

Selling Oil to the Arabs?



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My younger brother is what you would call a super salesman; he could easily sell ice to the Eskimos and even sand to the Egyptians. However he would not be the first to sell oil to the Arabs as this has already been achieved. The oil in question is not for fuelling the sheiks' gold-plated stretch limos or numerous Rolls Royce or Bentleys. I'm talking cooking oil. Not just any old cooking oil; this is something special: an extra virgin olive oil named after a castle in Spain, the 16th century Castillo de Canena, in the province of Jaén. This is from where the Vañó family supplies the seven-star Burj Al-Araba hotel in Dubai with its award-winning extra virgin olive oil.



Since 1780 the Vañó family of La Loma have been producing a virgin extra olive oil acclaimed by many to be Spain's answer to French champagne. Not to be sipped from a crystal flute, this nectar of the gods for me is to be chucked with gusto over my daily salad. The Vañó family's oil is produced in the valley of Guadalquivir, which is the world's leading region for the production of extra virgin olive oil.

The source of the Guadalquivir River starts in the Cazorla Mountain range that dominates the skyline of Jaén, a far-flung province of Andalucía, with an area of 13,500 km² that borders the region of Castilla. With a population of around 600,000,

Jaén province is a cornucopia of traditional Spanish sleepy white villages such as Ibros, Canena, Viches, Arquillos, Navas de San Juan, Sabiot and Torreperogil. Then there are the mining towns of such as Linares and the prettily named La Carolina, and then finally Andújar that is the centre of farming and the Provinces industry. Olivares de Jaén (Olive Groves of Jaén) is the title of an often-recited 20th century poem, dedicated to the seemingly endless valleys, hills and fields planted with olive trees which were first brought to Spain by the Romans. The register of Úbeda that dates back to 1780 cites the first documentation of the Vañó great-great-grandfather's name and his association with olive oil in the Conde de Guadiana region.

The extra virgin oil produced by the Vañó family is Castillo de Canena, and takes its name from their beautiful 16th century home, a castle that overlooks the attractive village of Canena. Built by the Arabs over the ruin of a Roman castrum, it has said that the King of the Taifa of Toledo took refuge in the castle during a battle for the town. Later the castle was to become a frontier defensive fortress against the Arabs during the 200 years that followed the battle of Navas de Tolosa. Later, in 1538, Francisco de los Cobos, secretary to Emperor Charles V, asked architect Vandelvira to transform the castle into a beautiful example of an Andalusian renaissance castle palace; so much so that the Emperor Charles V is said to have stayed there.

This one time fortress has remained in the hands of the descendants of Cobos, now the Vañó family, who are in their own right the Marquises of Camarasa. The castle was declared a national monument in 1931, and since then has been restored and preserved with the utmost care by the Vañó family.

Three members of the family run the present-day olive oil business. They are the President, Luis Vañó, an economist and lawyer and well-known consultant in the Spanish financial world. Francisco Vañó is the General Manager and a prominent lawyer, and Rosa Vañó, the Commercial and Marketing Manager, is an economist who once worked for the Coca Cola Company in the USA. With a multi-million turnover, they employ 75 people such as managers, land experts, farmers, mill masters, mill quality and process controllers, economists, administration and management personnel and commercial executives, and they all help to oil the wheels that sell the oil to the Arabs.

Jaén, the provincial capital, is set among a range of rugged mountains and olive groves, a dogs' paradise of more than 40 million olive trees, as far as the eyes can see. The present day population in this likeable busy

bustling city is around 115,000. Fernando III, or 'El Santo' as he was called, laid siege to the town in 1246 to remove it from the grasp of the emirate of Granada. Fernando agreed, in exchange for half the emir's annual income, to respect his frontiers. In the 15th century the Catholic Monarchs made Jaén the base to launch the final offensive against the Granada emirate. Centuries of decline were to follow and, after the Reconquista (reconquest), the strife, hunger and discontent caused thousands of Jaennenses to emigrate to other Spanish colonies; hence the name of Jaén in Peru, the Philippines and many other Spanish enclaves.

Old Jaén has a mass of old narrow winding streets huddled around the foot of the Cero de Santa Catalina, a wooded hill crowned by a castle which overlooks the western side of the city. Near the southern end is the monumental cathedral of the city, a huge edifice built in the 16th and 17th centuries on the site of what was Jaén's main mosque. The dominant twin towers on the southwest façade are more Baroque than Renaissance, with a large number of statues styled by Pedro Roldán of Seville. The interior is cavernous - so much so that you could describe it as gloomy - but lifting the mood is a neck breaking cluster of Corinthian columns that give some glamour to the height, and likewise the beautiful ornately carved choir stalls. The Capilla Mayor (Capilla del Santo Rostro) houses the Reliquia del Santo Rostro de Christo, a cloth said to have been used to wipe the face of Christ while he was on the road to Calvary, and this now bares marks that are said to be his image.

Palacio de Villardompardo is a very handsome Renaissance Palace that now houses two museums, and what is claimed to be the largest Islamic bathhouse with wonderful examples of Islamic horseshoe arches and star shaped skylights.

Jaén has several very good museums that would give you an excellent insight into its history. Iglesia de la Magdalena is Jaén's oldest church, originally a mosque with a Gothic main façade and interior, and the tower was originally a minaret but was reworked in the 16th century, now giving it its present day look. Castillo de Santa Catalina to say the least is spectacular, and a must see. It is a former Muslim fortress, perched on a high hill that towers above the city. For a few euros, you can take the 4km circuitous drive from the city centre up to the entrance or, if you are fit, a brisk walk will take about 40 minutes.

North of Jaén is the unremarkable town of Bailén, but just a few kilometres further north is one of Andalucía's finest Muslim castles built on a ridge above the town of Banos de la Encina. Built in 967 by Cordoban Caliph Al-Hakim II the oval castle has 14 walled towers and a large keep which is entered through a double horseshoe arch. It fell to Christian armies in the battle of Las Navas de Tolosa in 1212.

Andújar is a thriving olive-farming town that lies on the banks of the





Guadalquivir River in the north of the province, and boasts several fine monuments including the 12th-century Gothic Church of Santa María with its plateresque (Spanish Renaissance) façade and a Mudéjar (Moorish style) bell tower. Inside is an El Greco painting of Christ in the garden of olives. A Roman bridge with 15 arches spans Andúlar's muddy waters and this is overlooked by the obligatory ruins of a Moorish fortress.

Parque Natural Sierra Mágina's peaks are visible from the Jaén-Granada and Jaén-Baeza roads that cross the A-301 south of Úbeda, and are a rugged swath of mountains topped by the Mágina peak at 2,176 metres, the highest in Jaén province. Another natural wonder is the Parque Natural de Cazorla with complex mountain ranges divided by high plains called navas, deep rivers and lakes, and a host of wildlife such as red and fallow deer, wild boar and Ibex.

Baeza stands on the northern side of the Guadalquivir valley and is packed with stunning examples of Gothic and Renaissance buildings. Once renowned for its bazaars during the Muslim period, later it became one of the first Andalusian towns to fall to the

Christians. The Palacio de Jabalquinto is a magnificent mix of Gothic and Renaissance architecture, built in around the 16th century with a spectacular Isabelline Gothic façade and a Renaissance gallery. You may think that Baeza is one of the most heavily guarded towns in Spain but all the uniformed youngsters that you see on the streets are students from the Academia de Guardias de la Civil situated in the town.

I suppose the town of Úbeda for me in some ways is like an old friend as my wife and I have had for many years a little collection of beautifully glazed dark green pottery from Úbeda. Úbeda is just a 9km drive through olive groves from Baeza and has a heritage of wonderful structures from a bygone age. Plaza Vasquez de Molina, the jewel in the crown, has the finest example of 15th and 16th century Renaissance buildings in Andalusia. A lookout point (mirador) 150m east of the square along Baja de El Salvador gives fantastic views across the olive fields, with the jagged outline of the Cazorla Mountains in the distance. Úbeda was taken from the Muslims in 1234 by Fernando III. In the 14th century a group of local Knights were given the title of Lions of Úbeda after their heroics during the conquest of Algeciras, and in the present day motifs of lions are on many of the buildings.

For many reasons Jaén is a stunning province, an incredible mixture of mountains, landscapes, cities, towns and villages. Andalusian history oozes from every building rock and tree, and to cover it all would take me months of writing. In Jaén aceite de oliva rules and the astringent odour of olive oil hangs in the air. It contains over 40 million trees, many hundreds of years old, which form miniature forests and stud the hills, growing on virtually all of the fertile land available, some 4,500 sq km, a good third of the province. Jaén on average produces 900,000 tonnes of olives, most of which are turned into 200,000 tonnes of olive oil. This makes up one third of Spain's olive oil production, and 10% of olive oil consumed in the world.





Olives are harvested from late November to January. Whilst some growers have invested in new technology and mechanisation, many owners still use the old fashioned method of spreading nets under the trees and beating the branches with sticks and olive pickers earn on average 30 euros a day. Once the olives are harvested they are taken to oil mills to be mashed into a pulp, pressed and filtered. In the past the prime transporters were the mules which were used to carry the presses, but now modern machinery and stainless steel vats have replaced the burros and esparto-grass mats in which the oil was drained.

The premium oil or finest grade is the virgen extra oil. The next best produced is the aceite de oliva virgen, virgen olive oil, and then there is the oliva refinado, or refined olive oil. One can easily surmise that olive oil is the lifeblood of Jaén and plays a major part in the province's economy.

Back in the village of Canena, just 10 km from Úbeda and Baeza at the Castillo De Canena, the Vañó family go about their daily business of producing their very finest extra virgen olive oil. The family say, "We welcome our clients and friends to visit our castle, to share in the experience of the world of olive groves and oils; in the incredible gastronomy of our land and the surrounding beauty of Úbeda and Baeza which both take part in the heritage of humanity and make this area the Spanish Tuscany."

The Guide de Gourmands of France has awarded the Castillo de Canena olive oil a Coq d'Or, while the Nairobi Hilton and numerous famous restaurants in California serve the Vañó family oil.

Just picture the scene back in Dubai. Arabs in flowing robes, dissuaded by their religion to drink alcohol are splashing extra virgen olive oil, Jaén's version of champagne from Castillo de Canena, all over their salads.

