

Liquid gold

By Brent Gregston



France's *grand cru* olive oil is a coveted treasure

France produces a tiny amount of olive oil, 5,000 tons compared to Spain's 1.2 million. But in this case, less really is more. Foodies the world over savor and rate it like fine wine.

Nyons is the spiritual home of the French olive. The Nyons olive is the name given to the Tanche olives that grow in and around the town, located in France's southeastern Drôme region. The Nyons oil and olives were the first ever to obtain an Appellation d'Origine Contrôlée (AOC), the French label used to guarantee the origin and quality of wine and other products.

Guillaume Rocheville, a fourth-generation producer, says the quality of the oil depends not only on the variety of the olive, but also on the way it's harvested. "We harvest everything by hand without nets or sticks. Our only tools are a basket and a ladder. It's important not to break the skin. The fruit has to be in good condition when it is pressed. It's just like producing a good wine, like a St. Emilion, or a *grand cru de Bourgogne*. This is the *grand cru* of olive oil."

The area around Nyons is as far north as olives grow in the world. The cold weather and a late harvest result in olives that are black and

wrinkly with no hint of bitterness. And it's a risky business. "In a good year, the trees only produce 15 to 20 kilograms of olives," says Rocheville. "It takes five kilograms of Tanche olives to produce just one liter of oil. That is only a couple of liters for each olive tree." Then there are the frosts. In 1956, a deep freeze killed off many of the trees in the region.

The yield may be small, but the taste is unique. The oil is golden-green in color, with an aroma of Granny Smith apples and hazelnuts. The mature olives must be cold pressed within six days of harvest and taste-tested by a committee at Nyons' Institut du Monde de l'Olivier (Institute of the World of the Olive Tree). If the oil passes muster, it receives the AOC designation and is sold as Huile d'Olive de Nyons.

Niçoise olives are France's best known, but Nyons olives are generally considered to be the country's best for eating. Dry cured, then aged in brine, Nyons olives are bigger, plumper and more aromatic than Niçoise.

The town of Nyons celebrates the olive all year round. There is a feast of new olives in December, a feast of new oil in February and a festival – the Olivades – in July.

At its Institut du Monde de l'Olivier (Institute of the World of the Olive Tree), you can take part in olive oil tasting seminars that are open to the public. Next door, there is a small Musée de l'Olivier (Museum of the Olive Tree) that explores thousands of years of olive history.