

In praise of Wairarapa's superfood

Olive oil expert Pablo Voitzuk is in the Wairarapa to help with this year's harvest. He took time out from a busy day at The Olive Press to share some of his knowledge with **David Famularo**.

One doesn't expect an interview with a world expert in olive oil to detour into the subject of the tango – unless you know they grew up in Buenos Aires and you like tango.

But it's still a surprise to discover Pablo Voitzuk was once part-owner of an award winning record label with tango influences.

The two are not so far apart, Pablo argues, along with his other vocation as an elementary school teacher – all require a certain meticulousness and sharing of knowledge.

Despite his Latin American origins, olives and olive oil were foreign to Pablo until he acquired a taste when hanging out with Italian friends in New York.

However, he points out that "unless you are very lucky, no one is born knowing olive oil".

Recession in the Argentinian economy and the arrival of digital downloads forced Pablo to look at other options and by the early 2000s he was living at the foothills of the Sierras in northern California, and working for Apollo Olive Oil, one of the leading organic oil producers in the United States.

"I initially helped with the sales. They decided to improve their facilities and bought a new prototype for extracting oils, devised by Dr Marco Mugelli, a great innovator in Tuscany."

"He came to California and said I should become a taster so I went to study with him."

"When he died I felt my education was not complete so I connected up with some of his collaborators and studied with another expert, Pierpaolo Arca, in Sardinia."

Here, Pablo mentions one of many surprising facts about olive oil. While olives have been harvested for thousands of years, improvements in the quality of olive oil have only been recent

and are still developing, "even in the older olive oil culture of Italy".

Which is where The Olive Press comes into the picture.

Established 17 years ago and now located at the south entrance to Greytown, The Olive Press presses almost all of Wairarapa's olive harvest.

Olive Press managing director Bruce McCallum says as far as he knows Pablo is the first overseas professional to visit these shores.

"The olive oil we produce is already of a very high quality. Pablo will lift the bar even higher, and has already introduced new practices.

"He is imparting his knowledge to our team and also having one-on-one time with the growers so they have a better understanding of what they can do before the fruit arrives here for pressing to improve the quality of their oil."

Ask any grower if there is a lot of money in olive oil and they will likely give an ironic laugh.

But Pablo points out Wairarapa growers are not unique in this department.

"It is heart-warming to see all these growers so dedicated and passionate about olive oil even when, as in most countries around the world, they are working against the odds.

"It is very hard to make it viable commercially, even in Italy."

Pablo is well-versed in the commercial challenges facing olive oil producers here and around the world.

In San Francisco he helps chefs and retailers find the olive oils that best serve their customers' needs for Pacific Sun Farms.

"It's a very short supply chain that is a way to favour quality and authenticity, which are essential for farm-to-table restaurants."

Pablo is an optimist, believing that, in time, more people will discover the value of this "superfood".

"Olive oil is under appreciated. People are better educated and have more of an appreciation for wine so they are prepared to pay more for it.

"Wine is a couple of generations ahead of us. Millions of people go to a supermarket and know a good wine from a bad one.

"How many go to a supermarket and know which is the better olive oil – just a few. When we collectively understand what an exciting superfood olive oil is, there will be more than enough demand."

Which is where Pablo comes out with another of his interesting facts about olive oil.

"Olive oil is rich in anti-oxidants that can reduce the risk of certain types of cancer, arthritis, diabetes and other illnesses.

"Most importantly, its anti-oxidants are fat soluble, not water soluble.

"This means it has a natural fat shield that protects the anti-oxidants as they pass through the gastric juices of the digestive apparatus, reaching the lower intestine where they are absorbed into the blood stream and eventually offer protection to the cells from free-radicals.

"When used for cooking or drizzled over food, olive oil enhances the anti-oxidants in

other foods as well, by protecting them and therefore, making them more available for us."

Which is where he drops another interesting fact.

Unlike wine, olive oil is best fresh.

"Even the best olive oil goes off. You should always buy the freshest olive oil from one season to the next."

Extra virgin olive oil is the best to buy as it is defect free – defects not only affect the taste but also the nutritional value.

Beyond that, olive oil will vary from one producer and another, one cultivar to another, and one season to another.

This season has been a challenging one for Wairarapa's growers due to the unsettled weather with bouts of wet and dry, but Pablo suspects it will produce a pleasantly mellow oil.

Pablo is a member of the California Olive Oil Council tasting panel and a judge at international olive oil competitions in the United States, Italy, and Japan.

Bruce is hoping his presence will have a flow-on effect not only to growers but also the general public who can taste a variety of oils in the shop at The Olive Press at 14 Arbor Place, off Bidwells Cutting Road.

"You have good olive oils in Wairarapa which is quite an achievement, and the growers are doing their best. Don't take it for granted – take advantage of it."

"By buying from these growers you are supporting the local economy and that leads to multiple positive consequences."

And one final surprising fact from one of the best tasters in the world – bitterness is a positive quality – "this is the juice of a bitter fruit".



Pablo Voitzuk... lifting the bar for locally-produced olive oil
PHOTO/DAVID FAMULARO



Nau mai haere mai! All welcome!

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