



World famous - *and from the Bay*

INTERVIEW BY **LONNIE BERG**
PHOTOS BY **ANDY TAYLOR**

Moutohora Olive Oil have been in production for only five years, but that hasn't stopped them from winning acclaim, appreciation and international awards. Getting gold from the Thornton dunes hasn't been easy, but their growing success is a prime example of how you get to be world famous and from the Bay.



HAPPINESS IS WANTING WHAT YOU HAVE.

Meandering through their Thornton olive grove and vegetable gardens on the sunny afternoon following this interview, my hostess Wil Kruitthoed points proudly to a bed of plants I don't recognise.

"That's yucon"

"Oh," says I, none the wiser, "What do you do with it?"

Her husband Gerrit stops short and fixes me with a look that could peel paint.

"You eat it."

The interview had been punctuated by similar looks and curt replies but I know now, or hope I do, that Gerrit is in fact very, very dry and, moreover, genuinely puzzled even after all these years in New Zealand by our habit of the conversational question.

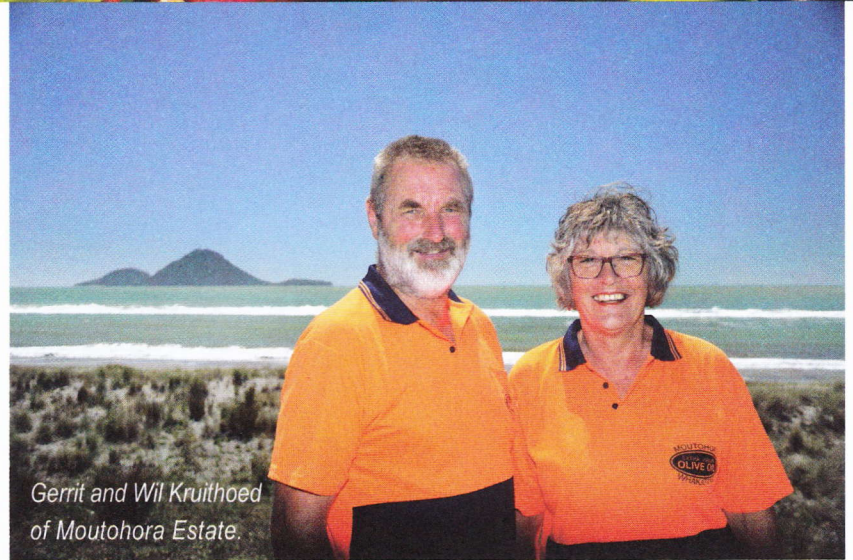
But for all that, his economy of language reflects the archetypal Kiwi bloke, a man who says exactly what needs to be said and no more. For all the rest he lets his work do the talking.

And talk about work! The success of the award-winning Moutohora Estate olive oil is testament to the sheer tenacity and hard bloody yakka of the towering Dutchman.

The Kruitthoeds settled in New Zealand in 1984 and until their move here in 1997 Gerrit had been a bee keeper on what Wil calls an Old MacDonald's type farm in Te Kuiti where they tried their hand at a "bit of everything".

But they yearned to live beside the sea and recalling coming to live in the Bay of Plenty the couple are disarmingly frank about what they didn't know back in the day.

"We stood on this hill and said, 'Wow, this is where we want to build a house,'" says Wil. "We didn't even look at the existing vineyard or the little old house already here".



Gerrit and Wil Kruitthoed
of Moutohora Estate.

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They made an offer on the land but it was refused. Undeterred, they went back and repeated the same offer (never let it be said that a Dutchman will pay more than he has to). This time it was accepted and they found themselves the new owners of a five and a half hectare property complete with a vineyard that hadn’t been worked for a year.

Knowing nothing about wine, other than that it was enjoyable to drink, they employed a wine maker and entered the viticulture business. But it was not an auspicious start; their first summer was blighted by a terrible El Nino and they could only watch as half the vines withered and died under the merciless drought.

Eventually, after struggling on for several years with a vineyard that consistently failed to thrive, their entry into olive production was accidental. It began with a shelter belt made up of alternating cedar and olive trees; the cedar were dwarfing the olives and when Gerrit removed them, the olives, exposed to full sun for the first time in years, rewarded him with a prodigious growth spurt.

That got him thinking.

Thus, after attending a course in Gisborne, Gerrit starting planting olives; two hundred and fifty trees the first year and another hundred every year after that. The grove now boasts around 900 carefully pruned and individually monitored trees.

In the early 2000s there were a number of olive growers in the region and, keen to learn from the best, they brought over an Australian expert for a workshop at the local Thornton Hall. The first thing he told them was that olives will grow anywhere - except in sand.

Naturally Gerrit and Wil, on a coastal property and believing in the power of their own labour more than in the words of experts, took little notice. However they did replace the type of olives they were growing from Barnea, a popular tree grown in Blenheim and native of Israel, with Italian olives like Frantoio and other varieties with great flavour and, importantly, known to thrive in coastal regions.



"I've been told that if the olives can see the sea then they taste better," says Gerrit. Their trees also benefit from year round seaweed fertiliser containing 60-plus minerals and trace minerals.

So much for the expert.

Their first pressing in Te Puna, from an olive press modified for avocados, was disappointing. Despite working flat-out from seven in the morning to nine at night the pressing produced a meagre 8% yield; clearly they needed to rethink the production process.

These days the olives are commercially pressed in Wellsford. Harvest is an annual event from mid-April to the end of May when the WWOOFers (young international visitors who work for free in exchange for board and learning about the orchard) and friends and neighbours come together to harvest the fruit. Luckily for the workers the 900 trees aren't hand-picked. Rather the hard little fruit are shaken from the trees by a machine which grips the branch and gives it a good rattle – a giant vibrator if you will - and caught in nets placed under the tree. The olives are pressed within 24 hours of being harvested, which means an ungodly start and a long drive to get them to Wellsford by 8am. But as we have established, Gerrit has a work ethic to match that of Boxer, the enormous and powerful cart horse in George Orwell's *Animal Farm* whose answer to any problem was "I will work harder!"

Now that Wil has retired from a long career in nursing she's on the land

every day and she too is working harder than ever alongside her husband to keep producing the best possible olive oil, as well as an array of other organic produce. But, lest I've painted a picture of relentless toil with few rewards let me disabuse you. The Kruithoeds, at home in their beautiful Mediterranean style villa sited on the very hill upon which they first stood and looked out over the Pacific, radiate a contentment and happiness with their lives which is increasingly rare these days.

Asked what's behind this zen-like peace despite a work load that would faze many a lesser mortal, Wil replies that retirement is akin to waiting for death, while happiness, on the other hand, is simply wanting what you already have.

And from that we may deduce that Wil and Gerrit dearly want what they already have.



Harvest time at Moutoura Estate.

Moutohora Estate olive oil is available from local markets, The Fresh Market, and Michelle's Health and Nutrition, Soul Organics and Julians Berry Farm.

**Find them online at:
[facebook.com/moutohoraestate](https://www.facebook.com/moutohoraestate)**