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**Growers drill for stricter olive oil industry standards**

Regulations have failed to give official definition of "extra virgin"

10/10/04

By FRANK NELSON

NEWS-PRESS STAFF WRITER



While many businesses moan and groan under the weight of what they regard as over-regulation and the heavy hand of

government, olive growers in Santa Barbara County are crying out for the Department of Agriculture to step in with some new industry standards.

The California Olive Oil Council is enjoying widespread local support for a petition it has filed with the USDA to upgrade industry standards that have survived unchanged since 1948.

Growers are especially concerned that the popular term "extra virgin" lacks any official definition and is therefore open to abuse from importers and unscrupulous U.S. olive oil producers.

According to oil council spokeswoman Amie Rubenstein, the suggested trade standards are now being reviewed by the USDA legal department. They could be published by the end of the month and would then be open for public comment.



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Depending on the level of opposition, if any, the USDA may also convene a series of public hearings.

The council wants growers to submit oil samples for lab testing to establish critical acid levels. Samples would also go to a certified panel of 28 tasters -- for expert sensory evaluation -- before a product could carry the council's official "extra virgin" seal of approval.

This highest grade of oil must contain less than 0.8 percent of oleic acid, a fatty acid found in most vegetable fats, which varies by when the olives are harvested and how quickly they are milled.



The "extra virgin" tag also speaks to the care and handling of the olives and shows the oil has been obtained solely by mechanical or other physical means and without the use of extreme heat or chemicals during the extraction process.

Current grading rules cover four broad categories -- U.S. Fancy, U.S. Choice, U.S. Standard and U.S. Substandard -- and go back more than five decades to a time when they referred primarily to canned olives.

Over the years, olive oil has emerged as a global commodity but one largely ignored by any kind of regulation in this country, said Shawn Addison, a major olive grower and processor in the Santa Ynez Valley.



"The biggest problem is that there's a lot of underhand activity in



the oil world," he said. "For example, it's legal to purchase oil in one country, say Spain, rebottle it and claim it's the product of another country, say Italy."

Mr. Addison said he knows of a few examples of this closer to home -- some imported oils that, though they don't actually claim to be from California, come in such deceptive packaging that consumers would only know the origin after carefully reading the label.

"A lot of European producers are sending lesser oil here and calling it extra virgin," he said, referring to lower grades of olive oil -- for example, from a second pressing or olive oil that has been diluted with other oils, such as canola.

"We're just trying to establish a standard so we're all playing on the same field. Europe can dump garbage oil and is not breaking any laws. The COOC is trying to change that.

"The whole certification process is an effort to get consumers to recognize the seal of approval and realize what it stands for," Mr. Addison said. "Public awareness is 90 percent of the battle."

Mr. Addison and his French wife, Antoinette, have around 4,000 trees on their farm and manage the planting, maintenance, harvest and extraction of about 3,000 more. Last year the couple, who also own an olive orchard in Provence, processed roughly 60 tons of fruit.

From the serenity of his young olive orchard at the foot of Figueroa Mountain, Mr. Addison is increasingly aware that he's part of an industry that is catching fire across California.

"Growing olives and making olive oil is taking off around Santa Barbara County," he said. "The Paso Robles and Arroyo Grande areas are exploding with new orchards. It's become a very popular thing."



Like Mr. Addison, Steve Pepe of Clos Pepe Vineyards near Lompoc is a member of the California Olive Oil Council; he's also among the county's new crop of olive growers and is preparing for the first harvest from 350 trees on about 3 acres.

He estimated there are around 50 growers in the county and hundreds throughout the state where the benign Mediterranean climate, mostly without extremes of hot and cold, enables California to account for between 90 percent and 95 percent of the nation's olives.

Mr. Pepe said cost is one reason some individual or small-scale growers may not join the council and adopt its proposed standards; joining costs \$350, and lab testing could add around another \$150.

That's the case with Caroline Beck. She and husband George McClellan run a small operation in the Santa Ynez Valley, just 673 trees on 7 acres, do everything themselves by hand and still have their oil lab-tested.

"We're not members of COOC, but we're big supporters," said Ms. Beck, who said she feels the council is designed for growers who intend to expand.

"COOC is a great organization, but the ultimate goals are more suited to people who are going beyond the artisan size. We're not growing any bigger," she said.

Ms. Beck is also enthusiastic about the proposed change in monitoring standards. "It's an excellent idea, and it's important for growers in the U.S. and consumers in the U.S. to have a better understanding of what they're buying.

"People want to be sure they're getting a quality product and that they're getting what the label tell them it is."

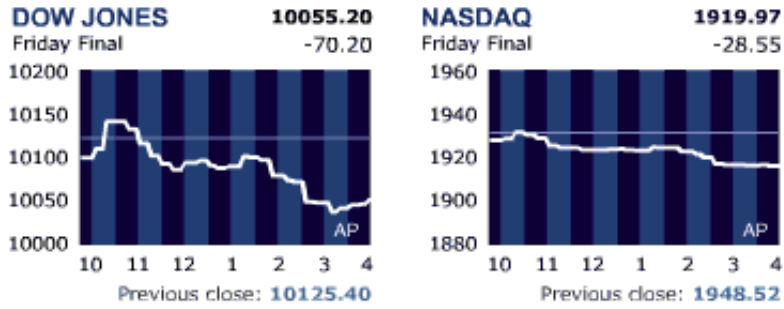
#### **LEN WOOD / NEWS-PRESS**

*Steve Pepe checks on one of the Tuscan-variety olive trees growing at Clos Pepe Vineyards, near Lompoc. Clos Pepe will be harvesting its first crop of olives before the end of this year.*

#### **MIKE ELIASON / NEWS-PRESS**

*At Figueroa Farms in the Santa Ynez Valley, owners Shawn Addison, above, and his wife Antoinette have installed this state-of-the-art olive mill.*

*Santa Ynez Valley olive grower Antoinette Addison puts the finishing touches to bottles of oil.*



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