

FEAST

Liquid Gold

Tunisia is the world's third-largest olive oil exporter, but a history of selling in bulk has favored quantity over quality. Today, a group of artisan producers is pressing for change.

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This page, from top: Sarah Ben Romdane's family owns five olive estates; the women farmworkers, such as Zohra (above), traditionally sing and dance during the harvest.

Opposite page: Olives are harvested by hand, using ladders to reach the highest branches.

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AT THE BEGINNING of November, as olives begin their transformation from green to purple, Sarah Ben Romdane's team of nearly 50 women farmworkers sets off. Under a golden sky in Bou Thadi, Tunisia, they split into groups and work tree by tree, which are spaced at least 50 feet apart—the same distance the Romans first planted their olive trees centuries ago. They loosen the olives from each branch using small hand rakes, allowing them to drop gently onto large nets spread out on the ground.

The women sing one of several century-old songs while they work. "I have a garden of black olives, beautiful ladies come to harvest it," the lyrics go. The singing slows as they collect the olives and bring them to the mill for cold-pressing to lock in quality and flavor.

"Most people assume the world's olive oil comes from Italy, Spain, or Greece, and that's it. They have no idea that Tunisia is the world's third-largest exporter and the first outside of the E.U.," says Ben Romdane, a 29-year-old entrepreneur who splits her time between Paris and the coastal Tunisian town of Mahdia, about 60 miles northeast of Bou Thadi. "In fact, they really don't know much about Tunisia at all."

Imagine you're scanning the shelves in your local market for a new bottle of olive oil. The labels might lead you to believe the oil is 100 percent Italian, but inspect the fine print and a fuller picture emerges: Pressed in Italy, Produced Outside of the European Union. And that's if the bottles specify that distinction at all.

Ben Romdane, who distributes Kaïa, her own brand of organic extra virgin olive oil—made from heirloom olives handpicked on her family's fifth-generation estate—is part of a growing movement to champion premium, artisanally made Tunisian oils. With one foot in Tunisia and the other in Europe, Ben Romdane has become a de facto ambassador for this evolution.



“I want to show that small producers can build an alternative system that values the quality of the olives and respects the people who work with us and protect our land,” Ben Romdane says.



Above: A worker removes leaves from freshly picked olives.

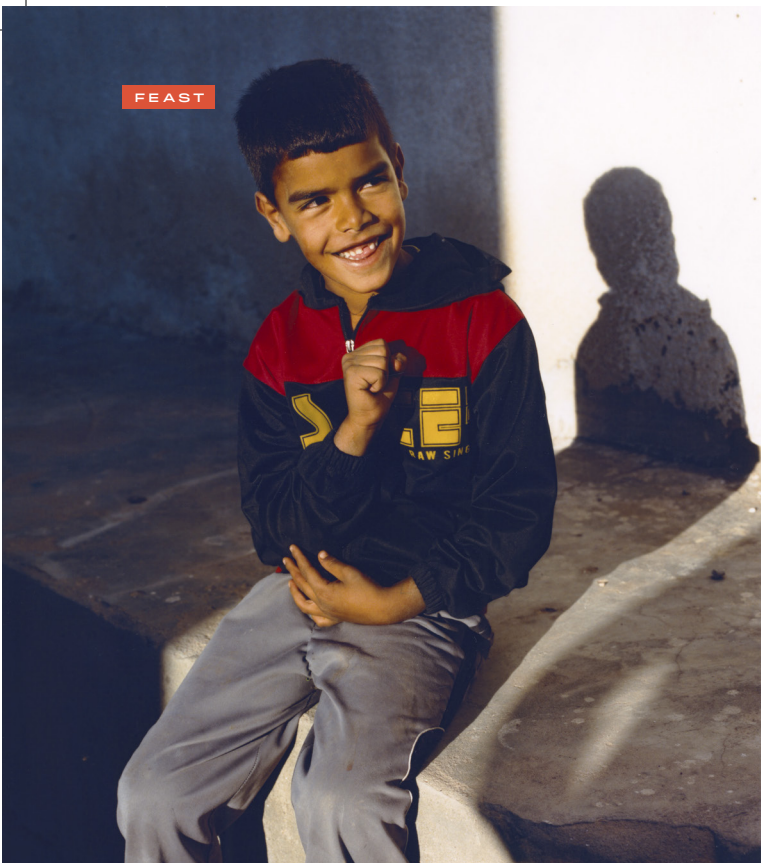
Right: Workers take crates of olives to the mill for cold-pressing on the same day they're picked.

Countries in North Africa have grown olive trees and produced olive products for millennia. Researchers found that the Phoenicians began cultivating the olive tree and spreading it across the Mediterranean through trade around the 10th century B.C.E., producing oil in Tunisia shortly thereafter. The country's sun-drenched, semi-arid land made for optimal conditions to grow olive trees, enabling the development of a global business. As a result, olive groves cover about one-third of Tunisia's landmass, and olive oil represents nearly half its agricultural exports.

Like wine merchants who buy grapes or finished wines from other producers and bottle them under their own name, the global olive oil business has traded heavily in bulk olives, relying on low-cost production in countries such as Tunisia. “Quality wasn't emphasized for a long time,” explains Sonda Laroussi, an engineer, olive oil consultant, and professional taster based in Sfax, Tunisia. “It takes better machinery and skills to push and market a high-quality product with more aromatic complexity, all of which comes at a cost. If margins remain thin, the thinking is: Why bother?”

And yet, there is great character among Tunisian olives. The two most dominant varieties used for oil are Chetoui and Chemlali, which both contain high levels of antioxidant-rich polyphenols and yield distinctive flavor profiles. Chemlali, the heirloom variety that grows on Ben Romdane's family estate, accounts for 70 percent of olives grown in the country, producing an oil





Top: A family affair: Naïm, the son of a farmworker, takes in the harvest.

Bottom: A finished tin of Kaïa olive oil, low in acidity and complex in flavor.

Right: Sarah Ben Romdane (second from right) sits with several of the women she employs.

that is smooth and versatile, low in acidity, and balanced with notes of almond and artichoke, leading to a peppery finish.

Part of Ben Romdane's motivation is to celebrate and promote awareness of the country's rich terroir. Born and raised in Paris to Syrian and Tunisian parents, she spent childhood summers in Mahdia, a short drive from three olive estates that the family can trace back five generations. Her third great-grandfather, Mohamed Romdane, became the first Tunisian to export local olive oil to the United States, where it won prizes. Subsequent generations carried on the business until the 1950s.

Ben Romdane left Paris and joined her parents in Mahdia in the summer of 2020, assuming she'd quickly return to her life as a culture journalist. Instead, she reconnected with her roots during a time of global turmoil and unlocked a new life perspective. With her family's blessing, she purchased olives from the estate in November 2020 and prepared to bottle and market the oil globally as Kaïa, a Product of Tunisia.

Her second batch drew the attention of specialty shops, such as La Grande Épicerie in Paris and Sabah in New York City. "We look for the trifecta: incredible product, beautiful packaging, and a backstory that will resonate," says Clémence Le Tannou, the buyer for La Grande Épicerie who added the brand, the first of the company's Tunisian olive oils, to its shelves. "Kaïa had it all, plus a character unlike the other oils we carry. And because Sarah was able to be in-store to lead tastings, our regulars instantly latched on."

In creating a direct supply chain where she oversees every stage of the process and offers higher compensation for workers, Ben Romdane hopes heirloom agriculture can serve as a form of cultural and political resistance: "The current trade system is part of a cycle that hurts the perception of 'Made in Tunisia.' I want to show that small producers can build an alternative system that values the quality of

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Many of Tunisia's culinary activities are found in and around Tunis, the country's capital and largest city. SaharanSky runs night food tours in Tunis (*starting at \$90 per person*) and excursions to nearby wine estates (*starting at \$125 per person*). The Four Seasons in Tunis, located along the beachfront in the Gammarth neighborhood, offers a palatial stay with contemporary touches.

For a visit that spans the country—including ancient ruins, *ksours* (fortified villages), Saharan salt flats, Amazigh (Berber) subterranean dwellings made famous by *Star Wars* films, Tunis's medina, and more—consider the 12-day cultural tour with Wild Frontiers (*starting at \$3,784 per person*). It includes stays at elegant blue-accented whitewashed hotels such as Dar Saïd and glamping in the desert town of Douz.

Oleotourism (olive oil tourism) is on the rise, too. Some olive oil producers, such as the Domaine de Segermès, open their doors to visitors. And travel company Engaging Cultures runs bespoke Taste Tunisia tours, which incorporate olive harvesting, olive oil tastings, and cooking lessons into its 10-day experience (*starting at \$2,499 per person*).

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This vision isn’t Ben Romdane’s alone. Other Tunisian olive oil producers, including Slim Fendri of Domaine Fendri and Afet and Sélîma Ben Hamouda, sisters who joined their family farm in 2015 to launch A&S extra virgin olive oil in 2017, have earned top honors at NYIOOC, the prestigious world olive oil competition. The positive impact of such attention can be felt swiftly, Afet says. “We all face strong competition from European producers

with stronger infrastructure. But contests bring visibility, and consumers take notice.” Spreading the good word about Tunisian olive oil beyond the competitions, she says, is a matter of time.

The country’s ambitions have a shorter runway. In 2020, Tunisia exported 27,000 metric tons of bottled olive oil. The goal, according to the president of the Tunisian Chamber of Olive Oil Exporters, Chihab Ben Slama, is to export 70,000 metric tons by 2025.

With only 5.5 metric tons produced from her 2021 harvest, Ben Romdane remains a relatively small player. But her commitment is clear. “A nation is strong when it is aware of its culture and shines,” she says. “This is my way of restoring that for our people.” 