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The Complexities of Quality Olive Oil

By Lou Fancher

A Science Cafe on the chemistry of olive oil at the Lafayette Library and Learning Center on June 2 resembled a banquet. With the sold-out crowd of nearly 100 people seated at place settings on tables filling the Community Hall, the atmosphere swiftly became more like a laboratory.

"Aroma and taste are the qualities to judge in olive oil," said Veronica Foods Company president Michael Bradley.

Veronica Foods is the parent company of Oakland-based Delizia Olive Oil Company. Leah Bradley, Veronica Foods controller and a member of the American Oil Chemists' Society, and Nate Bradley, the owner of specialty grocery store Amphora Lafayette, joined the elder Bradley as he led participants through an opening lecture and the opportunity to serve as human guinea pigs.

Encouraging everyone to warm a sample by vigorously swirling the olive oil in a small cup and covering the top to prevent heated vapors from escaping, he said, "Now smell it."

Olive Oil Number One, an Arbequina from Chile, rendered a grassy green, fresh-cut scent. "It was on a tree 21 days ago," Bradley said, referring to the olives from which the oil was made.

Harvest dates for the company's ultra premium extra virgin olive oil is "critical information," according to Bradley. "Most of the labels in the grocery stores are pack dates, which doesn't mean anything at all."

Tasting was next, with Bradley demonstrating a slurp-and-spread method that would allow the oil to coat the tongue and throat.

The room suddenly full of people coughing and exclaiming over the sting, Leah Bradley said a "robust, brassy, pungent, peppery" taste is a sign of a quality oil.

She said their company has had to "carve out the upper echelon" to set a standard in an industry that sets a low bar and has few regulations with real teeth. Quoting studies conducted by UC Davis, she said the adulteration of store bought olive oil that is allowed a two-year shelf life is as high as 60 percent. That means an oil graded as "extra virgin" may not be so pure after all.

Bradley said standards set by the International Olive Council may have initially attempted to create an understandable system, but have become "intentionally confusing" to protect low-grade oil.

Delving into history, he said olive oil was recently uncovered in a Neolithic village, pushing its date of origin from 5,000 years ago to as much as 8,000 years ago. Little changed in the making of olive oil from the time when Pharaohs traded with Phoenicians on secret trade routes in the Mediterranean - until industrialization began to impact the process during the last 100 years.

Ancient, traditional stone presses, cut with a circular groove and draining the oil from crushed fruit have today become shiny centrifuges, stainless steel containers and large-scale operations. Ancient traders' dismay at an oil's "fustiness" - the term for over fermentation and a sure sign of a defective oil - in 2015 has become complicated discussions concerning valuations of polyphenols, peroxide levels, free fatty acids, and oleic acid.

Attempting to simplify the barrage of language about anti-oxidants, polyunsaturates and various chemical aspects of olive oil, Bradley introduced Olive Oil Number Three. Describing the aroma as "mild, paraffin, non-grass," he slurped a sample and waited for the crowd to join him. "Do you notice how you're feeling greasy coated-ness in your mouth?" he asked. "It has rancidity, did you notice?"

The thought of being served and encouraged by an expert to taste defective oil caused most people to laugh, but a UC Davis study that he said showed consumers prefer greasy grocery store brand oils like Number Three prompted questions about how to select a quality oil.

Nate Bradley's store is stocked entirely with oils from his parent's 124-year-old parent company. He said sourcing at farms worldwide and working directly with farmers, he brings the oil back to his store to evaluate the chemical content. "Once you start tasting, it's like night and day," he said, about the difference between his private label brand and the oil sold in grocery stores. Believing an educated consumer is the best customer, Bradley offers samples, tours and a website with

information about the lessons shared at the Science Cafe.

Of course economics are at the heart of the matter and the older Bradley said a progression in discerning taste similar to what has happened in the wine, coffee and chocolate markets is driving the industry. Oils from Chile, Portugal and Italy are exciting, but the surest test of an oil's quality isn't its origin, it's the crush date. The Bradleys recommended consuming oils harvested within the past 14 months.

Extra Tips:

-Olive oil oxidizes and doesn't get better with time. Store it in tinted glass bottles and buy in small quantities.

-You can cook with olive oil: use a well-made olive oil for a high smoke point.

-The "Best By Date" on a label tells a consumer nothing. Look for the more important "Harvest Date."

-Recent studies show what is labeled and sold as extra virgin olive oil isn't what it claims to be. To read more, visit <http://olivecenter.ucdavis.edu/research/files/oliveoilfinal071410updated.pdf>.

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