



Tunisian Olive Oil

There's **GOLD**
in Tunisia.
Beautiful, green,
liquid gold.

Monica Frim
Photography by John Frim and Monica Frim

Its history goes back 2,500 years, to the time of Queen Dido and the ancient Phoenicians who founded Carthage on the northern coast of Africa. They brought with them olive trees, considered sacred by many religions and mythologies. Later, when the Romans conquered Carthage, they expanded the cultivation of olives into every region of Tunisia and introduced them to Italy and other destinations around the Mediterranean Sea. What the Carthaginians

started, the Romans expanded, and today's Tunisians perfected.

Tunisia has become a world leader in organic extra virgin oils and winner of numerous awards in international competitions, including 11 medals—seven gold and four silver—at the New York International Olive Oil Competition (NYIOOC) held in April 2018. It is the leading exporter of olive oil outside the European Union—and the third largest





Mounir Boussetta and Zhaira Abdellah Boussetta of Domaine de Segermès have much to smile about. Their organic virgin olive oils are winning international awards and catching the attention of chefs and gourmands the world over.



exporter of olive oil (after Spain and Italy) to the United States.

Yet Tunisian olive oils are scarcely known to the American consumer. For years, Tunisian olive oil made its way to Italy and Spain where it was mixed with other oils, bottled and, in the case of Italy, slapped with labels sporting the Italian flag or pictures of Mount Vesuvius, and exported with no mention of its Tunisian provenance.

But now Tunisia is reclaiming and celebrating its olive oil industry by bottling its own oils and selling them directly to international markets under the Tunisian producers' own labels. What's more, Tunisia is slowly gaining recognition on the world stage for quality extra virgin olive oils (EVOO) rich in Vitamin E and polyphenols, which act as antioxidants in a heart-healthy diet.

Mr. Chiheb Slama, Head of the Olive Oil Exporters Syndicate, addressed some industry objectives in his welcoming speech at the Tunisian Olive Oil Awards, held April 19, 2018 in Tunisia and organized by the Tunisian Packaging Technical Centre (PACKTEC) under the aegis of the Tunisian Ministry, Small and Medium Enterprises. "We want to improve our place within the international market," Slama said. "To increase exports and make our brands better known in the world and to develop new packaging to penetrate new markets."

But if Tunisian olive oil is to make headway in the United States, it will require more than clever packaging. Americans, used to bland, sweet fats, need time to adjust to the sophisticated, some would say acquired, tastes of a high quality extra virgin oil. Despite the labels attesting to extra virginity, many oils imported from Europe have been blended with hazel or other oils, or refined through a variety of chemical processes so that they contain few, if any, polyphenols. Polyphenols give great oils their evidential bitter tastes—a peppery and fruity throat-burn that signifies extra virginity. As one virgin oil aficionado remarked during a tasting, "Like medicine, bitter is better."

The mantra seems to be making its way into olive bars in New York and Los Angeles, where olive oil aficionados taste and compare olive oils much like the patrons of wine bars. It's all in keeping with the trend towards heightened sensory perceptions through foods like dark chocolate, bitter salad greens and pungent cheeses. If you can appreciate the subtleties of those strong flavors, you're probably already a connoisseur of extra virgin olive oil.

Tunisia prides itself on producing organic EVOOs that are exceptionally high in polyphenols, possibly triggered

by the tough semi-arid climate that also precludes a need for pesticides or herbicides. Olive trees grow naturally in every region of the country, either planted roughly 24 meters apart, with 17 olive trees per hectare for optimum water absorption, or scattered naturally by bird and animal droppings in dry river beds and other uncultivated regions. Their longevity is astounding; olive trees can survive and produce fruit for more than a thousand years. Indeed, south of Tunis, the peninsula of Cap Bon boasts a 2,500-year-old tree, that was planted during the Carthaginian reign and still bears fruit!

Ancient Roman olive mills still dot the landscape of Tunisia, many of them on display, museum-like, in privately-owned olive orchards such as the ones at Domaine de Segermès and Domaine Ben Ammar, both certified organic with internationally award-winning oils. While 95% of olive oil producers use traditional organic methods, few operations are officially certified as organic due to the high cost of certification.

Segermès is named after the original Roman place as found on an ancient map of Africa. It is the label of the award-winning oils produced by the BioLive Company, owned and operated by Mounir Boussetta whose father purchased the land in the mid1900s complete with Roman ruins and the remains of a Byzantine church, baptistry and sarcophagus. Two antique olive mills are also on display on the property. Indeed, Boussetta proudly positions his production facility within the framework of history. "It's both a museum and a modern production plant," he says.

The facility is modern with the stainless steel machines, tanks and laboratory equipment, but traditional in the sense that the olives are grown organically, then crushed and filtered by mechanical processes without the addition of solvents or chemicals to manipulate the flavors. Olives are crushed the same day they are picked for maximum flavor and health benefits. Boussetta uses both Chemlali and Chetoui olives, two major cultivars native to Tunisia. Chemlali olives produce a somewhat sweet, golden-green oil, while the Chetoui leans toward a more bitter, darker green oil.

Not that color bears any significance. Serious olive oil tastings are usually done with sips from little blue glasses that obscure the color of the oil to avoid any prejudice in favor of greener oils. The idea is to first cover the top of the glass with one hand to trap the aroma inside before

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The tastes and flavors of organic olives include [clockwise from top], a bottle of Domaine de Segermès Chetoui organic extra virgin olive oil, winner of the Extra Gold medal at the 2018 Biol International Olive Oil Competition; a shelf loaded with various olives for table consumption; olive oil tasting samples; a Tunisian salad accompanied by a bottle of Domaine Ben Ammar, whose Ivlia label won the Gold Award at the 2018 NYIOOC, the largest international olive oil competition in the world.



Domaine de Segermès also produces chemlali oils with fruity and grassy flavors, and a unique l'huile sauvage from the tiny olives that grow wildly from seeds dropped by birds.





Some proud winners of the 2018 Tunisian Olive Oil Awards event held at the Golden Tulip Hotel in Gammarth.

A table of trophies and awards stands on the patio of the Ben Ammar organic farm in recognition of Domaine Ben Ammar's prestigious award-winning olive oils.



you take a whiff. When you taste it, it's important to take a goodly amount that can be rolled around your mouth with your tongue. Swallow, paying close attention to the sensation you detect in the throat. Does it kick, tingle or make you cough? For a light olive oil that barely denotes a scent or a tingle, Boussetta also produces a pale yellow olive oil from trees grown from seeds scattered by bird droppings in the wilds. Appropriately, it's called, simply, Wild Olive Oil.

The Domaine Segermès Chetoui Organic Extra Virgin Olive Oil received the Biol Extragold medal in the 23rd International Competition for the best organic extra virgin olive oil in the world. Held in Bari, Italy in March, 2018, the Biol Prize is dedicated to the best olive oils from around the world.

At Domaine Ben Ammar, sales manager Rawia Ben Ammar leads a team of journalists and photographers through an all-encompassing facility that produces not only some of the best Tunisian EVOO—their IVLIA olive oil, an organic robust Chetoui under the label of Tunisia Natura received the Gold Award at the prestigious New York International Olive Oil Competition (NYIOOC) in April 2018—but also boasts a natural spring water bottling plant, free range chickens and a variety of vegetables.

Here too the emphasis is on organic in all aspects of the operation—from olives to artichokes, tomatoes and the almonds planted between the rows of olive trees. Rawia's brother-in-law, Mr. Chaouki Ben Ammar explains that as a family operation (The Tunis Natura Company was founded by his brother, Mr. Abed Raouf Ben Ammar) they try to

work in the spirit of their ancestors and in close conjunction with nature. They press only their own olives and use the paste left over from the pressing as a heating fuel. After it is burned, the residue is mixed with manure to fertilize the trees. Nothing goes to waste.

The production of olive oil is a seasonal industry so the other endeavors keep the company in production all year. In fact, according to Chaouki Ben Ammar, the facility cannot keep up with the demand for their products.

Their 15,000 (3,000 per hectare) free-range chickens are fed only organic grains. They take five months to mature. Though destined mainly for national consumption, the chickens are in high demand in Qatar, so three times a week the company flies fresh poultry meat to the Middle Eastern nation.

The gnarly trunks and bushy heads of Tunisia's emblematic trees have studded the North African landscape for thousands of years. Their liquid gold has flowed through changing civilizations—from Carthaginians to Romans, Vandals, Byzantines, Arabs, Berbers, Spaniards, Turks, Italians, French and traces of other cultures—as a binding force of hope and renewal. The green gold still flows as the country wrestles with the economic challenges of a tenderfoot democracy, seeking to gain a mutually beneficial foothold in international markets. Where olive oil was once a sign of wealth, it is now universally viewed as a foretoken of health. It seems an honorable exchange. ■

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Archaeological remains of an old Roman oil mill link past and present and provide a touch of elegance to the entrance at Domaine de Segermès.



International journalists join representatives of PACKTEC, the branch of the Ministry of Industry that runs the Tunisian olive oil campaign, for lunch at the Ben Ammar organic farm.



Bottles of some of the Segermès award-winning olive oils.



Rawia Ben Ammar, sales manager of the family business, dons traditional dress for a farewell photo taken at the Ben Ammar organic farm.

