



ingredients

Oliviera: the pick of the crop

Each time I walk past Nadim Beyrouti's corner shop in the Old Town, he beckons me in to try something new. If I happen to be with my three-year-old son Samuel, he sits him down too with a bowl of olive oil and slices of baguette for dipping. Last time we sampled oil made with pure Bouteillan, a Provençal olive more commonly used in blends.



"This year's crop tastes like an unripe fruit," Nadim said, the usual playful gleam in his eye. "Can you guess which one?"

Sure enough, the Bouteillan tasted subtly of green banana, a flavor that Nadim says Canadians always recognize (which might say something about the bananas sold in Canada).

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"I want to thank you SO much for the lovely cookery course. It was so enjoyable while at the same time being highly informative. I shall never be able to return to my slovenly ways....from now on it is nothing but the very best of ingredients AND replacing 'the knife' with a proper assortment of sharp ones! You have really whetted my appetite and I will be keeping an eye on your website with the view to returning to your kitchen in the near future."
Sighle Bhreathnach-Lynch, Dublin

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There is no shortage of olive oil to be found in Nice, but I've learned more about this essential Mediterranean ingredient at Nadim's shop Oliviera than anywhere else. With an enthusiasm that could more accurately be described as fervour, he seeks out the most dedicated producers in Provence and buys as much as he can of the current season's crop for his little boutique-restaurant.

"When it's gone, it's gone, and I have to wait until the next season and taste it again," he says. "I'd rather sell no oil than old oil."

Two years ago, when I first met Nadim, he stocked oils from all over the Mediterranean (he is Palestinian and worked in marketing before opening this boutique). Now he only stocks French Appellation d'Origine Controlee (AOC) oils, a label that guarantees the origin of the olives and the procedures used to make the oils. Because France's production is tiny compared to Spain's or Italy's, most of the dozen or so oils sold in his shop would be nearly impossible to find elsewhere.



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To complement his oils, Nadim serves a small, regularly changing selection of hot and cold dishes in the restaurant. He is modest about the food, saying its purpose is to showcase the oils, but I adore the dishes he turns out with his one gas burner and salamander (an intensely hot broiler used in professional kitchens). Recently, he whipped up a three-course seasonal meal for a group of 15 Norwegians that I brought to Oliviera for an olive oil tasting and lunch. The ingredients, such as multicolored tomatoes in summer and local goat cheese, come from small producers he has found in the arriere pays (the hills behind Nice) as he seeks out his oils.

The dish that never fails to surprise is the tiramisu served with a drizzling of Tanche olive oil on the side. "Try it with the oil and without, and tell me which you like better," says Nadim. Strange as it sounds, the Tanche brings a whole new dimension to this often-abused Italian dessert.

One day, while I was having lunch at Oliviera, two British tourists popped their heads through the door. "Do you have anything in a pretty bottle?" they asked.

"Sorry. I don't do pretty bottles," replied Nadim, and off they went, following



Sorry, I don't do pretty bottles," replied Nadim, and on they went, following the tinned sounds of cicadas emanating from the more touristy shops.

Nadim turned to me. "I can do nothing for people who care more about the packaging than what's inside. For me, this shop is a protest against the inauthentic."

A perfect example is the Nicois olive, the little black olive found on the onion tart known as pissaladiere and sprinkled on salade nicoise. "Most of what is sold under the name Nicois olive doesn't even come from Nice," Nadim told me. At Olivier, the AOC olives come in shades of green, violet and black, just as they should, and their flavour is never masked with herbs or garlic.

Nadim is the kind of idealist I can relate to, and that's why I decided to create a new program with him: a market tour and food walk through the Old Town of Nice, followed by an olive oil tasting and lunch at Olivier.

Eggplant Olivier

Serves 6

Nadim's Niçois take on the classic Middle Eastern eggplant dip tastes best when made with his Bouteillan oil. It's one of the most popular starters at Olivier, where he serves it with strips of grilled red pepper and a generous amount of oil.

5 small eggplants, as fresh as possible
 4 oz fresh goat cheese (100 g)
 1/2 cup Greek-style yogurt (120 g)
 Garlic, to taste
 Lemon, to taste
 Fleur de sel (the finest French sea salt), to taste
 Bouteillan olive oil or your favorite olive oil

Grill the whole eggplants under the broiler (ideally on a barbecue) until they feel soft to the touch. Peel them and dice them finely using two knives, then place in a bowl.

Add the cheese, yogurt, crushed garlic, lemon and salt and mix well.

Serve with grilled red pepper, and above all don't forget the generous drizzling of olive oil.

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