

THE PRESS DEMOCRAT

Sebastopol olive oil farm gears up for the busy harvest season

PD pressdemocrat.com/article/lifestyle/sebastopol-olive-oil-farm-gears-up-for-the-busy-harvest-season

November 3, 2021



Olives head up a conveyor to be processed at Gold Ridge Organic Farms in west Sonoma County on Thursday, Oct. 28, 2021. (John Burgess/The Press Democrat)

In Wine Country, the grape harvest ended in October, but another star of the table is waiting in the wings for its golden moment: the Italian, French and Spanish varieties of olives that will be harvested beginning this month, when the small green fruits begin to ripen and turn purple.

At Gold Ridge Organic Farms, founded in 2001 by farmer Brooke Hazen in the western hills above Sebastopol, the coastal fog and sun that slowly ripens the region's chardonnay and pinot noir grapes also create the ideal growing conditions for 88 acres of organically farmed olives, apples, citrus and herbs.

Hazen, who has blanketed 70 acres of the estate with 13,000 olive trees, started building his own olive mill 10 years ago, featuring a state-of-the-art Rapanelli olive press from Italy, so he could have more control over the quality of his olive oil. The mill also helps support the farm by providing milling services for about 150 clients all over California, from the flatlands of the Central Valley to the hillsides of the North Bay.

"Pressing olives is a romantic thing," Hazen said. "With the amount of olives I have, it would be really expensive otherwise. ... And our customers can bring from 50 pounds up to 50 tons to be custom milled."

Like other olive oil producers in the North Bay, Hazen is gearing up for mid-November harvest of his own olive trees, which include Spanish varieties like Arbequina, Picual and Manzanilla as well as French varieties like Picholine and Italian varieties such as Frantoio, Leccino and Minerva.

"I look at when the first killing frosts are coming, generally around Christmas, so I usually start picking in mid-November," he said. "We finish the olive harvest in four weeks, by mid-December."

All the olives are milled on-site within hours of harvest for peak freshness and flavor, including healthy, antioxidant boosting polyphenols concentrated in the bitter flesh of the fruit.

His organic line of olive oils have already won gold and silver awards from the New York International Olive Oil Competition as well as from the California Olive Oil Council, a nonprofit trade group that supports certified extra-virgin olive oil standards.

Hazen credits the climate of Sonoma County for helping nurture the complex flavors in olive oils grown and made here in the cool coastal hills.

"People wonder why olive oils vary so much," he said. "Yes, farming is involved, but climate is the biggest factor. ... The oil here is very robust. The reason is the cool fog we get here in NorCal. The flavors and colors have a longer time to develop nuances and do not get cooked out."

When he first started planting olives back in 2000, Hazen sourced his Italian olive varieties from McEvoy Ranch in Petaluma, one of the North Bay's revered pioneers of high-end Italian-style olive oil production.

"I'm a second-generation olive grower," Hazen said, referring to his olive trees' lineage back to McEvoy. "But

I also have 21 varieties. I wanted to diversify with the French and Spanish blends.”

Gold Ridge Organic Farms grows and mills four of its own olive oil blends: the Tuscan, Picholine, Arbequina and Minerva blends, each a mixture of four to six varieties of olives.

In the kitchen, the Arbequina blend is mild and perfect for salad dressings and marinades. The Tuscan blend, a favorite among chefs, is ideal for cooking. Minerva, another Italian blend, starts out robust and pungent, with the highest polyphenol count, but it mellows over time. Foodies love it for its buttery mouthfeel. The Picholine blend made from French varieties is delicious right out of the bottle.

“My favorite Picholine is when it’s new,” Hazen said. “It’s rare to find.”

Recently, Hazen started milling his olives together with some of the citrus he grows at the farm, a method that originated in Abruzzo region of Italy that is known as Agrumato. They started with a refreshing Meyer Lemon Agrumato and a Mandarin-Kumquat Agrumato.

“This is the first year making them,” Hazen said. “It’s made with a pure process — pure fruit, the peel and the juice.”

Edible cosmetic products coming

For the past few years, Gold Ridge also has been diversifying with a line of value-added products made from the organic apples, olive oil and herbs grown at the farm.

Director of Business Operations Andrea Lederle joined the sales and marketing team a few years ago to help raise the profile of the farm, then Naomi Ansbergs joined to head up sales and marketing.

The farm, which also grows 12,000 apple trees on 15 acres, is producing a Gravenstein Apple Syrup in collaboration with well-known preservationist Merrilee Olson of Preserve Farm Kitchens in Petaluma. The syrup is expected to be ready in time for the holiday season.

“We were inspired by The Apple Farm in Philo,” said Lederle, who once worked at Handley Cellars in Philo with Ansbergs. “It needs to cook for days and days.”

With the help of another preserving company, the award-winning Little Apple Treats of Sebastopol, the farm is developing a line of vinegars and shrubs — vinegar-based syrups to make seltzer drinks and cocktails. These are still about a year out from release.

Meanwhile, herbalist Colleen Bingham Solis has started to develop a line of soaps, lotions and face cleansers from the farm’s olive oil and herbs. She has created a signature herbal scent for the organic products from a blend of bergamot, lemon, cedarwood, lavender and clary sage.

From vegetables to olives

Hazen grew up in Marin County and fell in love with plants while attending Humboldt State University and during his summer job at Green Gulch Farm in Muir Beach.

“I loved being outdoors and working with my hands,” said Hazen, who turns 50 this month.

After he graduated from college in 1995, his parents helped him start a small organic vegetable farm not far from his current location in Sebastopol. In 2000, his mother bought a neighborhood 88-acre cattle ranch, which became Gold Ridge Organic Farms, and he started looking into growing olive trees there.

“I had very humble roots,” he said. “I started the orchard with just myself and one other person. ... I didn’t know how well olives would do here. It was a big risk.”

In 2011, Hazen started selling his premium extra-virgin olive oil under a different label to stores such as Whole Foods. He also worked to install a high-speed, large-capacity olive press at the farm.

The Italian olive press works with the two-phase blade method of crushing, rather than the frantoio (stone mill) process.

When the olives are delivered, they are unloaded and weighed on a scale, then dumped in a hopper that carries them up to the washer, where the stones and leaves are automatically removed. The blades in a crusher break them down into a mash, pulverizing the seeds, too.

“The blades are better (than a stone mill) because it’s quicker and there’s less oxidation,” Hazen said.

The crushed olive mixture goes into a series of kneaders, or malaxers, with paddles that coax out the oil. Once the kneading is complete, the paste is pumped into a centrifuge to separate the solids (dry pomace) from the liquids (oil and fruit water).

From there, the olive liquid is filtered to remove any remaining solids, then spun a final time in separators, which separate liquid oil from the fruit water.

“It’s a three-phase system, with three streams of product — the solids, the fruit water and the oil,” Hazen said. “We have fluffy pomace (solids) that can be composted, and we put the fruit water on the fields.”

The Gold Ridge olive oil is stored in stainless tanks for a few months, then passed through another filter.

“It’s supposed to sit for eight weeks so the solids will drop up,” Lederle said. “Two years is the lifespan of an olive oil.”

Lederle hopes that in 2022 the farm will be open a couple of days a week, for paid tasting experiences by reservation only. The farm may also offer an olive oil club to help boost direct-to-consumer sales.

Meanwhile, the Gold Ridge Organic Farms olive oil is sold at Community Markets in Santa Rosa and Sebastopol, Market Hall in Berkeley and Oakland and Olive This, Olive That in San Francisco.

Kim Bourdet, creative director of the branch line restaurant in Santa Rosa’s Railroad Square, said the fast-casual restaurant will carry the oils in its Mercantile shop. Branch line is expected to open before the winter holidays in the former Flying Goat Coffee space.

For more information, go to goldridgeorganicfarms.com.

The following three recipes are from the culinary team at branch line. To finish the toasts, thinly slice some kale and toss it with a citronette dressing with some pomegranate seeds, then pile that on the toast. To make a quick citronette, mix one part citrus juice with two parts Gold Ridge Organic Farms olive oil of your choice.

Eggplant Puree Tahini Toast with Roasted Vegetables

Serves 6 to 8 as an appetizer

1 eggplant

2 tablespoons Gold Ridge

Organic Farms olive oil

teaspoon smoked paprika

Za'atar spices, to taste

2 tablespoons tahini

Baby tri-color carrots

Fennel

Delicata squash

Mushrooms of your choice

Orange cauliflower

Crusty bread of your choice

Salt and freshly cracked black pepper

Cut the eggplant into rounds and marinate in the olive oil, paprika and za'atar for one hour.

Preheat oven to 400 degrees. After it's marinated, roast the eggplant in the oven for six to seven minutes. Once roasted, remove from the oven and allow to cool.

Place the cooled eggplant and tahini in a blender or food processor with salt and freshly cracked black pepper, to taste, and puree.

Roast all the vegetables in a 400-degree oven until tender (about 20 - 30 minutes, depending on size).

Once they are roasted, toss the vegetables in olive oil, salt and pepper, to taste.

Toast the bread slices, then spread with a generous amount of the eggplant tahini puree. Add your roasted vegetables on top.

This seasonal soup gets its creaminess from the coconut milk and a bit of heat from the ginger and olive oil.

Vegan Butternut Squash and Ginger Soup

Makes 3 - 4 quarts

5 pounds butternut squash
1 ½ pounds yellow onion
4 cloves garlic

3 2-inch chunks of fresh ginger

2 tablespoons Gold Ridge Organic Farms olive oil

1 quart vegetable stock

3 cans full-fat coconut milk

Salt and pepper, to taste

Preheat oven to 375 degrees. Split the squash in half, remove the seeds and roast it until tender (about 45 minutes to one hour).

In a pan over medium heat, add olive oil and sweat down the onions, ginger and garlic.

Once the butternut squash is fork tender, place in a blender with the onion mixture.

Pour the vegetable stock and coconut milk into the blender and blend until smooth and creamy. (Or pour stock and coconut milk in a large pan with the onion mixture and blend with an immersion blender.)

Pour the soup back into the saucepan on the stove and gently stir until ready to serve.

Season with salt and freshly cracked black pepper.

A kumquat is a small citrus fruit with a sweet, edible peel and tart flesh. They are available at Oliver's markets.

If you want to make a layer cake, double the recipe below and divide the batter between two cake pans, then assemble by putting the marmalade in the middle and the icing on top.

Vegan Kumquat Olive Oil Cake

Makes one 9-inch cake

For cake:

$\frac{3}{4}$ cup Gold Ridge Mandarin Kumquat Olive Oil

$\frac{1}{2}$ cup unsweetened applesauce

1 cup organic oat milk

2 tablespoons fresh kumquat juice

2 tablespoons fresh kumquat zest

1 $\frac{1}{2}$ cups granulated sugar

2 cups all-purpose flour

1 $\frac{1}{2}$ teaspoons baking powder

$\frac{1}{2}$ teaspoon baking soda

1 teaspoon salt

For Kumquat Marmalade:

3 pounds kumquats, sliced into thick rounds

1 pound sugar

1 tablespoon salt

1 cup water

For icing (optional for two-layer cake):

1 cup powdered sugar

1 tablespoon vanilla extract

$\frac{1}{2}$ teaspoon kosher salt

Fresh zest from about 5 kumquats

For cake: Preheat oven to 350 degrees and line a 9-inch cake pan with parchment paper.

Whisk together the olive oil, applesauce, oat milk, kumquat juice, kumquat zest and sugar until it has a thick

consistency.

In a separate bowl, whisk together the dry ingredients (flour, baking powder, baking soda and salt).

Gently fold the dry ingredients into the wet ingredients until the batter is thick and smooth.

Pour the batter into the cake pan and bake for 45-60 minutes or until a toothpick inserted in the middle comes out clean.

Let the cake cool in the pan for at least 30 minutes before flipping onto a cooling rack.

For marmalade: Mix all ingredients together in a pan over low heat. When mixed, marmalade should resemble wet sand. Continue to simmer on low heat until rinds are soft and broken apart. Remove from heat and allow to cool before using.

For icing (optional): In a small bowl, combine powdered sugar, vanilla, salt and juice. Stir in additional juice, 1 teaspoon at a time, until it reaches drizzling consistency.

To assemble: For one-layer cake, top with the marmalade. For a two-layer cake, put marmalade on the bottom layer and icing on the top layer.

Gold Ridge Harvest Open House

What: The public is invited to visit Gold Ridge Organic Farms for its first open house, including a tasting of the farm's four estate-grown and milled extra-virgin olive oils and a tour of the olive milling facility as it processes olio nuovo with its Rapanelli Olive Press from Italy.

When: 11:30 a.m. to 5 p.m. Friday, Nov. 5, and Saturday, Nov. 6.

Where: 3387 Canfield Lane, Sebastopol

Cost: Free to the public, but reservations required

To reserve: exploretock.com/gold-ridge-organic-farms

Safety protocols: Masks will be required indoors.

Holiday open house at Gold Ridge Organic Farms

What: Kick off your local holiday shopping at the Gold Ridge Organic Farms shop, where you can buy olive oils, citrus, dried apples and apple syrup, along with locally crafted soaps and lotions, made with Gold Ridge olive oil and botanicals. Guests also can taste the farm's four award-winning olive oils and see the olive mill.

When: 11:30 a.m. to 4 p.m. Nov. 27 and 28

Where: 3387 Canfield Lane, Sebastopol

Cost: Free to the public, but advance reservations required

To reserve: exploretock.com/gold-ridge-organic-farms

Safety protocols: Masks will be required indoors.

Staff Writer Diane Peterson can be reached at 707-521-5287 or diane.peterson@pressdemocrat.com. On Twitter @dianepete56