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# Become an Olive Oil Tourist on Spain's Dreamy Southern Coast

Where to eat, stay, and taste in Andalusia, which offers the world's greatest abundance of olives.

By [Alyssa Schwartz](#) | Updated February 13, 2020



PHOTO: COURTESY OF LA ORGANIC

If there's any debate that Andalusia is the best destination in the world for olive oil lovers, it can be resolved within minutes of taking a seat at Alacena de las Monjas in Grenada.

It's not the vaulted, underground dining room, which dates back to the 15th century, that'll move you. Rather, it's the three plates the server sets down on the table and proceeds to fill with prized oil. Each is slightly different on the eye, nose, and tongue: one golden and mild, another greener and fruit-forward, the third all pepper and spice.

The best part is that there's no shame in using all the bread to taste each one (and then taste them again, and again for comparison's sake; refills are a given). Unlike in Italy, where using your bread to soak up olive oil is cringey tourist behavior akin to ordering a cappuccino after noon, in Southern Spain, dunking isn't a culinary faux pas—it's strongly encouraged.

While it might not be the first place that comes to mind when you think of olive oil, Andalusia, Spain's southernmost region (it stretches from Portugal in the west to Murcia in the east, encompassing several provinces including Malaga, Cordoba, and Grenada), offers both the world's greatest abundance of olives—both in quantity and variety—and also some of the most unique opportunities anywhere to try the fruit and its precious emollient. Last year Spain racked up 113 awards, including four Best in Class, at the NYIOOC World Olive Oil Competition.

“When we talk about olive oil, I like to talk about the olives because they are very different here. There are many, many different kinds, and each has different characteristics,” said chef Paco Roncero, whose forthcoming “O” by Paco Roncero restaurant in Marbella, is dedicated to Andalusia's briny bounty (the “o” stands for olivo, of course).





PHOTO: COURTESY OF ANANTARA VILLA PADIERNA PALACE BENAHAIVIS MARBELLA RESORT

About 250 different varieties of olives grow here, including the soft and fruity arbequina, which comes from Catalunya (“I like to use it for desserts,” said Roncero) and picual, which is named for its pointy shape. “This one is very typical in Andalusia,” Roncero said. “It’s very, very strong and complex in body.”



“Although we produce half of the olive oil in the world, Spanish olive oil isn’t very famous abroad,” said Mara Maso, a guide at [LA Organic](#), an experiential olive oil grove and mill created in partnership with the designer Philippe Starck. “We wondered why this is. If we produce so much that even the Italian producers buy part of what we grow, what are we doing that people don’t know us?”

The solution, many in the region believe, starts with experiences that offer visitors new ways to taste, touch, and smell olive oil in its many incarnations.

“The owners (of LA Organic) were traveling in Northern Spain and visiting many wineries, and thought they could do the same in Andalusia,” said Maso. “And so they bought this farm and decided to do the same thing as they had experienced with wines, only for olive oil.”



Whether your olive oil knowledge is confined simply to how good it tastes poured over bread and pasta or used in baking, or you've seen the pressing process in action elsewhere, Andalusia will take your love to the next level. Here are three can't-miss olive oil experiences in the region.

## **Next-level tastings**

Having mastered the wizardry of molecular gastronomy under Ferran Adrià, Roncero has focused his tasty science on olives. At a dedicated lab, Roncero, whose Madrid restaurant La Terraza del Casino has earned two Michelin stars, experiments with creative ways of showing off the fruit. His unusual concoctions will appear on the menu at his new restaurant O, which opens this season at Anantara Villa Padierna in Marbella.

Take, for example, Roncero's "cata" (tasting) of bon bons that look just like different types of olives, but are made of a chocolate-like shell of olive oil and cocoa butter. Inside there's a liquid solution of equal parts olive oil and olive juice, which Roncero emulsifies, freezes to insert into the candy's center, and then allows to re-melt. "Take care with the (pits)," Roncero cautioned—but the joke's on the eater. At the center of each candy is a pure hit of the olive's truest essence. Other dishes include lobster olive oil soup and olive oil-orange sorbet.



## **Art meets olive oil**

Better known as a legend in the design world than the culinary one, Philippe Starck lends his dramatic eye and esthetic to olive oil production at LA Organic. An olive oil farm meets contemporary outdoor art gallery located on the outskirts of Ronda—a village perched spectacularly on the edge of the 400-foot-deep El Tajo gorge—LA Organic offers a playful, highly visual interpretation of how olive oil evolves from grove to bottle.

You'll know this isn't a standard olive oil experience the second you pull into the red-dirt parking lot, surrounded by pale stone walls and massive framed photographs, mostly of whimsically-shot olive trees draped with humans. The first stop is the barn, painted with the same juicy olive as appears on LA Organic's packaging, for which Starck won a design award, for an introductory video.



PHOTO: COURTESY OF LA ORGANIC

Next, visitors walk through groves full of hundred-year-old olive trees—there are seven different varieties used for production and a learning grove with another dozen or so, to demonstrate the most common types of olives grown across Spain—and mixed-media works of art dedicated both to olive oil production and Andalusia. Back in the tasting room, visitors are shown to warm small cups of olive oil with their hands to release its flavors and aromas. There’s also an on-site restaurant, and plans in the works to open an art gallery and inn within the next couple of years.



## Olive oil—any way you can

With so much olive oil to spare, there's nothing that doesn't take on a special sheen in Andalusia. From the breakfast buffet—at Anantara Villa Padierna guests can choose from four different types of olive oils to drizzle over their pan con tomate—to uber-light, golden tempura at the local outpost of Madrid's trendy 99 Sushi, and even on the massage table, the olive oil flows freely.

Don't fly home without loading up on bags of San Nicasio potato chips. Endorsed by José Andres, who sells his own cobrand of the chips stateside, they're slow-cooked at low heat at a small factory in Priego de Cordoba using 100% Andalusian olive oil, and they taste like the platonic ideal of potato chips. Winner of 11 consecutive Monde Selection Gold Awards, they're rare and expensive in the U.S., but widely available in Spain at gourmet food shops and in luxury hotel minibars. Carry-on friendly and with no risk of spills, they're the ultimate olive-oil soaked souvenir—some might say, they alone are worth the trip.