

FOOD & DRINK

Putting

Olive Oil

on the menu

By Rayne Wolfe
Food & Drink writer

Doctors will tell you that switching from butter or margarine to olive oil is good for your health. We've all read story after story about Mediterranean diets and how they may extend your life. Most would agree that olive oil is good for you, and yet, my switch is still scheduled for the future. Maybe next year?

So how do we go from knowing what's good for us to implementing it in our daily lives?

Listen to the grower

"Extra virgin olive oil specifically contains phenolic compounds, natural antioxidants, that are not found in other oils," said Ann Sievers, who with her husband, Mark owns Il Fiorello Olive Oil Company in Fairfield.

Appreciate the history of "Liquid Gold"

Olive trees have been harvested for food and crushed for oil for 5,000 to 6,000 years. Originating in Crete, Syria and Palestine, the olive tree - *Olea europaea* - is native to the Mediterranean region.

Olives, which are classified as a fruit, were brought from Europe to Mexico by Spanish Jesuits, and subsequently were introduced to California as the missions grew in the late 1700's. Commercial production in the United States began in the 1800's.

Recognize the bounty of California Olives

Did you know that 99% of olives grown in the U.S. are grown in California? About fifty percent of olives are canned as California-style black olives. Those are Manzanillo's, the olives you stuck on your fingers when you were a kid. The rest are pressed into oil. And while there will always be plenty of imported olive oil, the U.S. has been steadily increasing tonnage processed.

"We have 1,600 trees and grow twelve different varieties of olives. We have one of the most advanced olive mills in California, which mills three tons of fruit per hour," said Ann Sievers, who mills olives for about 100 other growers.

Olive production in California has been highly variable over the years, largely due to the alternate-bearing nature of olive trees. The 2012 crop totaled 160,000 tons and was valued at more than \$130 million, according to Agricultural Issues Center at the University of California.

California had 44,000 acres of olive trees in 2012. California olive oil growers plant Italian, Spanish and Greek varieties and utilize high-density plantings. All olives start as green olives. As they ripen, the skin turns purple and then black.

Of course, green olives can be amazing, like Sicilian Castelvetrano's, which are bright green and perfectly round. Their buttery, nutty taste makes them a great party platter choice.

In Solano County, according to the (most recent) 2012 Solano County Crop and Livestock Report, olive production has increased 135% with 124 acres in production.



Ann Sievers

If you go

What: Il Fiorello Olive Oil Company

Where: 2625 Mankas Corner Road, Fairfield Suisun Valley

When: olive oil tastings are daily from 1-to 5 p.m.

Info: <http://ilfiorello.com>

The top growing counties

According to the experts at Lindsay Olives, California's six top olive growing counties and their main varieties are: Tulare County and King's County, which grow Manzanillo and Ascolano; Fresno County, which grows Manzanillo; and Glenn County which grows Manzanillo, Sevillano and Mission, Tehama County, which grows Sevillano, and Butte County, which grows Mission.

All of which means consumers have tons of choices. You can find fresh, locally produced or imported olive oils at markets or you can even visit a local farm and buy small batches including many flavored oils.

The Sievers regularly rack up gold medals for their liquid gold. With a list of gold medal wins as long as your arm, Il Fiorello placed well among recent finalists at the fourth annual Good Food Awards Ceremony for their Frantoio Olive Oil, an Italian variety.

"There are many producers of fine olive oil in Solano County. We have an ideal microclimate for growing olives. Great oil starts with great olives," said Sievers.

As different grape varieties produce different wines, it's the same with olives and olive oil, according to Sievers.

Some varieties are delicate and fruity, others bolder and more robust. The ripeness of the olives when harvested also impacts the flavor.

"Oil made from ripe olives is generally more mild and buttery than green olives, which typically yield a stronger flavored oil. The best advice I have is to find a place to taste a variety of olive oils to discover what you like," said Sievers.

Fettunta recipe

One easy way to start is by "dressing" your French bread. Ann Sievers shares one of her favorite recipes:

FETTUNTA

Ingredients: 1 baguette, sliced 1 garlic clove, cut in half, Il Fiorello's Frantoio extra virgin olive oil, coarse sea salt. Recipe: Grill bread slices on both sides until crisp. While hot, rub each side with the cut garlic clove. Drizzle with olive oil, sprinkle with sea salt. Enjoy immediately!

Food & Drink columnist

Rayne Wolfe covers dining out, wineries, organic farming, foodie events and news, chefs, sinful comfort foods, ethnic festivals and fairs, right down to goof-proof recipes from unusual local experts. Rayne wants to hear all about your favorite restaurants, cafés, and hole-in-the-walls.

Send all your food, drink, farming, festival or related info to her at newsrayne@gmail.com

