

CONSUMED

WITH JANE BLACK & LIZ DUNN

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Nearly 20 years ago, I was lucky enough to [interview](#) the great wine importer, thinker, and all around mensch [Terry Theise](#). His knowledge of wine was exhaustive, but he was utterly unpretentious. He also had a way with words that appealed to a writer like me. Though Terry had access to rare bottles, he told me was often pleased to drink “happy dog” wines, the kind that “love you, and you love them back.” Terry also unapologetically liked what he liked. “Old World wines ask you to dance *with* them,” he wrote in his first book, *Reading Between the Wines*. “New World wines push you prone onto a chair and give you a lap dance, no touching.” You can see why I was impressed.

As the new crop of olive oils hit shelves this month, I’ve been thinking about something that Terry told me all those years ago — not about olive oil, but about Champagne. Terry was a fan of what are called “growers’ Champagnes,” the small producers who make and bottle their own sparkling wine rather than selling their grapes to the big Champagne houses — Moët & Chandon, Veuve Clicquot, Perrier Jouët — who then blend them and market their prestige bottles at top dollar. At least some of what you were paying for, Terry explained, was the fancy bottle, the box, and all that marketing



In the era of Instagram, this feels increasingly true of olive oil. Over the last several years, new California brands such as [Brightland](#) and [Wonder Valley](#) have built big followings on social media, and earned themselves plenty of ink. Like a French Champagne house, these brands buy bulk oils from small producers, blend them, and package the blends in sexy bottles. The aesthetic is a bold logo and a matte finish for the bottle, something that might look good sitting next to candles or fancy bitters in a gift shop.

There is nothing *wrong* with these brands per se. They've gotten some good reviews — I myself gave [high marks](#) to Brightland's new harvest

olio nuovo in a 2019 piece for *The Wall Street Journal*. And they do make a pretty host gift.

But the truth is that you are paying a serious premium for the [pretty packaging](#), [buzzy collabs](#), and social media marketing of an “Instagram oil,” rather than what’s actually inside the bottle. Why not pay less — and directly support California olive oil producers?

Before making this case, we conducted a test. To keep things simple, we decided to focus only on California olive oils. There are (truly adorable) Instagram olive oils from [Greece](#) and [Spain](#), too, but trying to compare zillions of oils from multiple countries was overwhelming and, with tariffs looming, it made sense to stick to U.S. oils.

To start, I purchased Brightland and Wonder Valley’s available olive oils (harvested in 2023) and gathered a number of bottles sold directly by venerable California farms. They included: [Gold Ridge Organic Farm](#), in Sebastopol; [Olive Truck](#), a moveable olive oil processing facility; [Bondolio](#), an organic farm in Winters; and [Fat Gold](#), which runs a mill in the San Joaquin Valley.

At first, prices appeared comparable. But we soon realized that the chichi bottles were 20 percent smaller, 375 ml rather than the 500 ml standard bottle. This makes a big difference. **Ounce for ounce, the direct-from-producer oils were between 54 and 58 percent less expensive!**

In a blind taste test, the Insta oils generally fared worse as well. Wonder Valley came up dead last, even though it was the most expensive at \$2.99 per ounce. “Bland with a very weird mouthfeel,” said one taster. Brightland’s “Alive,” which costs \$2.91 per ounce, got a middling score from our tasters; every one noted the minimal aroma of the oil. While one taster liked the peppery burn on the finish, another called it, “buttery but a bit flat.”

Meanwhile, most producer oils we tried — by no means a complete sample of California olive oils — cost between \$1.89 and \$1.95 an ounce per 500 ml bottle. There was one exception, Bondolio, the price of which was on par with the Instagram bottles. All the producer bottles got high marks, but our top two picks in a blind test both happened to be organic. The Goldridge Organic Farms Tuscan Blend was “rich and balanced”; the Bondolio was “strong, peppery, and bold” — not surprising when we discovered the owners’ admiration for Sicilian olive oil.

Buying olive oil directly from producers has another benefit, too: It’s more profitable for producers. In general, producers told me, wholesale prices are between 30 percent and 50 percent lower than retail. That gap can make all the difference for a small business in a tough year.

Interestingly, the producers I talked to were loath to dismiss the Instagram brands. A rising tide lifts all boats, and all that. This *may* be because some of them sell bulk oil to the Instagram brands, though no one was willing to say. (In an emailed response, a Brightland representative said: “While we don’t publicly share the specific farm names, I can assure you that we partner with trusted, family-run farms that focus on sustainable and high-quality farming practices.”)

Still, it's awfully rare that the tastier, more transparent food product is also the less expensive one. So this is a path worth taking. And now is the time. I reached out to Terry Theise as I was working on this story, only to learn that in the decades since I learned about growers Champagnes, lots of other people have too. In fact, they have become so chic, so in-demand, that prices have skyrocketed. Suddenly, those big, prestige brands are a decent value. Get the best California olive oils, at a bargain-ish price, while you can.

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Four California Olive Oils to Try (in alphabetical order)

Bondolio Sicilian-style organic oil with a bold, peppery flavor. Adds sparkle to the simplest dishes. Drizzle over hummus, fresh ricotta, or grilled vegetables. 500 ml bottle, \$50

Fat Gold, This *almost* looks like an Instagram brand. I love the strong branding and metal tin, which would be great for gifting. Inside is a light, balanced oil that will go with anything. 500 ml tin, \$32

Goldridge Organic, This farm near the Sonoma Coast has a later harvest than other farms. We tasted the fresh nuovo oil — which was rich with a fiery but pleasant hit on the back of the throat. Filtered bottles from the 2024 harvest will be shipped in March. 500 ml bottle, \$32

Olive Truck, A mobile mill, the Olive Truck drives around the state doing on-site milling. We tried the peppery Arbequina oil, but you can also choose Tuscan, Picual, or Frantoio varieties. 500 ml bottle, \$32.90