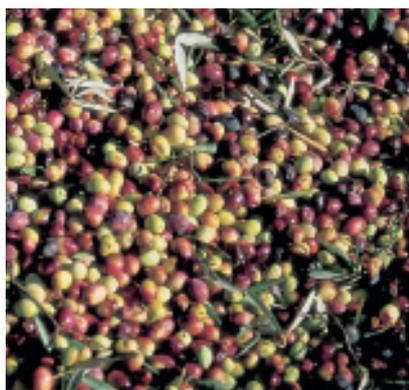
J. NICOLAS

Olive trees



T. KREISER

The harvest



J. GUILLARD

Fresh olives

The sceptics were soon obliged to change their views, however. The olive oils pressed by the young Bruns are remarkable. What is more, the couple are blowing a wind of change through the hidebound world of French olive growing, inventing tapenade crisps and olive oil fruit juice, and of course opening a shop on the Internet. The Mediterranean's most famous tree that has sculptured landscapes for 8000 years just entered the third millennium.

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Like Moulin du Calanquet, the entire French olive growing industry has had a close shave. Behind its traditional image of the eternal Provence, the olive tree was almost chased from the valleys where it had grown for 8,000 years. At the beginning of the 20th century, the green gold used to make Marseilles soap was abandoned in favour of cheaper sunflower and groundnut oil. People in

Provence turned away from their olive trees, preferring the more profitable vineyards and fruit trees. It has to be said that the Queen of Provence cooking is thirsty: 4 to 5 kilos of olives are needed to produce a litre of oil. An olive tree provides between 15 and 50 kg of fruit every year so it is easy to imagine the hard labour the sector requires.

It was in fact the healthy eating message at the beginning of 1980s that got

Provence olive oil started again. But restarting abandoned or torn-up olive groves takes five to 10 years of labour.

Inevitably, French production is tiny in comparison to Greek,

Italian or Spanish giants. To exist, French olive or producers have to be extremely tenacious, and some of them have chosen the quality end of the market. In Fontvieille, in the middle of the Alpilles, don't miss magnificent château Estoublon where olive oil is packaged in bottles that look like expensive perfume!



Bottles of olive oil from Moulin du Calanquet

Other producers have turned to tourism and are opening up their farms. In Château Virant on the banks of the Etang de Berre, Christine Cheylan, one of the rare women at the top of Provence olive production, will provide tasting lessons for the happy few that book in advance. The fashion is also for tourist routes, ideal for a theme holiday between October and February when the mills are in full swing.

Visitors to the mills will learn that the gathering period is decisive. Green olives are picked in September and October, two months before complete maturity. These will be used to make olive oil with the famous artichoke or cut grass aromas. Black olives are picked when they are ripe between November and February. Only these are pressed and crushed whole (fruit and stone) giving a definite “black fruity” taste. To get a “virgin olive oil” - the best, without any thermal or chemical alteration – millers press cold. The oil undergoes no treatment apart from washing, decanting and filtering.

Two itineraries follow the olive trees through Baronnies (around Nyons) and in the Alpilles (around Saint-Rémy). The programme includes visits to mills, rural museums and soap factories through a Provence that has walked off a postcard. And these visits are just the thing, for there is nothing better than a tasting session to make your choice of oil. Just one rule: the best olive oil is the one you like. So to get the best from the flavours, do it like the professionals: moisten the end of your tongue and wait a few seconds before taking a mouthful and rolling it around the mouth. Now it is your turn. ■

ADDRESSES

Moulin du Calanquet

(two young millers have taken over an old family domain)
Vieux Chemin d'Arles
13210 Saint-Rémy-de-Provence - France
Tel: + 33 (0)4 32 60 09 50
www.moulin-du-calanquet.fr

Château Virant

(one of the most productive mills in the region, run by a woman)
CD10
13680 Lançon-de-Provence - France
Tel: +33 (0)4 90 42 44 47
www.chateauvirant.com

Château Estoublon

(one of the best quality mills in an absolutely magnificent domain, also run by a woman)
Route de Maussane
13990 Fontvieille - France
Tel: +33 (0)4 90 54 64 00
www.estoublon.com

Afidol

Maison des Agriculteurs
Avenue Henri Pontier
13626 Aix-en-Provence - France
Tel: +33 (0)4 42 23 01 92
www.afidol.org

Domaine Les Bastidettes

Mas de la Laune
13104 Mas Thibert Arles - France
Tel: +33 (0)4 90 98 73 43
www.bastidettes.fr

Oliviers & Co

Parc de Pitaugier
04300 Mane - France
Tel: + 33 (0)4 92 70 83 39
www.oliviersandco.net

CALENDAR

Alicoque in Nyons, the first weekend in February: new oil festival.

Oléades in Avignon, mid-February: tasting, sales, conferences, even the Palais des Papes is transformed into an oil bar.

Olive Festival in Mouriès, mid-September: producers celebrate the beginning of the harvest and then in mid-December they celebrate the new oil.

Fête de l'Olive Piquée in Nyons, the Saturday before Christmas: demonstrations and visits.