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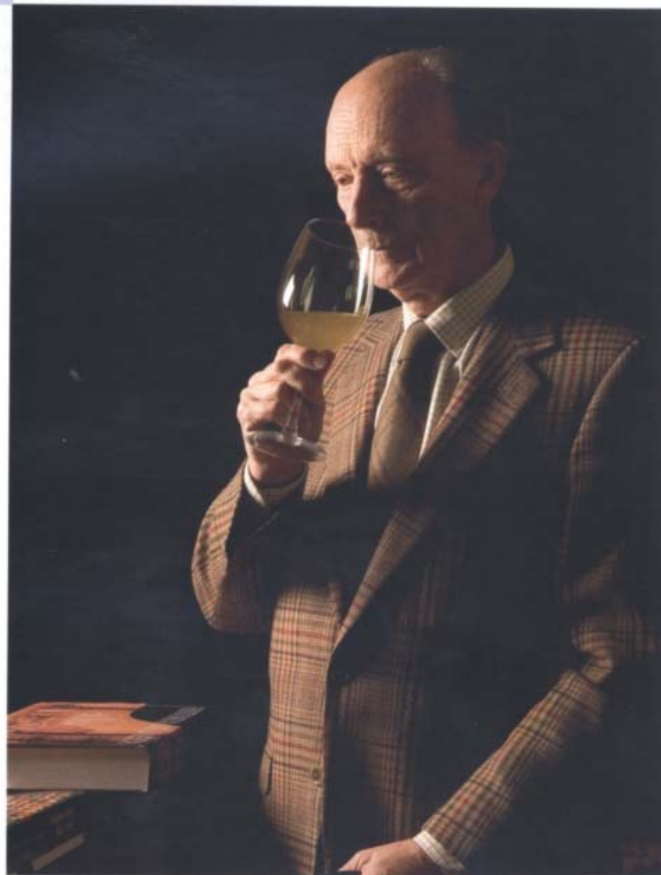
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Family Jewels

CASTILLO DE CANENA

Olive oil company Castillo de Canena is named after the seat in a little town in Jaén (southern Spain) of a family whose connections with the product stretch back as far as 1780. The company controls the entire production process of its extra virgin olive oils, whose fine quality has taken them to over 35 countries all over the world and won the Coq d'Or prize awarded by the *Guide des Gourmands*. Furthermore, this is an environmentally-friendly company committed to sustainable development: its three photovoltaic plants keep it self-sufficient in electricity, and it is also pioneering a scheme to create a torrefaction plant so that pruning remains can be capitalized on.





TEXT

ALMUDENA MUÑOZ/©ICEX

TRANSLATION

HAWYS PRITCHARD/©ICEX

PHOTOS

CASTILLO DE CANENA

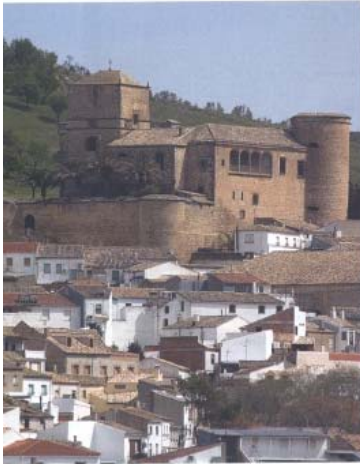
Madrid in the depths of winter. The spacious drawing room with its glowing fireplace is a welcoming sight, and delightfully warm after the bitter cold outside. I'm at Rosa Vaño's house, which serves as Castillo de Canena's HQ in Madrid: from here, she coordinates commercial activities at national and international levels, and organizes the various launches and presentations that the company stages for the extra virgin olive oils it produces in the little town of Canena, in Jaén province (southern Spain). The table has been set for breakfast, and features prominently the trademark cherry red bottles designed by Sara Navarro (a Spanish fashion designer whose work has shared the catwalk with that of John Galiano and Martine Sitbon) for the Primer Día de Cosecha (First Day of Harvest) collection of oils, the third edition of which has just hit the marketplace. Slices of country bread (some toasted, some not) and tomatoes are the next things to catch the eye. Ooh, and there's a homemade sponge cake, completing the still life. I wait to follow Rosa's lead: ignoring the tomato for the moment, we start by tasting just bread and extra virgin Arbequina olive oil. "Note the hints of green apple and artichoke. It starts off elegantly in the mouth and is sweet to the palate, though you'll notice that, gradually, a slight piquancy sets in, and a barely perceptible touch of

bitterness," she says instructively. Meanwhile, she also manages to tell me how her nearly ten years of experience as a marketing manager for The Coca-Cola Company taught her to communicate positive values, identify with the consumer, professional or otherwise, keep a close eye on quality and, above all, made her realize the importance of emotional resonances. Indeed, it was these, fuelled by an existential reassessment triggered by turning 40, that led to her setting up the Castillo de Canena Olive Juice company with her brother, Francisco Vaño. "At 40, you feel mature and resourceful: it's a time to stop and think about what you want to do with the rest of your life. And the idea of going into business together and doing something that revived the old family connection with olives appealed to us. We decided that he would see to the land and the oil mill and I would do the marketing and selling," recalls Rosa. The scheme was not something conjured up out of the blue, but rather

it was underpinned by the notion of honoring the family's olive-growing tradition, which dates back to 1780. "My father, who is an economist and a lawyer, is quite a connoisseur of olives and olive oils, but until five years ago he produced only bulk oil. My brother and I left our respective jobs with multinational companies with the clearly-defined objective of creating a brand that would become a world yardstick for top-of-the-range extra virgin olive oils. It was a tall order, but not an impossible one given that we control the whole quality chain: growing, milling, storing, packing and selling."

Product, innovation and image

We take a break from the company's background story to focus on the next round of toast, over which we drizzle extra virgin Picual olive oil. This time, I have to be on the sensory alert for "...balsamic aromas with hints of peppermint, mint and a touch of citrus, and the nicely balanced bitterness and piquancy making their presence felt in the mouth." As I grapple with the finer points, Rosa explains how excellence in the end product begins with the work carried out in the olive groves: "Our estate, which is right in the heart of the Guadalquivir Valley (which traverses



Andalusia, in southern Spain, from east to west) is irrigated by water from the Guadiana Menor River. Using a drip fertirrigation system sweetens our harvests and keeps things on an even keel, guaranteeing that our product is consistent and its aromas and flavors stable, harvest after harvest. On the basis of an integrated production system, we draw up a template for the harvest in advance, and we monitor the olives constantly and exhaustively so that we can spot when the fruit reaches the optimal degree of ripeness and development. We collect the olives manually or using vibrating equipment and umbrella-like mesh catchers, and we transport them to the mill in under three hours, where they are milled immediately in chilled conditions, thereby guaranteeing that our extra virgin olive oils are fresh, wholesome

and low in acidity." The process continues in the cellar, which is climate-controlled: it is equipped with completely inert stainless steel tanks which ensure that none of the oils' organoleptic properties are lost before bottling. Furthermore, the bottling process includes the addition of a little dose of (completely harmless) nitrogen to each bottle to protect against oxidation.

"At the moment we're looking into using new gases that are less volatile than nitrogen and effective for longer," Rosa informs me. Evidently, the company's commitment to excellence applies to innovative techniques as much as to the product itself. "We export by sea to countries such as Japan, Brazil and Canada, and we're currently doing research into new packaging made out of

materials—unfamiliar to the olive oil sector—that withstand the rigors of sea transport better." Meanwhile, there is a cosmetics project afoot in conjunction with a few laboratories, and an experiment using differentiated growing techniques for different types of olives.

For Rosa Vanós, all roads lead back to marketing: product and innovation must be backed up by image, and that image must be uncluttered and communicate certain messages. The company's extra virgin olive oils certainly illustrate her principles: the Castillo de Canena Reserva Familiar, which comes in Arbequina and Picual varieties, is understated in presentation and features the eponymous family castle on its label. (Built in the 15th century on the site of an old Arab building which itself had stood on the

I N D E T A I L

CASTILLO DE CANENA RESERVA FAMILIAR

This is the first extra virgin olive oil to have taken the Coq d'Or prize awarded by Paul Bocuse's *Guide des Gourmands*.

• **Pical varietal**

Description: The fruits of this variety are large, elongated and pointed. The trees are open in habit with structurally arranged branches, and are a bright silvery color.

Tasting notes: This oil is a lovely, bright golden yellow color with warm green hues. In the nose, it starts off complex and individual, with a wealth of elegant notes: artichoke, eucalyptus, lettuce and traces of peppermint, basil and rosemary. It is nicely harmonious in the mouth, with delicious suggestions of ripe banana, newly-cut grass, and touches of sweet almond at the finish.

• **Arbequina varietal**

Description: The fruits of this variety are small and round. The tree is medium-sized, leafy and dark green in color.

Tasting notes: Within its notably intense flavor and exceptional fruitiness in the nose and mouth, this full-bodied oil is remarkably delicate, well-rounded and complex. Its luscious vegetal aromas are suggestive of lemon peel, lemon verbena, tomato leaf and olives. The flavor develops in the mouth, progressing from a velvety start through to an explosion of green impressions underpinned by an elegant bitterness and a cheeky, piquant finish.

PRIMER DÍA DE COSECHA

Olive oil meets the art world for the third year in a row at Castillo de Canena with a 20,000-bottle run bearing a label by chic jewelry designer, Joaquín Berro. He follows in the footsteps of bullfighter Enrique Ponce and fashion designer Sara Navarro (creator of the distinctive red bottle).

• **Pical varietal**

Harvest: Early November

Tasting notes: This is a bright green oil of medium intensity, green olive fruitiness. It is highly aromatic and quite complex in the nose—balsamic with a hint of peppermint, mint and a zing of citrus. In the mouth it is well structured and long lasting, with a very nice balance between bitterness and piquancy.

• **Arbequina varietal**

Harvest: Late October

Tasting notes: This oil has the smoothly fruity aromas of fresh olives, with slight hints of green apple and artichoke and the slightly piquant nuance that one expects of Arbequina oils from the Jaén region: they contain a high proportion of oleic acid and polyphenols, which make them exceptionally stable. It starts elegantly in the mouth, fluid and sweet on the palate, though with a hint of piquancy and a barely perceptible bitter note gradually making their presence felt.

ACEITES DEL SIGLO XXI

This collection is intended as a group of oils suitable for different uses, each with its own particular added value: a new take on using and appreciating extra virgin olive oil.

• **Royal Temprano**

This oil is obtained from early Royal olives, a variety native to Jaén province. This variety was grown in ever-decreasing quantities from the late 19th-early 20th century on, to the point of almost becoming extinct: there are barely 1,200 ha (2,965 acres) of Royal olive trees there today. The decline can be attributed to the fact that its fruit is difficult to harvest and yields less oil than other varieties, such as Pical.

Description: Royal olives are large, egg-shaped and pointed, and turn purple to black when ripe. The tree is of medium vigor, open in habit with pendulous branches and a dense canopy. It develops a prolific root system and has thicker, tougher leaves than Pical and is better equipped to survive long periods of drought.

Tasting notes: This green, golden-tinged oil is remarkably elegant in the mouth, just slightly bitter and with the slightest prickle of piquancy. It is highly fragrant, with three complex aromas emerging: artichoke, green banana and fresh grass. The fact that it possesses all three of these extra virgin olive oil characteristics endows it with huge personality which lingers on in a long finish.





site of a former Roman *castra*, the castle was declared a National Monument in 1931 and is considered to be one of the finest examples of Andalusian Renaissance architecture). Primer Día de Cosecha oils, again Arbequina and Picual varieties, are more flamboyant in their appeal, the tone having been set by the cherry red bottle designed for their launch by Sara Navarro; Aceites del Siglo XXI (21st-Century Oils), a collection whose

first oil (a Royal Temprano varietal) has just been released onto the market, comes in a black, rounded bottle with white text.

Worldwide market

As she finishes her description of the Castillo de Canena range, Rosa reaches for the sponge cake that has been waiting in the wings during our typical Andalusian breakfast. She

gives me a piece to taste, explaining that it's made with Reserva Familiar extra virgin Picual olive oil instead of butter, spelt flour and brown sugar "...much better for you, and easier to digest." It is light and really delicious. She goes on to point out that our breakfast exemplifies new uses for olive oil, and replicates a technique that the company uses abroad: "It's what we do with foreign chefs when we're opening up new markets. We work with them to find out how our oils can be used to enhance local dishes. No one can put the qualities of our product across as well as we can." And it pays off: in Japan they use Castillo de Canena Reserva Familiar in marinades, mixed with soy sauce, and in seaweed dishes: "Some are very bland and others are too salty: in both cases, extra virgin Arbequina olive oil redresses the balance." In Russia, they use it in the most basic examples of their cuisine: in vegetable (especially cabbage) dishes, and in purées and thick soups, such as beetroot. In the UK, patisserie and dessert chefs have been replacing saturated and polyunsaturated fats with extra virgin olive oil "...especially Picual oil, because it has an extra piquancy." In the US and Norway it is used for marinades, for barbecue foods in the former, and for herring and salmon in the latter, where it makes "a perfect mixture with dill and sugar."

CONCERN FOR THE ENVIRONMENT

Castillo de Canena's policy of environmental awareness is exemplified by its three operational photovoltaic energy plants, capable of generating 300 kW, which make it electrically self-sufficient for fertirrigation of the olive groves. In addition to this sustainable development initiative, the company has an integrated production farming certificate, to rationalize the use of phytosanitary products; maintains vegetal cover throughout the farm, which obviates the indiscriminate use of herbicides, reduces soil erosion and preserves the native herbaceous vegetation; and also uses pruning remains as biomass to be used as a non-pollutant ecological fuel. The company has entered into an agreement with the Geopónica firm to make use of pruning remains, entailing the installation of a torrefaction plant for turning them into ecological fuel in the form of charcoal briquettes.





The same idea is given a different slant for what Rosa calls "Open Days": days when journalists, chefs, buyers and opinion leaders in general are invited in for an oil tasting, followed by a drinks and snacks party at which the food (cheeses marinated in oil, chicken wings sautéed in Picual olive oil, Arbequina olive oil soufflés...) showcases the company's extra virgin olive oils. They have staged these in places as far-flung as Hong Kong, Dubai, Japan, the United States, Mexico, France and the United Kingdom. "The most recent one was the event we held in London at the end of last year, at Ibérica (the Spanish food and wine center on Great Portland Street). It got a lot of coverage, including a report in *The Times*."

A room at the company's productive HQ, the actual Castillo de Canena, has been fitted out with public relations events in mind. I was shown around it some months ago by Francisco: a large space located in the lower reaches of the castle, it is almost certainly a former cool room where foodstuffs were stored. The fact that the temperature remains stable all year round makes it perfect for tastings and meetings, added interest and atmosphere being provided by a little collection of olive oils from around the world and the press reports about the company throughout its history that line the walls.

All told, it comes as no surprise to learn that Castillo de Canena extra virgin olive oils have a presence in over 35 countries: upmarket food shops such as Fortnum & Mason (suppliers to the British Royal Family) stock them in the UK, while John Williams, Chairman of the Academy of Culinary Arts and chef at the London Ritz, uses them prominently in his cooking; in the US they are sold at Whole Foods Market, Williams-Sonoma (the leading chain of gourmet food shops) and the New York restaurant Daniel; Joel Robuchon's restaurant L'Atelier in Paris; at the Palacio de Hierro department stores in Mexico; in Russia at the Globos Gourmet chain; and at the 7-star Burj Al Arab hotel in Dubai.

Rosa is also keen to mention: "Our extra virgin olive oil has been selected by Harrods to be sold as 'Made by the Vañó Family for Harrods'." The UK is, in fact, Castillo de Canena's most important market, with sales in 2008 totaling 110,000 euros. Future plans include bringing out a range of "signature" oils and promoting "monovarietals" made from Andalusian varieties Hojiblanca, Arbequina, Manzanilla Sevillana and Pico Limón, which will join Royal in the Aceites del Siglo XXI collection. Rosa, recently voted Businesswoman of the Year for 2008 by Fedepe (the Spanish Federation of Managerial, Executive, Professional and Business

Women) views all these changes philosophically: "The important thing is what we are, not what we aren't. We must stay true to the essentials."

Almudena Muyo spent twelve years as a journalist specializing in international trade before taking up her current position as editorial coordinator of Spain Gourmetour.

CASTILLO DE CANENA

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Date of foundation: 2003

Activity: growing, milling, storing, packaging and selling extra virgin olive oil

Workforce: 75 employees

Turnover: 900,000 euros

Export quota: 50%

Main export markets: France, Japan, Russia, UK, US

Head office

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