

# Retailers Finding Greater Worldwide Selection of Imported Olive Oils

BY DAVE BERNARD

If you peruse the aisles of Whole Foods or Trader Joe's or sit down to dinner at many a gourmet restaurant, that delicious extra-virgin olive oil you are either buying, dipping into or enjoying on flakes of halibut quite likely came from Italy or Spain. With the countries combining to ship more than two thirds of all U.S. EVOO imports, gourmet chefs and home cooks have plenty of high-quality and healthful oils to choose from when calling on these traditional powerhouses.

Look closely though, and among the elegant bottles of various sizes filling the olive oil section at your local grocery store, you will spot a 33.8-ounce can from another Mediterranean country that has got a few interesting oils of its own: Tunisia. Tunisia and nearby Morocco now both track in the top 10 producing countries for U.S.-sold EVOO.

"Our customers just love the taste of the Moroccan," said Darya Suddreth President of Carolinas-based The Olive Shoppe stores, commenting on the growing popularity of olive oils from this often neglected Mediterranean locale. At The Olive Shoppe, the Moroccan EVOO (\$16.95 for 375 milliliters) sells most briskly, better even than the company's popular blend from Italy's renowned EVOO-producing Umbria region. The Moroccan green olive oil, sold under private label like all of the company's oils, contains mild notes of green fruit that partner with smooth and buttery notes of ripe olive, finishing with hints of creaminess and a slight peppering at the back of the throat.

You do not need to hug the Mediterranean, however, to find high-quality EVOO offerings. Six thousand miles and an equator line away, Chile has been steadily building a reputation with its award-winning mild and fruity oils. No less than 13 of the country's EVOO producers earned outstanding scores in the prestigious Flos Olei olive oil guide for 2012. Chile (the eighth leading U.S. supplier) has a couple olive oil-producing neighbors of its own, with Argentina (fifth) and newly minted

International Olive Council member Uruguay also turning out flavorful award-winning oils.

While Italy and Spain continue to dominate the U.S. market, accounting for a combined 67 percent share of 2013 U.S. olive oil sales, this actually marked a 9-point drop from the previous four-year average. Meanwhile, "second tier" producers from South America and the Mediterranean, including previously mentioned Tunisia and Morocco, but also Turkey, Lebanon and others, have been gradually bottling their way into the picture.

Whether it is the mild and fruity Chilean oils, the bold and robust Australian products or the sought after gourmet oils from Turkey or Argentina, American consumers are expanding their olive oil palates and finding it increasingly easy to do so, simply by stopping at their favorite local gourmet shop.

"What's happening in the food world in general is that, with the Food Network and all of those things that have grown within the last decade, people are cooking more at home, and they're returning to whole natural food and high-quality ingredients," said Eryn Balch, Executive Vice President of the North American Olive Oil Association. "And with extra-virgin olive oil in particular, people are starting to understand that it's really very much like wine. You can have different extra-virgin olive oil from different regions, from different types of olives, or different types of olives blended together, just like wine, where you get this huge range of flavors and huge range of options – everything from the store brand stuff up to small-estate, high-quality, high-priced options."

While second-tier producers in the Southern Hemisphere face challenges breaking into a U.S. market long dominated by Italy and Spain, these relatively young suppliers have some advantages as well, the biggest of which is, quite simply, the sun. With their opposing season harvest time, Southern Hemisphere countries like Chile, Argentina, South African and Australia offer fresh product while heavy producers like Spain and Italy are off-season.

"We've got amazing Mediterranean growing conditions here, and we're producing our oils six months after the equivalent oils in the Northern Hemisphere," said Tim Smith, Sales and Marketing Director of Cobram Estate, an award-winning Australian producer that this year debuted its premium oils to U.S. consumers. From early July through December, consumers seeking the absolute freshest olive oil can look to Southern Hemisphere producers, and companies like Cobram are making it easy to do so. Cobram has been a top performer two years running at the prestigious New York International Olive Oil Competition, winning five gold medals, including two Best in Class oils in this year's competition. The company plans to offer U.S. consumers even fresher oil when it begins growing olives and producing oil in a new California operation that is in its early stages. Cobram Estate's selection of premium oils have U.S. suggested retail prices of \$9 to \$50, with its 2014 Best in Class Première Extra Virgin Olive Oil selling for \$12 for 375 milliliters and its Best in Class Reserve Hojiblanca Extra Virgin Olive Oil selling for \$20 to \$25 for 500 milliliters.

For some of the more successful second tier producing countries, the key to finding that success has been in building awareness and education among U.S. consumers. Tunisian olive oil, for instance, has been served on American tables virtually since European oil imports began, although not too many consumers knew it, since oils from Tunisia, the world's second largest net exporter, were branded under Italian and other countries' labels. One northern Tunisian company has single-handedly changed that over the last two and a half years, however. CHO gave the country its first branded olive oils and has quickly become a factor in the U.S. market, with the company's gourmet EVOO and organic EVOO appearing in about 4,000 U.S. retailers, a figure that is growing at 100 percent annually.

"We started in a market where consumers

did not know much about Tunisian olive oil," said Wajih Rekik, CEO of CHO America, whose Terra Delyssa EVOO and organic EVOO brand boasts gold medal recognition from Israel's prestigious international Terraolivo competition and Best in Show accolades from Biofach Germany, the world's largest organic food and agriculture show. "But the smooth, fresh flavor of our oils are perfect for everyday use," Rekik continued. "They don't overpower any other ingredients when cooking, and they can be used in salads and for dipping." Operating with a completely in-house business model that accounts for its products from tree to retail shelf (CHO even maintains its own importing offices in the United States and other countries), the company has gone from zero to 4,000 stores in quick fashion. CHO olive oils retail in the United States from \$2.99 for 8.5 ounces to \$24.99 for 101 ounces.

With small and large global producers continuing to churn out award-winning oils and making their way onto U.S. gourmet market shelves, the outlook is for future growth of such imports as Americans gain both knowledge of and desire for the highest-quality and healthiest extra-virgin olive oil. **GN**



## La Tourangelle Introduces Artisan Spray Cooking Oils

Adding to its repertoire of much-loved gourmet oils, La Tourangelle, the celebrated California company that utilizes a 150-year-old traditional production method, recently announced the introduction of its artisan Spray Oils.

Finding a gap in the market for a healthy, propellant-free, all-natural spray oil product, CEO of La Tourangelle, Matthieu Kohlmeyer decided it was time for the brand to introduce its wildly successful oils in a new design. La Tourangelle's idea is simple: keep the oil, lose the chemicals. The spray oils series will feature the brand's favorite nut oils in cans that use compressed air to propel 100 percent oil. While existing cooking oil sprays are

renowned for using harmful chemicals as propellants, including petroleum, propane and isobutene, La Tourangelle's mission is to offer an alternative for at-home cooks who value great-tasting food and do not want to see propane listed as an ingredient.

Soon to hit shelves, La Tourangelle's Spray Oil Series will be available in roasted walnut, 100 percent organic extra-virgin olive, grape-seed, organic canola, Thai wok and roasted pistachio flavors. More information about La Tourangelle can be found at [www.latourangelle.com](http://www.latourangelle.com).



## T. Marzetti Co. Brings Ortalli Balsamic Vinegars to the United States

Ortalli Balsamic Vinegars have been skillfully crafted by the Ortalli family of Modena, Italy, for four generations. Combining a genuine passion for family and tradition with a creative entrepreneurial spirit, Ortalli has created a select line of balsamic vinegars, sweet vinegars and glazes that express the family's love of the land and appreciation for Modena's rich culture.

Remarkably versatile, each of Ortalli's signature products can enhance almost

any dish or dessert. The balsamic vinegars bear the Protected Geographical Status label (PGI Balsamic Vinegar of Modena) plus the leaf grading system of A.I.B. (Italian Balsamic Vinegars Tasters Association).

Ortalli's fine line of products are now available in the United States, brought to you exclusively by the T. Marzetti Co. For more information, visit



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