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The Best Spanish Olive Oils for Dipping and Drizzling

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Not long ago, I had the unlikely honor of being inducted into the Confraria de la Mare de Deu de L'Olivera, a society of Catalan olive oil producers, on a rainy evening in the church of Santa Maria del Mare in Barcelona. Never mind that I'm a displaced Texan who grew up on food fried in Crisco; I'm now a certified, medallion-wearing Spanish olive oil fanatic.

As such, it's my duty to note that with olive oil, you get what you pay for. There's no comparison between mass-produced oil and a hand-harvested, organic variety. You don't need a top-flight extra-virgin oil for everyday frying, sauteing and so on. But when you want something to go with a crusty piece of fresh peasant bread, or to swirl into a bowl of soup, good Spanish oils provide the most bang for your sensory buck.

The Spanish cultivate 262 varieties of olives for oil, but a few key choices account for most of the production: Picual, Hojiblanca, Picudo, Cornicabra and Arbequina. While most oils are blends, the dominant ones go a long way toward defining character. The following cover the main bases in terms of olive varieties and range of flavor, and they're remarkably affordable for the quality they offer.

VIBRANT AND SPICY. L'Estornell Organic is made entirely from Arbequina olives, the small, brown, glossy variety that are the pride of Catalonia. An organically produced oil, it is medium-weight, with a nutty aroma and a mildly peppery bite, superb drizzled over grilled vegetables or fish. Available for \$25.99 for 750 milliliters at Sutton Place Gourmet (3201 New Mexico Ave. NW, 202-363-5800) and Dean & DeLuca (3276 M St. NW, 800-925-7854, www.deandeluca.com). Another good Arbequina oil is Pons, which costs \$24 for 475 milliliters at www.tienda.com -- a great resource for imported Spanish gourmet goods.

MILD AND FRESH. Rafael Salgado "RS" is made mostly from Cornicabras and Manzanillas from Andalusia. Gold and light-bodied, it has a fresh, grassy taste -- ideal for a salad with a little sherry vinegar from Jerez. \$14.99 for 750 milliliters at Williams-Sonoma or Tienda.com, which also has a single-note Manzanilla oil by Aguibal (\$19.95 for 500 milliliters).

RICH AND COMPLEX. From Baena, Nuñez de Prado, making oil since 1795, produces the most full-bodied of the three here. A blend of organic Picual, Picudo and Hojiblanca olives, the oil is unusual in that it's not pressed -- only that which drips by gravity from the crushed olives is used. It's richly aromatic, with a flavor that recalls apples and nuts -- great with a piece of bread. \$24.99 for 500 milliliters at Dean & DeLuca or www.zingermans.com, where you can also find Columela, which makes two single-note oils of either Picual or Hojiblanca olives (\$21 for 500 milliliters). **Ray Isle**

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