

ENTERTAINMENT

Tasting tours delve into olive oil

By [SAN JOSE MERCURY NEWS](#) |

PUBLISHED: August 31, 2015 at 12:00 pm | UPDATED: July 28, 2018 at 4:41 am

You're sitting in an olive oil tasting room, just a few hundred yards from where the liquid gold was grown and even closer to where it was milled. The moment the oil hits your palate, velvety smooth and pungent with a peppery finish, is an awakening. This is how truly extra-virgin olive oil should taste.

The health benefits of olive oil are no secret. Neither are the culinary benefits. Olive oil aisles are expanding in supermarkets and specialty shops as the product's popularity rises.

Now, olive oil tasting rooms have begun popping up, too, not just downtown at olive oil boutiques but where the olives are grown. You can go tasting at Il Fiorello in the Suisun Valley, Seka Hills in the Capay Valley, The Olivina in Livermore and beyond. And you should, because there is nothing quite like tasting extra-virgin olive oil, or EVOO, where it was grown and milled.

Ann Fiorello Sievers and her husband, Mark Sievers, run Fairfield's Il Fiorello Olive Oil Company in the heart of the Suisun Valley American Viticultural Area, where they turned a grove of 2,000 trees into 13 distinct varietal oils. Their tasting room

“Our goal is to educate a growing number of consumers who are only just beginning to distinguish between EVOO, pure olive oil and the Crisco their mothers may have used,” Mark Sievers says.

There’s plenty to learn. Extra-virgin oil is best used within 18 months of the harvest date. Since the oil is affected by light, you should buy dark bottles that are stocked on lower store shelves.

“As soon as the olive oil is exposed to light, heat and air, it begins to oxidize and decay,” Ann Fiorello Sievers says.

Tempting as it is to taste oils by dipping bread into them, the bread will obscure the pure taste of the oil. Sip the oil to fully experience it.

And who knew there were so many different varietals, each with its own distinct taste and optimal food pairings? Charles Crohare, who runs The Olivina with his father (also named Charles), rattles off just a few: picholine, soft and smooth delicate taste, good with fish and vegetables; Arbequina, buttery with subtle bitterness, perfect on corn on the cob or potatoes; century mission, nutty with a slight tickly finish, nice for bread dipping.

The Olivina’s tasting area is without frills. It takes up an undecorated corner of the farm’s equipment garage, on the other side of the milling machines, but “visitors like our rustic authenticity, knowing they’re in the middle of where our olives were grown,” Crohare says.

Their 2,000-acre estate sits just down the road from Wente Vineyards.

Experts predict that we will see a blossoming of olive oil tasting rooms at farms like this, as growers embark on an educational and marketing strategy similar to what wineries did 30 years ago.

“These tasting rooms are part of the growing ‘ag tourism’ trend,” says Patricia Darragh, executive director of the California Olive Oil Council, the trade association that represents about 400 producers and growers in the state and sets certification standards. “The advantage of olive oil tasting rooms is that, unlike at wineries, people of all ages can sip the product — and you don’t need a designated driver.”

That’s good news if you decide to travel to Yolo County’s Capay Valley, about 80 miles from downtown Berkeley. The trip will be worth it. Seka Hills Olive Mill, which is owned by the Yocha Dehe Wintun Nation that also owns nearby Cache Creek

A wall-sized window at Seka Hills' attractive tasting room peers into the area that houses the milling machines. There's nothing sexy about the mills, a series of metal containers and pipes that grind the whole fruit, pit included, into oil. The process is explained on a quick tour, followed by the opportunity to taste Seka Hills' oils, vinegars, wines and even homemade honey. Pick up sandwiches and salads at the cafe, along with many other locally made products.

Visit during the fall harvest, and you'll have the added advantage of watching the milling process — and tasting the very newest harvest. You'd have to chew an olive straight off the tree to get oil that's any fresher.

A trio of tastings

Il Fiorello: Tastings 1-5 p.m. daily. Olive oil and balsamic vinegar tasting is \$5 per person, which includes food pairing. Oil and wine flights are \$15 per person and include three wines, balsamic vinegar and a food pairing. 2625 Mankas Corner Road, Fairfield; www.ilfiorello.com

Seka Hills: Open 11 a.m.-

6 p.m. Wednesday through Sunday. Tastings of oils, balsamic vinegar, nuts and honey are complimentary. Add a wine flight for \$8. 19326 County Road 78, Brooks;

www.sekahills.com

The Olivina: Group tastings by appointment. 4555 Arroyo Road, Livermore;

www.theolivina.com

Or taste many olive oils Oct. 17 at the San Benito Olive Festival in Hollister;

www.sanbenitoolivefestival.com.



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