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Business News

Time's ripe for olive oil

11/13/05

By FRANK NELSON
NEWS-PRESS STAFF WRITER

A bumper crop of local fruit is expected to produce a lucrative gusher



This season's olive harvest is now nearing the halfway point, which means things are humming in high gear at Figueroa Farms, which owner Shawn Addison says is Santa Barbara County's only commercial olive mill.

At the center of the Santa Ynez operation stands the Italian-made Peralisi press -- costing around \$250,000 -- that can wash, crush and extract oil from a ton of olives every hour. It is, says Mr. Addison, the most modern machine of its kind in the United States.

The Peralisi, a high-tech beast boasting 27 separate motors, is so complex that when it arrived three years ago, it came with its own Italian engineer, who spent a week assembling it. It's



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officially described as "a fully automated double-hammer double-grid hammermill with fully-covered malaxers and a centrifugal extractor."



The heavy rains earlier this year that produced a bumper grape harvest in the county also pumped up this season's olive crop. At Figueroa Farms, Mr. Addison expects to process somewhere around 100 tons of olives this year, each ton yielding maybe 25 to 35 gallons of oil.

Olives disappearing down the hopper at the start of milling range from tiny, unripe green ones that yield a sharper, more peppery flavor to fat, ruby-red and almost-black fruit that contain a much more mild and buttery oil.

Most of the olives come from the 4,500 trees, a mixture of mostly Italian and some California varieties, that Mr. Addison and his French wife, Antoinette, planted on their surrounding land just four years ago.



This season, for the first time, they are sourcing about one third of their olives from orchards they lease or manage, while Figueroa Farms also offers private milling, bottling and labelling for certain clients.

That service works well for Steve and Cathy Pepe, two former lawyers from the Los Angeles area for whom olives are a fun sideline at Clos Pepe Vineyards, their 40-acre estate near Lompoc.

They planted about 400 trees on a couple of acres in 1999 and 2000, and on a sunny morning earlier this month, a team of about 20 pickers, including Mr. Pepe, swept through and collected every olive.

Buckets of fruit were poured onto a sorting table, where winemaker and vineyard manager, Wes Hagen, his wife and assistant winemaker, Chanda, her mother, Diane Mikelson, and Ms. Pepe expertly sifted through the crop, weeding out olives affected by fruit flies.

This is the second harvest at Clos Pepe, where the crop

stacked up to a mighty 2,449 pounds and produced about 48 gallons of oil, enough to fill 725 bottles.

Each bottle, with a label featuring Oliver, the family's Italian greyhound, will likely cost around \$20 and will be available to preferred wine customers and on the vineyard's Web site.

In a few years, when their own trees reach maturity, the Addison's expect that their orchard alone could produce more than 100 tons.

With the shake, rattle and roll of the Peralisi chomping through olives in the background, the prospect of all that oil -- perhaps as much as 3,500 gallons annually -- has helped focus their minds on the knotty problem of marketing the stuff.



"It's all about sales now," says Mr. Addison, who knows better than anyone that Figueroa Farms must seriously expand its sales and distribution network if it hopes to sell the tens of thousands of bottles it's soon going to be producing.

Currently, those distinctive 375ml bottles are available in about 150 stores, most of them in California, plus a few restaurants.

The Web site brings in additional customers, and Mr. Addison sees the possibility of bulk sales, though lots of five to 55 gallons eat into potential profits.

"The way the system works, we need to find distributors in other metropolitan areas," says Mr. Addison, who admits that the company's sales network today extends little beyond California and Atlanta.

The couple know they face an uphill battle trying to compete on price with imported oils -- bottles ranging

from about \$9 to \$14, depending on variety, are still roughly twice as much as the equivalent oil from Italy or Spain. However, they have no doubt that their own oil is more than twice as good.

Processed within hours of hand-picking, using only mechanical extraction and no heat or any chemical agents, the finished product has very low levels of fatty acid and can claim the coveted "extra virgin" seal of approval.

The Addison's share an industry-wide frustration with the lack of effective regulation that leaves consumers exposed to imported oils that may be misleadingly labeled, both in terms of the origin and quality.

Some so-called "extra virgin" oil, for example, may have come from a second pressing or be diluted with canola or other oil.

On the plus side, Mr. Addison says domestic production accounts for only 1 to 2 percent of total U. S. consumption, so the industry, which is predominantly based in California, has plenty of room to grow.

Along the way, he expects to see consolidation.

"I think we're going to see a lot of little producers sell to larger producers. There are so many boutique brands, they can't all make it," he said.

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LEN WOOD / NEWS-PRESS PHOTO

Workers at Clos Pepe Vineyards east of Lompoc pick Tuscan olive varieties that are destined to become olive oil. At top, Steve Pepe, the vineyard owner, joined other pickers harvesting more than 2 tons of olives earlier this month.

RAFAEL MALDONADO / NEWS-PRESS PHOTO

Shawn Addison of Figueroa Farms checks a 50-gallon drum of freshly milled, extra virgin olive oil.

A WELL-OILED MACHINE: A LOOK AT OLIVES' JOURNEY FROM TREE TO BOTTLE



Olives are handpicked, then sorted.



Within a few hours, the olives are taken to be milled. They are unloaded into a hopper and travel up a conveyor belt. A blast of air removes leaves and debris before the fruit goes through a washing process.



Olives go through a double hammermill where the fruit and pit are turned into thick paste.





The paste is stirred for 20 to 45 minutes to begin releasing oil.



Next, it is spun in two centrifuges, at 3,600 rpm and 7,700 rpm, to extract the oil.



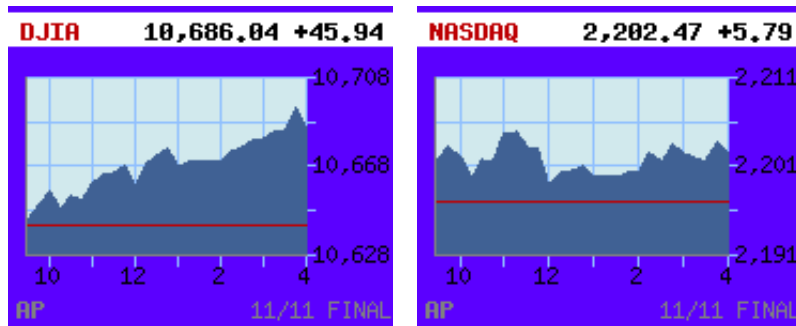
Antionette Addison of Figueroa Farms puts little stickers on bottles of olive oil that won medals at this year's Los Angeles County Fair.





The finished product: Extra virgin olive oil, from olives grown and milled in the Santa Ynez Valley by Figueroa Farms.

RAFAEL MALDONADO / NEWS-PRESS
PHOTOS



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