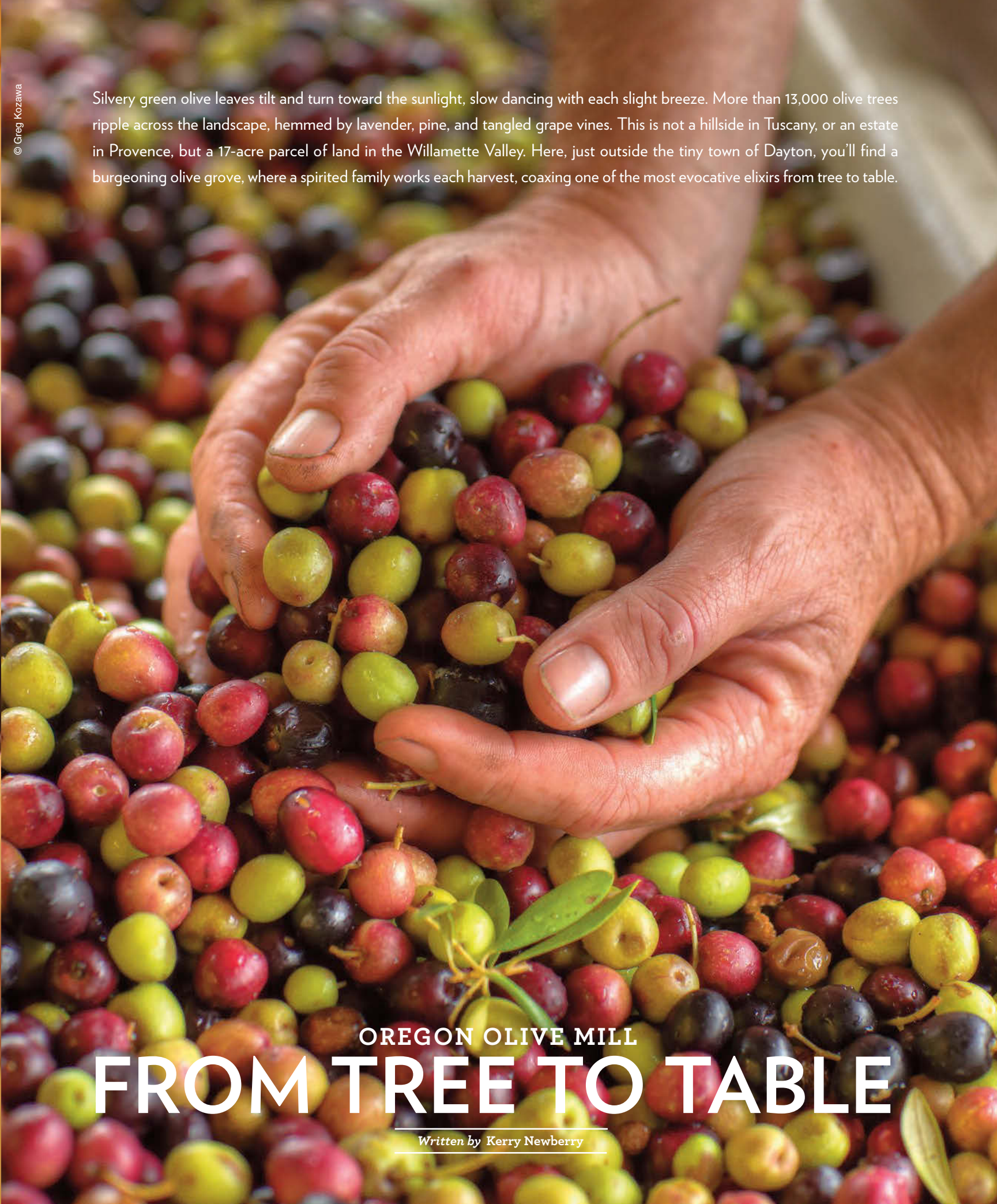




Oregon visionaries Paul and Ken Durant are forging the path to estate-grown and milled Oregon olive oil. Their mission is to directly connect with our dinner plate. The younger Durant adds extra virgin olive oil to almost any dish, but swears by a splash of the Tuscan when making a whole-baked chicken, coating a pan-seared cod with the Koroneiki, and finishing a simple poached egg with the Arbequina.



Silvery green olive leaves tilt and turn toward the sunlight, slow dancing with each slight breeze. More than 13,000 olive trees ripple across the landscape, hemmed by lavender, pine, and tangled grape vines. This is not a hillside in Tuscany, or an estate in Provence, but a 17-acre parcel of land in the Willamette Valley. Here, just outside the tiny town of Dayton, you'll find a burgeoning olive grove, where a spirited family works each harvest, coaxing one of the most evocative elixirs from tree to table.

OREGON OLIVE MILL FROM TREE TO TABLE

Written by Kerry Newberry



© John Valls



THERE IS AN OLD ITALIAN SAYING, “Grow grapes for your children and olives for your grandchildren.” Olive farmer and miller Paul Durant echoes this sentiment as he weaves between rows of ten-year old Arbequina trees, a hardy Spanish variety of *Olea europaea*. He squints into the spring sunlight that his young trees bask in, as he explains that olive trees can take up to 40 years to reach full maturity—one reason for the timeless adage.

Olive trees are rich with lore and legend, in ancient Greece, the tree was considered sacred, and a symbol of life, wisdom and prosperity. When rooted in the right place, they thrive, and live for hundreds—even up to thousands of years. The cultivation of olives trees, and extracting olive oil, dates back over 6,000 years, and is also steeped in mythology. Poet and author Homer deemed olive oil “liquid gold.”

“I’m working with an ancient crop with significant cultural ties—that’s one reason why I love to do this,” says Durant. The historic home of the olive tree is the Mediterranean, but farmers now tend to groves across the globe from North and South America to Australia and New Zealand. Paul and his father, Ken, planted 11,000 olive trees in Oregon in 2005 as a grand experiment. The rain-soaked Willamette Valley is far from a Mediterranean climate. But, why not try?

“My parents are entrepreneurs at heart,” says Durant. They are also pioneers, willing to take risks, and eager to innovate. In 1973, Ken and Penny Durant planted one of the first vineyards in the valley—when the surrounding farmland was a patchwork of wheat fields and orchards. “They started with three acres of pinot noir, chardonnay and riesling grapes,” says Durant. His father was a hobby winemaker, and planned to sell most of the grapes to aspiring winemakers.

At that time, the idea of grape vines in the Willamette Valley prompted older farmers to chuckle. Today, the Durant vineyards stitch through the center of Oregon’s premiere wine region in the famed Dundee Hills. And the three vineyard acres have prospered to over 60 acres, with most fruit still sold to neighboring wine-makers, and a small amount bottled under the Durant label.

“My mom is of Irish descent and land is a great passion of hers,” says Durant. Plus, he quips; neither parent likes to sit still. This led to the debut of their destination plant nursery in 2000, Red Ridge Farms, where they sell aromatic herbs, specialty plants—like olive trees, and artistic outdoor pottery.

With multiple businesses flourishing, the olive oil venture required a dedicated lead. “I’m the humble implementer of my parent’s vision,” says Durant. In 2010, he left his career as a mechanical engineer to return to his family’s 120-acre farm full-time. Tall and lean, sporting farm boots and faded denim, Durant grins when he recalls that decision. “This is where I’ve always wanted to be,” he says. “I grew up in these vineyards,” he says. “It’s such a beautiful place.”

On a clear day, like today, when Durant walks the olive grove, he can spy the snowcapped peak of Mt. Hood gleaming in the distance. Elegant vines etch across nearby hillsides, and newly crafted wooden bee boxes cluster near lavender bushes. (Estate honey is next on the list). More than thirty years later, his daily footprints trace the same path his parents did back in 1973. He’s following their lead, taking a leap of faith in farming—a pursuit that requires patience, persistence and passion for the land.

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Olive harvest begins late autumn, usually just after wine grapes. The olives are often hand-picked at night—the freshness of the fruit translates to the oil. After harvest, the fruit is sorted, cleaned, and then run through the mill—where it’s crushed, pressed, and the oil is separated from the solids. The pure oil is stored in a tank until it’s time for filtering and bottling which occurs early winter. The Italian mill at Oregon Olive Mill has the ability to process over 1,000 lbs of olives per hour, making it the largest commercial operation in the Pacific Northwest. Each year, the Durants host a community milling day, crushing olives for nearby small growers.



© Greg Kozawa

Any new venture is not without challenges, and one that Durant embraces with the curiosity of a scientist, is the agronomy—playing matchmaker with the tree and the climate. The biggest question he’s faced: What cold-hardy olive tree can survive the occasional freezes the farm encounters during the winter? Over the years, the family has run tree trials—and handpicked several varieties for their site, including the Spanish Arbequina and Picual, and several Tuscan cultivars.

Mother Nature, though, is not known for her predictable nature. And neither is the Willamette Valley. Durant crests a slope, reaching a row of Arbequinas similar in age, but vastly different in size. One tree bursts with the signature silvery-green leaves, the adjacent tree is mostly bare and struggling—it did not fare as well this winter. It’s one of many puzzles that Durant must decode. “We have found a path,” he adds, with positivity.

Durant strides past a tractor, ducks under a garland of wisteria and sidesteps into a humid greenhouse, rich with the aroma of earth and herbs and blossoms. “This year, we plan to propagate our own trees,” he says. An idea that struck after a bonsai master (who cultivates bonsai olive trees) visited the mill. “It’s just like when my parents got cuttings from winemaker David Lett over thirty years ago,” says Durant. He carefully plucks and then cradles an olive tree cutting the size of a butterfly in his hand. A mosaic of cuttings in tiny seeding containers quilts two wooden tables. Each slivery sprig a symbol of hope.

In five short years, Durant has fast-tracked in an industry with longstanding traditions. He’s a certified master miller and has taken charge of the entire Oregon Olive Mill production. The compact facility includes the mill and production area, a bottling line, and an oil storage area. This gleaming space was home to the first olive pressing mill in the state of Oregon, and is the only estate olioteca in the Pacific Northwest.

When the family purchased their small Italian olive mill, the manufacturer sent over Duccio Morozzo della Rocca, a master miller, for two seasons. Durant learned about the craft of olive oil blending and state-of-the-art milling techniques from the Italian master. “What was most memorable was learning about the cultural connections to olive oil,” says Durant. One of the rituals the family took to heart from the master miller was the tradition of the Olio Nuovo Festa in Italy, where millers and producers swing open their doors and invite the community to taste the freshly pressed, new olive oils from the harvest.

Olio Nuovo is the freshest extra virgin olive oil you can find—it has a deep green hue, and is full of rich sediment from the milling process, which adds texture and

Like wine, tasting olive oil is a sensory experience. At Oregon Olive Mill you can taste through a “flight” of current releases—ranging from Arbequina (Spanish), Koroneiki (Greek), and a Tuscan Blend. Or you can schedule a mill tour and participate in one of three guided tastings with Libby Clow, Olive Oil Program Ambassador, and a graduate of the University of Gastronomic Sciences in Italy with a specialization in cured meats, wine, cheese and olive oil.



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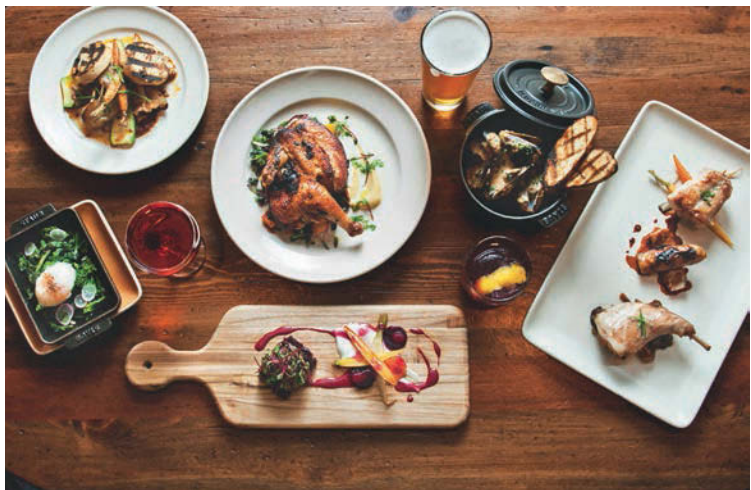
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flavor. On the palate, the oil is peppery and fruity with a burst of freshness. The longevity of oil is fleeting—with a limited shelf-life, it must be used within a few months. Last November, Oregon Olive Mill hosted over 1,500 people during their fifth annual weekend-long festival. In the spirit of tradition, they also provide milling services to other olive growers in the area.

“I love milling, especially when the fruit comes in,” says Durant. “The fruit usually arrives at night, so it’s kind of like Christmas. You have a big truckload of olives, and you never know exactly what you are going to get.” Currently, the Durants harvest olives from their 13,000 trees, and augment their crop with olives brought in from family farmers in Northern California, producing small batches of blended olive oils. In 2015, the family will celebrate their eighth year of making olive oil in Oregon.

Durant is often asked about producing olive oils made with 100% estate fruit. Part of the challenge stems from the young trees growing enough fruit, the other—predicting and prevailing over the whims of Mother Nature. “Realistically, if we have a bad winter, and a crop failure, it would be devastating to have no olive oil to sell,” says Durant.

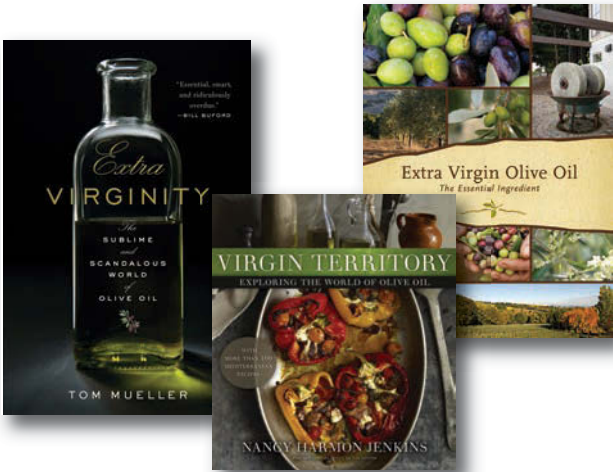
He does make a very limited quantity of estate olive oil, a project requested years ago by chef Vitaly Paley of Paley’s Place and Imperial. “As a longtime supporter of all things local it only makes sense that Paul’s olive oil plays a big part on our menu,” says Paley. “But the real reason is that it is one of the best oils I have ever had,” he adds.

The chef uses the olive oil extensively at both of his restaurants to finish most dishes including all grilled and sautéed items as well as the house made charcuterie. “Personally, I like dipping some crusty bread in it and eating it as is with just a light sprinkling of salt,” he says. The Oregon-made olive oil also graces many wine country restaurants, and unexpectedly, can be savored by the scoop at Salt & Straw, where the extra-virgin Arbequina Olive Oil ice cream was named one of Oprah’s favorite things in 2012.

Just as his parents forged a path in the nascent wine community, Durant aspires to establish an olive oil culture in the Pacific Northwest. That’s why he’s spearheading an annual Pacific Northwest Cool Climate EVOO (Extra Virgin Olive Oil) Conference, where he brings together chefs, olive oil experts, authors, scientists, importers, and growers from across the west coast. This year, the mix included Nancy Harmon Jenkins, author of the recently published *Virgin Territory: Exploring the World of Olive Oil*.

As she spoke about her book and her travels, Harmon said: “Food is a way of telling stories, about what we believe in, and it’s the the quickest route inside another culture. Which is one of the ways that I came to olive oil.” The story of olive oil in Oregon is just now unfolding. It’s a new frontier. And similar to our wine, olive oil evokes a distinct taste of place—whether it’s green and grassy or robust and peppery—we get a sense of the seasons, the sunshine and the rain that is Oregon.

bookshelf | Localvore



Essential Reads

Extra Virginity: The Sublime and Scandalous World of Olive Oil
By Tom Mueller
(W.W. Norton and Company)

The sacred history and profane present of a substance long seen as the essence of health and civilization. For millennia, fresh olive oil has been one of life’s necessities—not just as food but also as medicine, a beauty aid, and a vital element of religious ritual. Today’s researchers are continuing to confirm the remarkable, life-giving properties of true extra virgin olive oil. But what if this symbol of health and purity has become deeply corrupt? Extra Virginity is an explosive story of oil fraud - a story of globalization, deception, and crime in the food industry from ancient times to the present - but it’s also an inspiring account of the artisanal producers, food activists, chemists and chefs who are defending the extraordinary oils that truly deserve the name “extra virgin.”

Extra Virgin Olive Oil: The Essential Ingredient
A lovely booklet of recipes with interviews from notable contributors: Nancy Harmon Jenkins and Vitaly Paley of Paley’s Place and Master Olive Miller Paul Durant.

Virgin Territory: Exploring the World of Olive Oil
By Nancy Harmon Jenkins
Photography Penny De Los Santos
(Houghton Mifflin Harcourt)

An illuminating look at olive oil with 100 recipes from the country’s leading authority on the subject. Olive oil is more popular than ever, thanks to its therapeutic and preventative effects in treating different diseases, as well as the growing variety of brands and imports available. Nancy Harmon Jenkins, arguably the leading authority on olive oil and the healthy Mediterranean diet, presents more than 100 dishes that showcase olive oil, ranging from soups to seafood to sauces to sweets. Along with favorites like tapenade and pesto, you’ll find other exciting dishes like North African Seafood Tagine, Oven-Braised Artichokes with Potatoes and Onions, and Quince and Ginger Olive Oil Cake. But this book isn’t just a collection of hearty and healthful recipes; Jenkins also covers the history and culture of olive oil as well as how to buy it and cook with it. A thing of beauty with the stunning photographs of exquisite dishes as well as Jenkin’s own Tuscan olive tree grove, Virgin Territory captures the delights of making and cooking with olive oil.



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