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CAMBIL JOURNAL

A Spanish Town Withers With the Olive, Its Tree of Life

By **RENWICK McLEAN**

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CAMBIL, [Spain](#) - The anxiety in this town begins to make sense after a short drive up the main road, as the homes and plazas give way to orchards with seemingly endless rows of olive trees.

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Denis Doyle for The New York Times
Olive trees have been heavily pruned in Cambil, Spain, after a record-breaking freeze and a long drought. The trees are now largely barren.

Trees that normally sag with hundreds of pounds of fruit at this time of year are largely barren, holding little more than a handful of olives, many no bigger than peas. Some trees have dried up and shriveled, their brittle leaves breaking in the wind. Others have been cut to stumps to preserve their sap in hopes they will regenerate.

The groves that have sustained this region for centuries and helped turn it into the richest source of olive oil in the world have been decimated by

circumstances that few here thought possible. A record-breaking freeze last winter was followed by a drought that has been described as the worst to hit Spain in 60 years.

The combination has been devastating to this town of 3,000 residents in the mountain ranges of Jaén, a southern province that is slightly larger than [Connecticut](#) and produced about 20 percent of the world's olive oil last year - almost as much as [Italy's](#) entire output. Whether oil producers elsewhere will make up for this year's drop in supply from Jaén is not yet clear, but the effects on towns like Cambil are likely to be profound.

Practically every family in Cambil owns olive trees, two or three hundred on average, residents say. The town, which has the slightly unkempt look of a community more focused on its orchards than itself, has a couple of groceries, a bar or two, a pharmacy and three olive oil factories.

But this year there is little fruit to feed the factories. "This is a catastrophe," said Juan Castro, 77, a retired farmer. "Without olives, we have nothing." He was speaking of Cambil, but he could have been speaking just as easily about dozens of similar towns in the mountains of Jaén.

The gravity of the problem extends far beyond this year's harvest. Since badly damaged groves can take 5 or even 10 years to regain full productivity, it may be a decade

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before the towns recover, if they ever do, agricultural experts say.

"This could be the end of a way of life," said Emilio Torres Velasco, an official at the Jaén branch of the Unión de Pequeños Agricultores y Ganaderos, or Small Farmers and Ranchers Union. "Some of these towns may be completely depopulated if they don't get help."

Life in the mountain orchards of Jaén is worlds away from the mechanized agriculture of the adjacent flatlands. Olives here are still largely collected by hand, with poles and baskets and occasionally mules the only practical way to reach the trees on the steepest slopes. The orchards are generally family-owned, and small - most are under 10 acres. The steep mountainsides have aggravated the effects of both the freeze and the drought, and farmers did not have the money or machinery to protect their trees or help them recover, the way their competitors can on the flat fields below. But in the past, the durability of the olive tree, which can bear fruit for hundreds of years, enabled residents here to scrape by.

Luis Miguel Martínez Martos, 40, a farmer in Jaén who advises the small-farmers union, said that olives are far more than a crop to the people who live here. "Their whole understanding of power and value is based on the olive tree," he said.

The oil is used here to deep fry eggs and to make potato chips, ice cream and even perfume. It is combined with lye to make laundry detergent, and applied to wounds to speed healing. The air here is cleaner, the food healthier and the life spans long, all because of the olive and its magical oil, residents say.

Residents have relied on the trees and fruit for centuries, sometimes in unexpected ways. The trees marked the borders between Muslim and Christian Spain in the Middle Ages. They provided refuge for residents fleeing aerial bombardments in the Spanish Civil War in the 1930's, and food during the hungry decade that followed. "The olive tree is life for us," said Antonia García Espinosa, 73, who was born in Cambil and has never lived anywhere else. During the civil war, Mr. Martínez's great-grandfather took refuge from the bombs inside the concave trunk of one of the oldest trees in the family's orchard, he said, adding, "Many people in Jaén have stories like that."

The trees have thrived so well, so long, that residents have failed to consider other crops or industries, assuming that olives would always be reliable. Now few towns know how to attract new businesses.

"No industry will come here," said Mr. Torres, the official at the farmers union. "There is no infrastructure, no highways."

The only solution, Mr. Torres said, is for politicians in Madrid and Brussels to agree to offer more aid.

Juan José López, 27, a bartender in Cambil, said the town might get through the year with government loans and other aid. But in the time it takes the trees to recover, he said, "people are going to leave."

"There is nothing else here," he said.

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