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Olive becomes a passion fruit

One day, olive oil may be appreciated in the same way as fine wines. writes **Conrad Walters**.

IF SAM MANCINI has his way, consumers will one day discuss olive varieties much as wine-lovers now discuss grapes.

Mancini, the face behind The Little General extra virgin olive oil, is trying to tackle a lack of knowledge about olive varieties and help consumers to discern the good from the ordinary.

"The olive oil industry in Australia, I believe, is where the wine industry was about 25 or 30 years ago," he says.

Then, drinkers spoke generically about ports and sherries before developing preferences for a shiraz and sauvignon. In time, he hopes, consumers will gain similar knowledge of olive varieties from Spain, Israel, Portugal and elsewhere.

Mancini began his family-run business at Whitton in the Riverina nearly nine years ago and has some 5500 trees producing olives usually native to Tuscany, Italy. He is in the middle of harvesting.

He grows three varieties: frantoio olives, which have a peppery taste and are good for cooking; leccino olives, which have a smooth taste and are ideal for drizzling on salads; and pendolino olives, which have a buttery flavour.

The Little General, named after a picture of Mancini as a child dressed in a stiff white suit, emphasises the freshness of its products. Processing for a premium olive oil needs to begin as quickly as possible – and certainly within 12 hours of being harvested. Otherwise, the oil takes on a musty or fusty smell.

"We start processing within three hours

of harvest," Mancini says. "And with every day's harvest, the processing is completed before sunrise the next morning."

The company won two prizes in 2006 at a competition held in Italy, the Concorso Oleario Internazionale Armonia. The awards for best chemical composition for olive oils made in the southern hemisphere were given for the company's leccino and pendolino products.

This year's harvest, now under way, promises to be a good one, Mancini says, citing good temperatures and moisture that have ensured there is plenty of flesh on the olive seeds.

The Little General sells to restaurants but the retail side is where business is growing.

Successful as it is, Mancini champions not only The Little General but the industry as a whole and urges consumers to ensure the oil they buy is fresh.

"What I say to people is, I don't mind what olive oil they buy," he says. "But if they make sure it's Australian then they can be certain – if it's a good quality Australian olive oil – they're at least one season ahead of any imported stuff that comes here."

The Little General is at the Sydney Morning Herald's Growers' Market (7-11 am), Pyrmont Bay Park, Pyrmont (opposite Star City) on Saturday, May 2.

OLIVE OIL: THE TERMS

Cold pressed

The olives are crushed and the oil is filtered. No heat or chemicals are used.

Some producers sell unfiltered and unsettled oil for a short time at harvest. Called Novello, it's expected to be on sale soon. The Australian Olive Association favours the term "cold extracted", arguing most extra-virgin olive oils today are made by crushing and centrifuging the fruit rather than using simple presses.

Extra-virgin olive oil

This name refers to oil from the first pressing with an acidity level (in certified Australian oils) of no more than 0.8 per cent. Its flavour is intense. The AOA's code of practice means only oils that pass flavour and chemical testings can display its extra-virgin symbol. The association also checks certified oils on shop shelves.

Virgin olive oil

The term is not seen often on retail packaging but the classification indicates oil with no more than 2 per cent acidity. With each subsequent pressing, acidity increases and taste lessens.

Olive oil

A blend of virgin and refined oil, this one gives a mild flavour. Refined oil, initially unfit for human consumption, goes through an oil refinery to make it edible. No virgin oils can contain refined oil.

Pure and light olive oils

Made through an oil refinery process, light refers to the colour, aroma and flavour.



Family affair ... Nadia Mancini and the Little General brand. Photos: Kirk Gilmour, Julian Kingma