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UC Davis institute embraces the olive

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Olives are omnipresent at the University of California, Davis. You'll find olive trees and their small fruit peppering the grounds around campus, plus a university-produced olive oil sold exclusively at the campus bookstore.

And now there's an institute for all things olive: the UC Davis Olive Center, which is celebrating its first anniversary this month. The Olive Center also will hold a symposium Thursday to discuss issues related to super-premium olive oils.

"We've got a lot of projects lined up," says Dan Flynn, executive director of the center. "We're looking at getting our orchards certified organic, and we'd like to set up a sensory panel on campus that would evaluate samples sent in by producers. This is necessary for grading purposes set by the International Olive Oil Council. We've also planted 600 new trees (at an orchard near Highway 113) where we can train them to be harvested in a more effective way."

Olive trees have literally deep roots around UC Davis. The university's two oldest olive trees date to the 1850s, and some trees at a university orchard in Winters were planted in 1861. The UC Davis Olive Center is now the epicenter – the pit, if you will – of all this olive activity and research for a California industry valued at \$1 billion.

The Olive Center opened with a \$200,000 start-up budget and now has its coffers greased with the sale of university-pressed olive oil.

The olives sourced for the oil were once a kind of campus nuisance. About 1,500 olive trees grow around the university, but the fallen fruit has long been the enemy of bicyclists.

Instead of getting crushed by tires, the campus olives – along with fruit from university orchards – are pressed into three different olive oils. The 2008 vintage produced 600 gallons, which grossed more than \$100,000 in sales and was sold in three bottlings.

"The Silo" olive oil is marked by a buttery and slightly spicy character. "Wolfskill" olive oil sources its fruit from a university orchard in Winters and boasts ripe and nutty notes. "Gunrock" olive oil is the boldest of the bunch, with upfront grassy and floral flavors.



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The bad news: All are sold out.

The upside is that a special olive oil is still available. "Centennial Blend," an extra-virgin olive oil, is a mix of oils from both UC Davis and such Northern California producers as Saltonstall Estate and McEvoy Ranch. This oil costs \$29 for 500 milliliters (about 16.9 ounces; \$1.71 per ounce) and is for sale at the UC Davis bookstore or online at oliveoil.ucdavis.edu.

"The olive trees around campus are probably a good 60 to 70 years old, and they're the foundation of our olive oil production," says Flynn. "It was clear that we needed to do something to be entrepreneurial to generate money, and olive oil is one way we're doing it. The oils sell really fast. We're also looking to put out some table olives: brine-cured Sicilian-style olives from campus fruit."

A new olive oil mill, which is capable of producing 50 to 100 gallons of oil each day, is running at UC Davis' Robert Mondavi Institute for Wine and Food Science. And what to do with the slurry mush of olive pits and skins at the end of olive oil processing? Finding uses for olive waste is another field of research at the UC Davis Olive Center.

"There's a potential nutritional benefit for livestock," says Flynn. "We're also working to see how it can be used as a biomass for energy, and used for plastic polymers."

Other research focuses include the mechanical harvesting of olive trees with trellis systems and projects to control the olive fruit fly. But perhaps the tastiest order of business are the center's sensory panels.

"We had a December event that was a three-hour course and tasted six or seven olive oils," says Flynn. "It gave those in attendance a good overview of olive oil quality, defects and the opportunity to taste some very fresh oil from the new harvest. It was packed with people who wanted to learn all about that."

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