

Olive oil a thriving business in San Joaquin Valley (video)

By Robert
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Watch ENZO Olive Oil Company create extra virgin olive oil at the company's Madera plant. THEFRESNOBEE

From the moment you walk into Enzo Olive Oil Company's processing plant in Madera County, you smell that distinct grassy and earthy aroma.

The former grape processing plant on Road 33, just north of the San Joaquin River and just east of Highway 99, is now dealing with the pits and everything else. Workers have spent the last two weeks bringing in freshly harvested olives to be milled into premium olive oil.

It's that time of year for California's thriving olive oil industry. The state's growers and olive oil producers are about halfway through their annual harvest. Olives go from harvest to milling within 24 hours in order to ensure the highest quality oil — a standard set by state regulators.

Industry officials say the state is expected to produce 2.3 million gallons this year, down from 3.5 million the previous year. Patricia Darragh, executive director of the California Olive Oil Council, says the decline is due largely to unfavorable weather, the olive fruit fly and the drought.

"Olives can withstand a long drought and we have seen some groves with stressed trees while others look perfectly fine," Darragh says. "The good news is that the quality of oil is excellent."

Although the market for canned black olives has diminished, the demand for high quality olive oil has grown. There are 40 olive oil mills in California with others under construction or expansion. Statewide, olives for oil are grown on more than 35,000 acres and an estimated 3,500 new acres will be planted each year through 2020.

California is home to nearly 400 growers and producers of olive oil, including several in the San Joaquin Valley. Among the Valley's olive oil producers are Enzo, Bari Olive Oil in Dinuba, Fresno State, Cullen Creek in Sanger and Rosenthal Olive Ranch in Madera.

Enzo has been making oil since 2011 but has already racked up 39 awards, including this year's Best in Class in the delicate category at the New York International Olive Oil Competition. It also earned a mention in the New York Times.

Vincent Ricchiuti, whose family owns P-R Farms and Enzo Olive Oil, says one of the keys to producing award-winning olive oil is having total control of the process from the fields to the factory.

All of the oil produced by the Ricchiuti family comes from olives grown on its own 400 acres. Workers test the fruit to determine the optimum time for harvesting. Once picked, it can be just a matter of hours before it is trucked into the plant to begin milling.

"Once that olive is picked off the tree, we want to mill it because that is the best and freshest oil," Ricchiuti says.

Inside Enzo's Madera County mill, workers carefully dump wooden bins loaded with green, black and purple olives. The darker the color, the riper the olive.

"What we are looking for is a good balance of flavor," Ricchiuti says.

The olives are emptied onto a conveyor belt where they enter a hopper that removes leaf material and any other

debris. The olives are washed and then pulverized, pit and all, into a paste-like consistency. The olive mash is then spun at a high volume to separate the solids from the liquid. The solids are sold as cattle feed while the liquid is sent to a centrifuge where it is spun to separate the oil from the water.

Once the oil is removed, it is pumped into holding tanks where any sediment floats to the bottom of the tank. The oil will remain in the tank until February when it will be ready for bottling.

The company makes olive oil in three different types (delicate, medium and bold) and all are organic and extra virgin, which signifies the highest quality. Enzo also makes three flavored olive oils — lemon, garlic and basil.

This year, Ricchiuti is introducing a limited-release olive oil known as *olio nuovo*, Italian for new oil. The oil has a bold, grassy and peppery taste, but with a shelf-life of about a month. The oil is bottled before it is placed into holding tanks. The oil's time in the tanks allows the sediment to separate from the oil and also extends its shelf life. Enzo's *olio nuovo* will soon be available at the newly renamed farm store Enzo's Table at Willow and Shepherd avenues in Clovis.

Ricchiuti says the family decided to change the name of Bella Frutta to Enzo's Table to better reflect the company's new venture: "The olive oil has really taken off."

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