

Posted on Friday, Sep. 27, 2002
By S. L. Wykes
Mercury News

After years of cooking in his own kitchen, Frank Menacho wasn't satisfied with commercial olive oils. "I just couldn't find one with all the complexities, flavor and characteristics I wanted," said the former fish broker.

So he began making his own, unaware that it would change his life's work and give birth to a certified organic olive oil that has been embraced by celebrity chefs like Emeril Lagasse, while becoming a sought-after item at farmers markets and high-end grocery stores across the country.

Some of Menacho's success may be due to an American consumer palate that has grown more sophisticated and daring in recent years, perhaps through visits to events like this weekend's Arts & Olive Festival at Cañada College in Redwood City.

The two-day festival will feature oils and vinegars from Menacho and other custom olive oil makers. Menacho plans to attend, happy to show off his blue glass bottles of Olivas de Oro.

Menacho's quest for an oil that matched his taste led him to a cluster of olive oil presses all over California for just the right flavors. He learned that olive oils sold for the mass market are made from a single variety of olive.

The 45-year-old Los Gatos man also learned -- from the chefs and winemakers he worked with -- that he needed to blend more than one variety of olive to produce what he wanted. "Just like a wine, a multi-varietal olive oil gives a more full-bodied taste," Menacho said.

Menacho tasted the difference between an olive harvested early in the season when it is still green and one harvested late, after it has turned black all the way to the pit.

The early olive, he found, produces a stronger, more bitter-tasting oil, carrying the olive's peak aroma and flavor. It is also the lowest in acidity, and is high in a naturally occurring substance that helps maintain the oil's flavor for a long time.

The late-harvest olive yields the buttery flavor that, Menacho said, most often comes to mind when people think of olive oil. "They think that's what olive oil is all about -- but it's not," he said.

What Menacho wanted was this: a slight bitterness at the beginning; a full-bodied flavor perceptible through the front and back of the nose; the scent of fresh-cut grass, ending with a taste that was just a bit peppery.

He mixed and poured and warmed and smelled and tasted. Fairly quickly, Menacho found his own formula that he would mix up six or seven gallons at a time for cooking use in his own kitchen.

Then, in 1999, a friend offered to sell Menacho a 160-acre olive orchard in Oroville planted with about 10,000 trees, most of which are 80 to 90 years old. Unlike many other things in life, olive trees just keep getting better with age. "Some in Greece are 600 years old," Menacho said. "People joke about how you plant olive trees for your great-grandchildren."

His first harvest -- 100 tons of olives -- produced 3,000 gallons of oil. And Menacho immediately began to do things his way: He allowed the freshly pressed oil to rest for three months before blending, which allowed sediment to fall to the bottom. He used no filtering, something he said is commonly done by large commercial olive-oil makers.

"That filters out the organic matter which contributes to flavor and complexity," he said. Menacho and his wife taste-tested every barrel of the single blends to help them select the right oils for the final multi-blend.

Just for fun, and at the urging of friends, Menacho sent some of his first batch of oil to the 2001 Los Angeles County Oils of America competition, organized in conjunction with the California Olive Oil Council.

Menacho's Olivas de Oro won a silver medal. "Everybody said, 'Who is this person? This must be sheer luck,'" he said, recalling the reaction.

This year, his oils competed against entries from all over the world, and Menacho walked away with three bronze medals.

Menacho has help. His wife masterminds the oil's marketing. His two youngest children label the bottles and assist at farmers market sales. His oldest, meanwhile, will be enrolling at the California Culinary Academy in San Francisco next year.

IF YOU'RE INTERESTED

The Arts & Olive Festival will run from 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. Saturday and Sunday at Cañada College, 4200 Farm Hill Road, Redwood City. Admission is free. For more information about the festival, go to www.canadacollege.net/olivefest. For more information on Menacho's oil, go to www.olivasdeoro.com