



Olive You, Man!

Nestled at the base of the San Tan Mountains south of Phoenix is a fertile olive grove that can turn a cupcake healthy, tame dust clouds on dirt roads, and thrill martini enthusiasts and chefs alike.

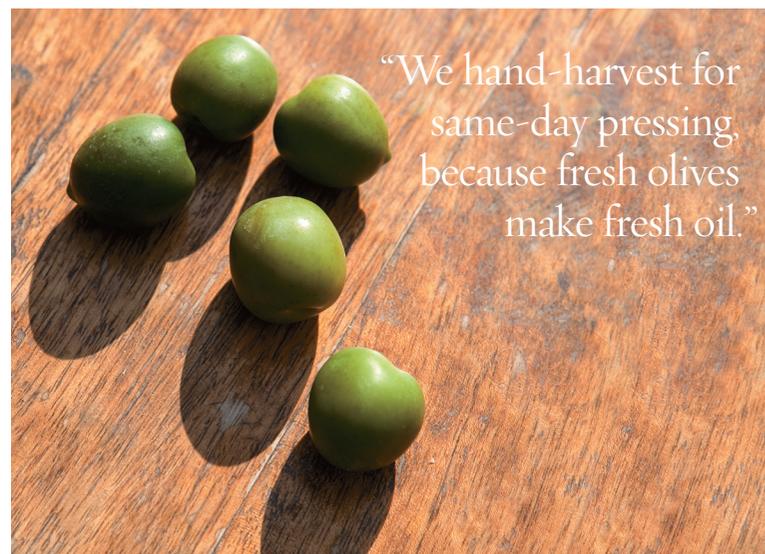
BY LAUREN WISE PHOTOGRAPHY BY CHRIS LOOMIS



Arizona's sun-baked terrain may not easily yield many fruits and vegetables, but one that can stand the heat—even thrive in it—is the olive. For thousands of years the olive has been valued for energy, food, peace offerings and health-promoting properties. Greek mythology records that Zeus found the goddess Athena's gift of an olive tree so useful to society that he named Athens after her, where she then planted the tree on a rocky hill now known as Acropolis. And in Queen Creek's Gila River flood plain lies Arizona's own slice of cultural vigor, where the long sun-drenched days, rich soil and cool nights conspire to produce one of the most beloved olive oils in the country.

Queen Creek Olive Mill is the only known working olive mill in the state, and has been a leader in local growing and dining long before the term “locavore” entered the lexicon. A decade ago, owner Perry Rea and his wife Brenda noticed the abundance of landscaped olive trees while vacationing in Arizona. During one wine-enhanced evening, Brenda suggested they grow the fruit to make oil. Perry inquired of University of Arizona's agriculture department for direction, and the seed was planted.

Completely self-taught, Perry experimented for several years to find which varieties grow best in Arizona. Currently, the pesticide-free grove is home



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to more than 16 types of olive trees, including such varieties as the Tuscan Frantoio and Grappolo, the Greek kalamata, the California Lucca, the popular Mission and the Spanish Manzanillo.

“We always hand-harvest what we need for same-day pressing, because, well, fresh olives make fresh oil,” Perry says. It is this mentality, combined with two important factors in olive oil production—the fruit maturity and the varietal character—that have made Queen Creek Olive Mill a rising star on the local food scene.

But this family-owned, environmentally conscious, locavore-dedicated gem is much more than just a grove of 2,500 mature olive trees. After six seasons, Queen Creek Olive Mill makes a full-fledged field trip destination for locals and tourists.

“Our vision was to put together a place where people could see and learn about the olive oil production process, have a good time and relax—like an American piazza,” Perry explains.

And it seems he may have the right idea. The mood among visitors and workers at Queen Creek Olive Mill is happy and relaxed. The scent of the mill's signature waffles, made with vanilla bean olive oil, mingles with an earthy richness wafting from the herb garden. Olive trees provide dappled shade to picnic tables, and small groups cluster for tours, during which they learn about the mill's history and taste boutique extra-virgin olive oil right out of the production tanks. And October through June, weekend wine tastings and live music on Saturdays are added fixtures.

A tour may be the best way to explore the grounds, but even a visit to the gourmet marketplace can yield several samplings and a glimpse of unique local products the Reas stock. Bottles of olive oil beg to be sampled, from the extra-virgin blend to such unique flavors as chocolate, fig and Meyer lemon. Small pockets of recipe cards hold the promise of brownies made with blood orange oil and tequila fajitas sauced with Mexican lime oil.

Shelves are piled high with 10 types of hand-cured stuffed olives and seven tapenades (all Perry's recipes), handmade olive oil bath and body products



QUEEN CREEK OLIVE MILL'S OILS, TAPENADES AND STUFFED OLIVES HAVE BECOME FIXED FEATURES AT FARMERS MARKETS AND GOURMET GROCERY STORES—BUT THERE'S SOMETHING ABOUT BUYING STRAIGHT FROM THE SOURCE.

(Brenda's), baked goods, olive wood crafts, honey, aged Italian balsamic vinegars, house-made pasta, jam, coffee, cheese, chocolates, ceramics, popcorn, spices—almost all locally made.

"I insist that anyone who wants to put a product on my shelf do a vendor tasting on property to see if guests like it. If it starts to sell off the shelves, I'll keep it," Perry explains. "We also have about 200 wine labels that Brenda and I hand-selected. A lot are from smaller properties that wouldn't be found at places like BevMo."

When asked who he thinks is a leader in the local sustainability movement, he pauses.

"I don't know if there is anyone as dedicated to farm-to-table as we are, in terms of planting and serving on property. And we also supply about 250 restaurants and resorts."

One of those restaurants is elements at Sanctuary Camelback Mountain Resort in Paradise Valley. Chef Beau MacMillan uses the mill's products at the chic award-winning eatery, and even praised the mill's kalamata sandwich on the Food Network's "Best Thing I Ever Ate." Ten years ago, he met Perry playing hockey and tried his olive oil.

"I've been a fan of the oil since the day I tried it," MacMillan says. "I respect the quality of the product, the fact that it's local, the varieties, and purity of it."

At elements, MacMillan uses the blood orange olive oil the most, particularly on summery tomato dishes. He has even used the oils on a black pepper goat-milk cheesecake.

"I think that dessert made with olive oils is one of the most creative uses. I've made blood orange oil mignonettes, which are delicious," MacMillan says. And he continues to look forward to new flavors, like the much-anticipated bacon olive oil that took Perry a year and a half to perfect.

"Drizzle some of that over a warm spinach salad for amazing flavors," the chef says.

Whether the olives are stuffed, chopped or pressed, their taste sensation begins well before bottling. At Queen Creek, the olive trees flower in mid-April, and it's said that if four percent turn to olives, a big crop can be expected. The flavor of the fruit depends on when it's picked. When harvested and pressed in the green, early stage, the resulting oil has a grassy, bitter and peppery profile and a long shelf life; when plucked at the purple, late-harvest phase, olives produce a buttery, fruity to flat oil, and do not keep for long periods.

Queen Creek Olive Mill is known for its cold-pressed extra virgin olive oil. Both Perry and Brenda say the extra-virgin is their favorite. Olives are harvested (fallen ones are never used) and pressed within 24 hours for the



Just about everything at del Piero is local, a Rea family recipe, or created by Perry; bruschetta and a kalamata sandwich are popular picks.

freshest oil, which clocks in at .3 percent free acidity. In order to be classified as extra virgin, the oil's free acidity can be a maximum of .8 percent; the lower the number, the fresher the oil.

The olives are cleaned and crushed, then blended slowly for up to 40 minutes in a process called malaxation, during which smaller oil droplets snowball into bigger ones. The olive paste is spun at high speed to sift out heavier components before being decanted. At this point, the oil is ready for bottling, and on the tour, for tasting. It's hard to beat the fresh flavor of the silky Tuscan Estate extra-virgin olive oil, with its fruity start, grassy overtones and peppery finish.

To make the flavored oils, the process varies. For the innovative bacon oil, the process is complicated—and apparently top-secret.

The vanilla and chili varieties acquire their flavors by infusion, somewhat like steeping cold tea. For the Mexican lime, Meyer lemon and blood orange oils, the process is simpler.

"We cold-press the citrus with the olives for a rounded, never bitter flavor, and adjust the intensity of the citrus to how we want it," Perry explains. "These 'short-cut' oils are so great at home. I use the chili oil on popcorn, vanilla for waffles, and lemon for salad dressing."

At the mill, oil is blended every six weeks and bottled every three. In 2010, 4,000 bottles were produced, almost doubling 2009 quantities. And even oil past its peak is used on-site, sprayed upon the dirt road leading to the mill to prevent clouds of desert dust.

The Tuscan-inspired eatery on property, del Piero, is an ideal place to taste what the mill has to offer. Just about everything on the menu is local, a Rea family recipe, or created by Perry. Highlights include bruschetta with green apples and Chardonnay herb cheese, and the kalamata sandwich, which stars olive salami made specifically for the mill by The Pork Shop (a Queen Creek pig farm/butcher), topped with white balsamic oil and herb crema. For dessert, how about a vanilla bean olive oil cupcake? About 1,500 are sold per week.

"Using olive oil's monounsaturated fat in baking instead of butter is healthier," Brenda explains. "Some people even take a shot of olive oil in the morning for the health benefits."

A jigger of straight olive oil may not be your cup of tea, but the surprisingly light and flavorful experience is sometimes compared to wine tasting. And if your timing's lucky, you may be able to sample some of Queen Creek Olive Mill's seasonal private presses. But whenever you visit, chances are you'll relax, learn something new and leave satisfied—likely with a new recipe or tasty creation.



PERRY REA RECOMMENDS
 CHILI OIL ON POPCORN;
 WIFE BRENDA SAYS EVOO
 CAN SUBSTITUTE FOR
 BUTTER IN SOME RECIPES.