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Picking the Passion

Monday, November 14, 2005

You might say Carol Firenze has an obsession with olive oil. To her, the precious stuff that has venerated throughout more than 4,000 years of civilization makes life flow just a little more smoothly.

"My grandparents came from Italy," she said, explaining her cultural love for the liquid. "As a child, I grew up with olive oil. I recall my grandfathers talking about how they saved money for weeks in order to buy olive oil, because it was so important to them for their cooking and health and a lot of other uses."

Firenze received her "olive oil consultant certificate" from the Italian Culinary Institute in New York, and she now serves as a board member on the California Olive Oil Council.

Sharing her fervor for the fluid is so important to the Los Gatos resident that she wrote a book, "The Passionate Olive: 101 Things to do With Olive Oil." She's scheduled to be at the Gilroy Barnes & Nobles bookstore at 3pm Nov. 19 to autograph copies, as well give a tasting of fine quality olive oils.

Most people think of olive oil simply for use in the kitchen, but the substance provides a wealth of other uses, she said. "There's so many books on the market today about cooking with olive oil," she said. "But I think my book is unique because it tells how olive oil is not only healthy to ingest, it's also topically healthy for you."

Many skin-care products today are made with olive oil because of its natural lubricating benefits, she said. She recommends using olive oil to remove makeup because it won't harm the skin. And she suggests mixing olive oil with a little water to create an excellent natural moisturizer.



Alessio Carli, wine and olive oil maker at Pietra Santa Winery in Hollister, washes and moves freshly picked olives into the crusher that will produce the winery's olive oil.

Photo by: Nick Lovejoy/Staff Photographer

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Live Oak will be leaving behind its league rivalry with Gilroy next season to go to the Blossom Valley Athletic League. What's your take on this development?

- Good riddance, Acorns
- Sad to see LO go

Mustangs, Acorns will

goes toward charities and city programs?

- Yes
- No

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Firenze said she ingests two tablespoons of olive oil each morning to keep healthy. The substance is loaded with antioxidants and vitamin E, which help preserve a youthful appearance in skin. "It's supposed to be the ultimate beauty secret," she said.

In the Mediterranean, various cultures spoon feed olive oil to babies 5 months or older because it provides many health benefits to growing infants, she said.

"The chemical composition of olive oil is closely related to human maternal milk," she said. "So during the nursing process, it's very practical to apply if there's any irritation. It has great benefits to the baby."

Among its other 101 practical uses, olive oil is also beneficial for killing head lice, curing ear aches and as a painkiller similar to ibuprofen, Firenze said.

Health and beauty aren't the only benefits of olive oil, she said. It can be used to eliminate the squeaks on dry door hinges and also as a lubricant on mechanical gears, such as bicycle chains.

"You can even polish furniture with olive oil," Firenze said. "It's great to dust your furniture with, and it's also a great polish for metal. It's kind of a one-stop shopping."

Instead of candles, olive oil can be useful as a less smoky way to illuminate a table during the holidays, she said.

"People who have allergies and can't have candles burning can use olive oil instead," she said. "You have to use it in an olive oil lamp, though. It cleans the air and doesn't have any odor."

For people who want a hint of fragrance, she recommends burning olive oil with the essence of lavender or other flowery scents.

Olive oil even played a big role in sports history, Firenze said, as it might have contributed to making Joe DiMaggio one of the greatest sluggers in baseball.

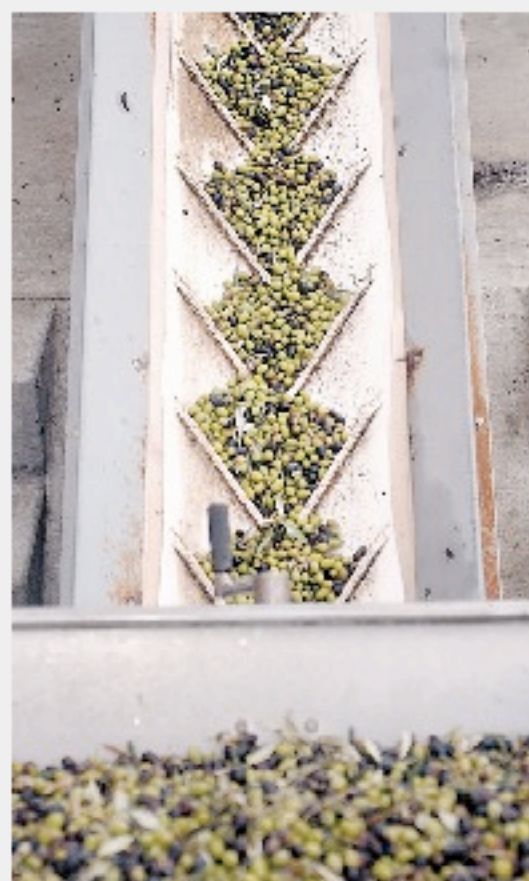
"He would soak his wood bat in olive for up to 10 days because he thought it gave his bat greater spring," she said.

Firenze, who majored in history in her college years, devotes a chapter in her book to detailing how olive oil played an important role in the development of Western civilization. The olive trees originated in the Caucasus



After the olives are crushed and strained, the oil is separated to make extra-virgin olive oil.

Photo by: Nick Lovejoy/Staff Photographer



Olives travel on a conveyer belt and into a wash to start the process of making olive oil at Pietra Santa Winery.

Photo by: Nick Lovejoy/Staff Photographer

- Mustangs, Acorns will square off in non-league games plenty
- Couldn't care either way

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City of Gilroy

\$155 million

Santa Clara County

\$3.3 billion

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Mountains in what's now southern Russia.

The Greeks and Romans considered olive oil very important to their civilizations and created laws protecting olive trees, she said. The Athenian leader Solon proclaimed that if someone cuts down an olive tree, that person would be sentenced to death, she said.

In ancient Greece, Firenze said, the city of Athens owes its existence to the olive tree. The legend goes that head god Zeus held a competition between the goddess Athena and the god Poseidon to see who could provide the people of the city with the most beneficial gift. Poseidon presented a war horse, but the wiser Athena chose to bless the city with the olive tree. The people favored her gift and honored Athena by naming the city after her.

The three monotheistic religions - Christianity, Judaism and Islam - all consider olive oil important in their rituals, Firenze said. The title "Christ" means "the anointed one," and the anointing substance is olive oil, she said.

Because of its Mediterranean climate, California produces about 99 percent of the olives grown in the United States, Firenze said. Most of them are used as table olives, but in recent years, farmers have realized the benefit of crushing some of them to make olive oil. California, however, produces less than 1 percent of the world's entire olive oil supply.

Olive oil is the second largest agricultural product after wine grapes in the Sonoma and Napa valleys, she said. In the South Valley, she heartily recommends the Pietra Santa olive oil which is produced at the San Benito County winery's Cienaga Road site. "Pietra Santa is a wonderful oil," she said. "They have a beautiful olive oil."

With so many choices on the market, picking the best olive oil can sometimes be a bit complex, she said. Olive oil that's classified as extra-virgin by the International Olive Oil Council is considered the premium product. This is followed by virgin olive oil. A bottle that is labeled simply olive oil contains what is considered by the council to be the lowest grade in the line.

Because truth in advertising laws aren't always enforced, some foreign producers claim their product is extra-virgin when it might not be, Firenze said. "What you need to look for in extra-virgin is a seal of authenticity," she suggested. "I go to specialty stores and buy olive oils."

Firenze said she also belongs to two "olive oil of the month" clubs and consumes about two bottles every month. One club sends her Italian oils, and the other sends California olive oils.

Storing olive oil in the proper container is vital to its enjoyment, Firenze said. She prefers to store her oils in glass or tin receptacles, as plastic bottles affect the oil's taste, she said.

To initiate friends and families in the joys of olive oil, Firenze recommends throwing a tasting party where everyone can sample different varieties of the golden-green liquid. Her book details how to hold one of these galas.



The finished product.

Photo by: Nick Lovejoy/Staff Photographer

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Many people have discovered that a quality bottle of olive oil can make as nice of a present as a bottle of fine wine, Firenze said.

"Olive oil is following the same sophisticated path that wine followed a few years ago," she said. "I think a time is coming for olive oil when people are going to recognize the (various) tastes just as they do with wine."

A local olive oil jewel

The Pietra Santa winery on Cienega Road in the heart of San Benito County not only makes great wine, but it also produces some of the finest organic olive oils in the United States. The estate imported 5,000 olive trees directly from Italy and began producing its extra-virgin olive oil in 1999.

Pietra Santa bottles three different oils: Olivita, Primo and California Olivita. The premium oil is produced with olives grown exclusively at Pietra Santa and is said to share a richness comparable to the finest Italian oils. Olive varieties include Leccino, Coratino, Frantoio, Itrana and Pendolino.

Primo and California blends are slightly lighter in flavor and are produced with olives sourced from the Sierra Foothills.

All of Pietra Santa's extra-virgin olive oils come from fruit that are hand picked and certified organic.

Pietra Santa crushes its olives using state-of-the-art Pieralisi Olive Oil presses. The estate's winemaker, Alessio Carli, creates olive oils that have won a number of awards, including the gold medal at the 2001 Los Angeles County Fair.

Originally from Sienna, Santa gained his professional training in olive oil production while working for two years in Tuscany at Fattoria Il Castagno and at the famous Badia a Coltibuono.

To see a video showing how Pietra Santa olive oil is produced, go to the winery's Web site at www.pietrasantawinery.com.

The Passionate Olive: 101 Things to do with Olive Oil

By Carol Firenze

Ballantetine Books, \$17.95

www.passionateolive.com

Firenze will hold an olive oil tasting session and sign copies of her book at 3pm Nov. 19 at Gilroy's Barnes & Nobles bookstore, 6825 Camino Arroyo Drive.