

USA olive oil producers have a project and a goal

Davis University open a research olive center and we decided to interview a pioneer of the emerging California olive oil sector: Dan Flynn

by Duccio Morozzo della Rocca

Ten years to enter into the top 10 largest olive oil producing countries in the world, this is the goal of the emerging California olive oil industry.

Over the past few years the U.S. domestic demand for olive oil has seen a steady increase. Though consumed mainly in large metropolitan areas and the state of California, the product has sparked a growing curiosity amongst Americans, with consumers beginning to experiment with the regional and varietal taste differences in olive oil.

Nevertheless, we are speaking of a small number of people who use olive oil within the United States, either because of their close proximity to an area of production, a memorable experience on a trip back to the old country, or simply an affinity for the popular Mediterranean diet.

But what are the current numbers for U.S. production? And how is the American olive oil industry planning to move the world market? What are realistic goals for this young industry?

I met with Dan Flynn, Executive Director of the newly founded University of California, Davis Olive Center to hear the opinions of an American at the center of this new group of olive oil pioneers.

- Dan, it seems that recently there has been a lot of activity in the olive oil industry?

Definitely, over the past 25 years the Mediterranean diet has had a huge influence on American cuisine, and today Americans are continuing to seek out healthier ingredients for their cooking. For this reason U.S. olive oil consumption has increased exponentially, particularly in California, where

the population is very attentive to what they eat. Due to the health benefits of olive oil, producers have developed an important role in directly marketing their product.

- For the most part, the story of olives in California is recent?

Actually it began about 200 years ago during the 1800's when Spanish missionaries traveled from Peru to Mexico and finally to San Diego. Olive trees were planted around missions to serve as a source of light and nourishment, as well as to be used for holy sacraments. It is here that the American variety received its name, Mission. Unfortunately this olive tree is no longer a highly cultivated variety.

- When did this olive oil resurgence begin?

About 20 years ago a few American producers, mainly from Sonoma County, were inspired by olive oil they tasted while traveling in Italy. Interested in concocting a classic Tuscan blend they began to import Frantoio, Moraiolo, and Leccino trees to the U.S.

- Today production seems to be moving in a different direction.

Definitely, in 1999 the first super-high-density trees were planted and today they represent a major percentage of the acreage in California. The Spanish model occupies two thirds of the olive acreage in state and it is predicted that by 2009 this acreage will double.

- Do you believe that this causes a risk of product homogenization?

Actually if after twenty years these trees did not continue to produce olives, this would not cause a huge problem, as Californian producers are already use to replanting fruit trees after they decrease in production.

- Olive oil production is concentrated mainly in California. How many producers are there in total and what is the average farm size?

We are actually about 500 producers, almost all in California, and as of 2007/2008 there were approximately 50 mills producing 500,000 gallons of oil.

In regards to farm size, there are three large producers, who all use the

super-high-density method of production, and another 10 percent of producers who have medium-scale operations.

In short, approximately 90 percent of producers run small-scale operations, yet only produce about 15 percent of the olive oil in California. This oil is generally destined for self-consumption.

- Does an olive oil association exist in the U.S.?

Yes, the California Olive Oil Council was founded in the 90's adopting parameters slightly stricter than those of the international olive oil council, by only certifying oil that has a .5 percent acidity or below.

- What is its role?

It is an association that encompasses and unites all aspects of the California olive oil industry, mainly aiding with the marketing of Californian olive oil and certifying oil by placing the organization's stamp on each bottle.

- How did UC Davis get involved?

The university had been working with a number of small local producers for about 20 years when about four years ago they decided to start making their own olive oil, using 2000 previously existing trees on campus.

Through this they entered into contact with an even larger number of Californian producers and began to realize the need to unite this growing and fragmented industry.

For this reason we decided to create the UC Davis Olive Center, specializing in olives and merging the needs from the industry for research, outreach, and education.

- What projects does your center work on?

The olive center is creating a taste panel and trying to obtain International Olive Oil Council accreditation, we have started research looking into olive oil consumer taste preferences, we are completing chemical analysis research, and we are developing diverse research on production. The olive center is also planting experimental orchards, of which we have requested organic certification. We are conducting research on the problems of verticillium and olive fruit fly, which only appeared 5 or 6 years ago and has become a large problem for many table olive producers.

We are also organizing many courses addressing both consumers and producers, regarding all aspects of production, irrigation, pest control, pruning techniques, processing techniques, marketing, and sensory evaluation.

- And as of this year, UC Davis has its own mill?

Exactly, we thought that this would be a unique way to move forward with our experimentation. We purchased an Alfa Laval 500 that can process 500 kg of olives an hour.

- What is the average consumer's knowledge of olive oil at this time?

There is not a lot of consumer knowledge in regards to olive oil, probably less than one percent of the population, but there is a lot of interest around the product, people try it, they like it, and they want to learn more about it. Like many high quality products in the United States, such as coffee, chocolate, bread and wine, at first people do not mind the quality of the product that they are eating, but as they learn more about the food they begin to search out the highest quality and the healthiest products.

- What are the next important events for the olive center?

In June, we are organizing an international conference on olive oil along with the Culinary Institute of America in Napa, TREE, Accademia dei Georgofili, the Robert Mondavi Institute for Wine and Food Science, and CIFAR with the objective of examining the sensorial qualities and culinary usages of many high quality olive oils. The conference participants will include producers, journalists, buyers, researchers, and international chefs.

The young Californian olive oil industry appears to be quite a gamble, requiring researchers, producers and educators to focus on communicating the attributes of olive oil to the average American. The industry may already be producing olive oil, but now it must begin to produce consumers.

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