



This ancient oil brings a new glow to Santa Cruz cuisine

Local olive oils vie for center stage

By Laura Copeland

A handful of olive trees dots the hillsides near DeLaveaga Golf Course, their gnarled branches hinting at an old Santa Cruz courtship with the ancient fruit.

No one knows for certain who brought them here, but most agree the trees came in the mid-1700s with missionaries who never quite struck liquid gold. A new generation of county growers is now trying its luck with the olive. Santa Cruz County is home to two artisan producers, each with groves about 2,000 trees strong, and one of the nation's leading olive tree nurseries.

The challenge of keeping olive trees here isn't the weather — Santa Cruz is of the same coastal Mediterranean climate where the olive was born — but one of economics.

"Olives don't give the quickest return on your investment," said Marguerite Remde, co-owner of Belle Farms in Watsonville.

She and her husband Steve countered this by dividing their 13-acre Peckham Road plot into equal parts wine-grape vineyards and olive groves, a common pairing in Eu-

rope. They sold the grapes the next year to a local winery. The olives they kept an eye on.

Seven acres, mostly traditional Tuscan varieties, were planted at Belle Farms in 1999. The Remdes pruned the groves annually, irrigated with a drip system, and used an organic spray to ward off the olive fly. And they waited.

After the couple had given their only son two siblings, the olives at Belle Farms began to bud. Again, the couple waited, this time to know when to pick.

Green olives yield stingy amounts of a pungent, peppery oil — but they're a necessary balance for the nutty golden oil milled plentifully from a more mature fruit.

Belle Farms' first harvest came in late fall 2003, when the farmers picked and pressed 200 pounds of olives "just for the experience."

"We brought home three gallons of olive oil, which we referred to as our liquid gold, the most expensive three gallons we ever produced," Marguerite Remde said.

The tarps were rolled out in seriousness

the next year, the gloves went on, and the race for a commercial oil began.

The family and a small crew of workers plucked the fruit, and then pooled the tarps into a truck each day, driving two hours against the sunset to a Modesto mill.

Time oxidizes olives. Within 24 hours of picking, they must be crushed, pits included, into a paste, then spun in a centrifuge that separates the oil from the water. That first cold pressing is the extra-virgin olive oil, left to settle for several weeks in a cool, dark bottle.

The Remdes sold all 176 gallons of their first commercial release in 2004.

"Most people are surprised when they find out we're local," said Remde, who sells a 16-ounce bottle of Belle Farms Olive Oil for \$14 and champions the family's handiwork as an excellent drizzle over salads or steamed

(Top) Chris Banthien walks through her Aptos olive groves at Valencia Creek Farms.

Photo: Dan Coyo



A 16-ounce bottle of Belle Farms Olive Oil sells for \$14 and is available at local farmer's markets.

vegetables. Even to astute localvores at the Cabrillo Farmers Market, Remde often has to explain that olives can and do grow locally.

A modest proposal

The Italians say that vineyards are planted for children and olive orchards for grandchildren — they couldn't have guessed the Tuscan trees, old as time, would go to the grandchildren of the Central Coast.

When Bruce Golino brought a few year-old varietals to a neighboring Aptos flower farm in 1997, he helped give Valencia Creek Farms the distinction of being the first local operation since World War II to grow olives expressly for oil production.

Domestic olive oil saw a boom in the 1930s and '40s, and the county had some producers, but just as quickly the interest died out.

"Once we resumed trade with Europe, the imported oils from Italy were back," said Patty Darragh, executive director of the California Olive Oil Council.

Valencia Creek's Chris Banthien planted the gifted olive trees next to fragrant lavender, hydrangeas and flowering oregano, not yet sure what would come of them.

"I'd been looking for tree crop, and I thought it'd be nice if there was something tall," Banthien said.

But she'd lucked out with Golino's delivery. Olive oil was trending as a healthier fat

alternative, and in a time of water shortage, olives were a low-consumptive crop. And unlike other stone fruits that live only 25 to 30 years, olive trees can produce for centuries. There are olive trees in Italy and Greece that

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are more than 1,000 years old.

Four years later, Banthien harvested 20 acres of olives from the rolling hills of her farm and Golino's, pressing the two hauls into a single label: "Le Colline di Santa Cruz," the hills of Santa Cruz.

She and her crew pick some by hand, but mostly they use special rakes, as the dark olives bruise if you shake the trees.

The farm enjoyed a heavy crop last



Photo: Dan Coyro

These small white early summer blossoms of Santa Cruz olive trees will soon contribute to the million gallons of olive oil produced annually in California.

November — 10 days to harvest about 2,000 trees — and expects the same this year.

Formerly the owner of a Laguna Beach catering business, Banthien now weaves her olive oil into handmade chocolate truffles as a side business.

"It's nice to be able to produce something people use in cooking," she said.

Her business partner, Golino, has shifted his focus in recent years from experimenting with olives on the Central Coast — clearly, it works — to shrinking production costs for growers and demystifying the term "extra-virgin" for consumers.

In part because of a campaign Golino spearheaded, the U.S. Department of Agriculture enacted new regulations for olive-oil importers who use the ubiquitous term for impure blends. The gentle-mannered man, a former president of the California Olive Oil



The orchards of Belle Farms are only a portion of the 21,000 acres of olives currently farmed in California.

Council, is among many growers who say consumers buying \$5.99 extra-virgin olive oil have almost certainly been duped into using lower-grade oil.

"The olive oil most people grew up with was like the old coffee we used to drink," he said.

The Santa Cruz Olive Tree Nursery in Watsonville is Golino's wholesale playground, which holds the country's largest collection of varieties. His clients harvest "super high-density" groves with machines used for grapes, bringing in goliaths with names like the Colossus and the Shock Wave Shaker, which quickly eat up olives without the time or expense of hand-picking and laying down tarps. The savings, Golino hopes, will go to consumers' wallets.

Other Californians aim to lower olive-oil costs using dwarf varieties, trees on four-foot instead of 16-foot centers, that start producing fruit in three to four years instead of the usual seven to eight.

"These are huge steps for the California industry," said Fran Gage, who features 75 olive-oil producers in the Golden State in her 2009 book, "The New American Olive Oil."

Skeptics may doubt there are even 75 olive growers in California — well, they're

right. There aren't 75 olive-oil producers in California. There are more than 300, spreading across 21,000 acres, and the California Olive Oil Council reports annual industry growths between 22 and 32 percent.

A million gallons of extra-virgin olive oil is expected from in-state growers this year, tipping the totals past the olive oil produced annually in France.

And with stricter USDA regulations on what imports can call extra-virgin, many suspect the domestic oils will move to center stage. ♣

Where to Buy

Valencia Creek Farms

Valencia Creek Farms' 'Le Colline di Santa Cruz' is sold at the Cabrillo Farmers Market and at many county retail shops, including Shopper's Corner in Santa Cruz, Gayle's Bakery and New Leaf in Capitola, and Deluxe Foods in Aptos.

Belle Farms

Belle Farms extra-virgin olive oil is sold at the Cabrillo Farmers Market and at many county retail shops, including Shopper's Corner, Staff of Life, River Cafe & Cheese Shop, New Leaf Markets and Whole Foods in Santa Cruz, New Leaf Markets in Capitola, Deluxe Foods in Aptos, and New Leaf Markets and Hallcrest Vineyards in Felton.

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How to use

We asked the county's two largest olive oil producers how to use their oils. Here are their suggestions:

Valencia Creek Farms

"My olive oil is very food friendly," says Valencia Creek Farms' Chris Banthien, who grows Tuscan varieties in her Aptos groves.

She recommends using her *Olio delle Colline di Santa Cruz* to dress freshly steamed vegetables with a liberal drizzle of the oil and a few grinds of sea salt. For beet salad, she tosses peeled beets with the oil and sea salt and spritzes a good-quality vinegar over them. She also finds vinaigrettes with dijon mustard, oil and vinegar or lemon juice so delicious.

Belle Farms

Belle Farms owner Marguerite Remde recommends her olive oil for these nutritious and hearty breakfast muffins, adapted from *The Black Dog Summer on the Vineyard Cookbook*, The Black Dog Tavern, Martha's Vineyard, Little, Brown & Co. Publishers.

This recipe highlights fresh, local ingredients, all of which are in season and can be found at local farmers markets, she said.

Whole Wheat Banana Blueberry Muffins with Walnuts

2½ cups whole wheat flour

1½ cups oats

2 tsp baking soda

1/8 tsp salt

¼ tsp nutmeg

1 cup local honey such as Amen Bees

Orange Blossom Honey

1 cup Belle Farms Extra Virgin Olive Oil

6 medium mashed ripe bananas

1 tbsp vanilla extract

1 cup chopped, fresh walnuts

2 cups fresh blueberries, such as Triple

Delight Blueberries

Preheat oven to 350. Line two muffin tins with liners. Mix flour, oats, baking soda, salt and nutmeg in a large bowl. In a separate bowl, combine honey, olive oil, bananas and vanilla. Add the wet ingredients to the flour mixture and mix just until moist. Stir in walnuts. Gently fold in blueberries. Fill each muffin cup ¾ full with batter. Bake for approximately 35-45 minutes or until toothpick comes out clean. Muffins will be golden brown. Makes 18-24 muffins.