

## LITTLE ITALY

Rivalling Tuscany's finest, the olive oil produced by a small farm on the banks of the Breede River is being hailed as the best blend in the world. Lisa van Aswegen samples this liquid gold

PHOTOGRAPHS **GREG COX** PRODUCTION **CORNELIA BADENHORST**  
FOOD PHOTOGRAPHS **MICHAEL LE GRANGE** PRODUCTION AND RECIPE **ABIGAIL DONNELLY**



This page: Olives are hand-picked to ensure the best quality olive oil.  
Opposite page: There are some 35 000 olive trees to be harvested on El Olivar olive farm.

The row upon row of vines for which the Cape Winelands has become famous is by now a familiar sight. Not so the flashes of silver, grey and blue of the olive trees glimpsed after turning down a gravel road just before Robertson.

To me, this valley is unfamiliar territory, but it is home to El Olivar, an efficient, compact little farm on which some 35 000 olive trees are grown. These seemingly innocuous trees bear the fruits of what will eventually become Olyfberg Extra Virgin Olive Oil – an award-winning blend, exclusive to Woolworths, that is giving Italy's olive oils a run for their money.

On what promises to be a sweltering day in the Breede River valley, El Olivar owner Frikkie Naudé points out the different olive varieties and introduces the pickers. There are plans underway, he says, to offer families working for the Naudé Farming Group a share in their own market-driven olive-farming project.

Bought 12 years ago – despite the admonitions of sceptical neighbours – the farm has a *terroir* and climate almost identical to those of Tuscany, explains Frikkie, who travelled extensively researching olive-farming conditions before purchasing the property. Farm manager André Lourens concurs: "We persevered and learnt with time and experience. But the Breede River is what gives us life. Without it, there would be nothing here".

In the factory, workers meticulously sort olives by hand. Then there is the area in which the magic is made: a brand-new olive-oil-extracting machine was installed in March, which means production has been optimised. "This is my baby," gushes olive-oil producer Pikkie Lourens, as she demonstrates the various aspects of the machine. "You have to start the oil-making process within 24 hours of picking," she explains. "Otherwise, the outer layer of the olives' skin starts to ferment, which leads to an inferior oil."

The new equipment can handle 2.5 tons of olives per hour, which translates to a phenomenal 400 litres of oil. Interestingly, it



will always be a mix of green and black olives that makes up an oil – the flavour comes from the black, and the green provides shelf life and longevity. Of course, green and black olives come from the same tree, but are picked at different stages of ripeness. Olyfberg's olive oil consists of 20 percent frantoio, 20 percent leccino and 60 percent mission olive oils, each of which lends its unique character to the blend, which is faintly grassy, has a gentle hint of pepper and is impossibly fresh and smooth.

Frikkie explains that, globally, the whole language of olive-oil production is changing. In Europe, where old presses continue to be widely used, you can still get an extra virgin and a virgin press (the first and best pressing of the olives, during which the olives are kept under a certain temperature before undergoing a second and even a third press). With this new machine, however, the olives are no longer pressed, but rather spun in a turbine at extremely high revolutions to extract the oil by centrifugal force. "The machine draws out almost all the oil in the very first round," he explains.

Add to the unique oil-extraction method the fact that the olives are hand-harvested and stored in cool conditions (below 30°C), and that contact with the air is kept to a minimum (thus preventing oxidation), and you have an extremely high-quality product.

The Italians are the first to agree – in Rome last year, they awarded Olyfberg the coveted L'Extravergine award for the best blend in the world. Not bad for a little farm quietly going about its business on the banks of the Breede River. **W**

To visit El Olivar or to arrange a tour or olive-oil tasting, tel: (023) 342-5096.

### CRUSTY OLIVE LOAF WITH THICK CREAM CHEESE AND DRIZZLED OLIVE OIL

Serves 6

Preparation time: 10 minutes

Cooking time: 1 minute

60ml (4T) Olyfberg extra virgin olive oil

10g sage leaves

1 crusty loaf olive bread, sliced

1 x 250g tub smooth cream cheese

1 x 200g bottle assorted olives

freshly ground black pepper, to taste

Place a small pan over a medium heat. Heat 15ml (1T) olive oil then fry the sage leaves until crisp and slightly darker in colour. Remove from the pan then drain on a paper towel. Serve slices of the olive loaf, generously spread with cream cheese, on a large platter. Scatter with the olives and sage leaves, and finish with a drizzle of the remaining olive oil. Add a crack of black pepper to taste.



**"THE BREEDE RIVER IS WHAT GIVES US LIFE. WITHOUT IT, THERE WOULD BE NOTHING HERE"**



This page, dockwise from top left: Owner Frikkie Naudé; up to 400 litres of olive oil are produced per hour; olive processing takes place within 24 hours of picking; award-winning Olyfberg Extra Virgin Olive Oil; olive sorting is done by hand; olive oil is made from a mixture of green and black olives. Opposite page: El Olivar olive farm.

CRUSTY OLIVE LOAF WITH THICK CREAM CHEESE AND DRIZZLED WITH OLIVE OIL