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UC Davis launches olive research center

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Enlarge by Rich Pedroncelli, AP

Dan Flynn, executive director of the University of California, Davis, Olive Center, pours olive oil into a sampling glass at the Davis, Calif. campus, Thursday, March 6, 2008. The newly created olive institute will be a resource to delve into essential questions about olive production and consumption. California growers produce about a half million gallons of olive oil each year, with production to increase fivefold in the next five years. (AP Photo/Rich Pedroncelli)

By Laura Kurtzman, Associated Press Writer

SACRAMENTO, Calif. — After the repeal of Prohibition in 1933, the University of California, Davis established a research department that led to the flourish of the California wine industry. Now, it hopes to do the same for olive oil.

The challenges to the emerging industry are significant: finding economical ways to produce fine oil, dealing with unscrupulous importers and educating unsophisticated palates, among them.

While California olive oil makers have begun to use techniques developed in Europe to capture the pungent taste of fresh olives, the American palate may not be ready for it.

"This is the big challenge for all of us here in California -- to expose people to this fresh fruit juice olive oil and not have them gag on it," said Paul Vossen, a formative figure in the nascent world of California olive oil who is affiliated with the new UC Davis Olive Center.

The center opened in January under the umbrella of the university's Robert Mondavi Institute, which houses the campuses' Department of Viticulture and Enology, the scientific names for grape-growing and winemaking.

That is where UC scientists showed California winemakers how to replant vineyards that had been ripped out during Prohibition and taught them how to make fine wine.

Olives have been growing in California for more than a century, but most of the state's 600 oil makers are of recent vintage.

Collectively, they produce 500,000 gallons of olive oil each year, a tiny fraction of the 75 million gallons Americans consume.

California's output is expected to increase fivefold in the next five years, as several thousand acres of olive groves come into production using mechanized pickers that vastly speed up the process.

The potential U.S. market for olive oil is huge. America is the fourth largest consumer, after Italy, Spain and Greece. Consumption has doubled in the last decade, but the average American still uses relatively little -- about the equivalent of a bottle of wine each year.

The olive center's executive director, Dan Flynn, said the center will be a resource to delve into essential questions about olive production and consumption. Undergraduate courses may come later.

Contributing faculty include researchers from the UC Davis Medical Center, who are studying the health benefits of antioxidants in olives.

Others already have done work on genetic fingerprinting of olive varieties and how irrigation affects growth.

Researchers also make and sell oil from the 1,500 olive trees on campus and launched this year's oils with a party on Wednesday. The proceeds will make up half the olive center's budget. The rest comes from industry and the university.

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Charles Shoemaker, a food scientist who is co-chairman of the olive center, said a possible topic of research -- preventing oxidation, which ruins the taste -- could benefit olive oil lovers around the world.

The answer, he said, may be as simple as selling the oil in smaller bottles.

Fine olive oil is a relatively recent phenomenon anywhere in the world, said Vossen, who teaches an olive oil tasting seminar to the general public and helped develop California's first panel of expert tasters.

While olive oil dates to antiquity, Vossen said truly fine oil only came about in the last few decades, as Europeans revolutionized production with clean, modern techniques.

Stainless steel spinners and decanters replaced the old, smelly mats that had been used to drain oil from paste made of crushed olive pits and meats.

The result was an entirely new taste that could be as spicy, peppery and pungent as the olives from which it was made.

"The new olive oil industry of the world is capturing the fresh fruit flavor of the olive," Vossen said.

But few in this country have learned to appreciate the fresh taste. Just as post-Prohibition Americans happily drank wine of such poor quality it could not be sold today, so do many contemporary Americans make their salad and pasta with olive oil no self-respecting Italian would consume.

In his tasting classes, Vossen teaches how to discern the mellow flavors of oil made from ripe olives, such as nutty, floral, buttery, tropical, banana and spices such as cinnamon.

He also introduces the pungent flavors of oils made from green olives, including those of fresh-cut grass, artichoke or even straw. As his students' palates grow more complex, he says, they quickly develop an appreciation for bitter green oils, which are rich in antioxidants.

It is a leap he hopes the greater American public will one day make, as well.

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