

the promised land

WHEN ZEUS BID A STAND-OFF BETWEEN ATHENA AND POSEIDON, ATHENA BROUGHT TO THE PARTY AN OLIVE TREE. THE RABIES OF WILLOW CREEK TAKE US THROUGH THE INS AND OUTS OF PRODUCING AWARD-WINNING PREMIUM QUALITY OF THE PUREST EXTRA VIRGIN OLIVE OIL FROM THIS FRUIT OF THE GODS

BY NATALIE BORUVKA PHOTOGRAPHS BY ANDREA VAN DER SPUY

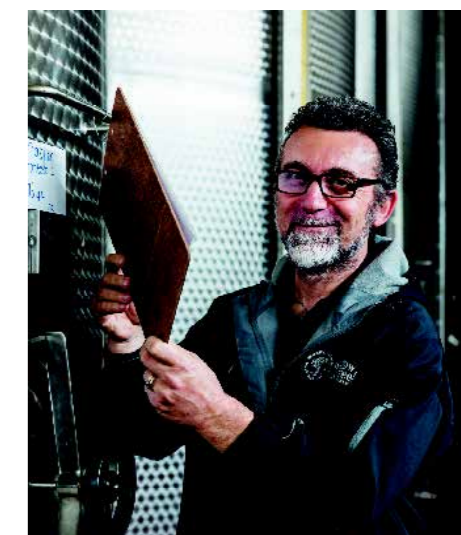
In 1999 Andries and Louise Rabie took a leap of faith. On a farm outside Worcester in the Western Cape where Andries's forefathers had toiled for more than two centuries, they planted 10 hectares of olive trees after years of farming wine grapes, table grapes, wheat, potatoes and other vegetables.

"I felt a calling to do something more significant as a farmer – something that would add real value and leave a legacy," recalls the founder and managing director of Willow Creek Olive Estate. "The decision to diversify was triggered by a dramatic drop in the price of wine. As a result, cooperatives were paying farmers a quarter of the value of their grape harvests. "We knew that in order to be in control of our own destiny, we had to bypass the middlemen and close the circle to the end-consumer with a product of our own," Andries explains.

It was a good friend who brought to light that the terroir of the Nuy Valley, in which the Rabie land lies ensconced, was ideally suited to the cultivation of olives for extra virgin olive oil (EVOO). "I discovered that the region's characteristic lime-rich soil together with a Mediterranean-type climate (defined by big fluctuations between winter and summer and day and night temperatures) promised fruit of excellent flavour maturity," says Andries. "The lower-than-required winter rainfall would be mitigated by our existing irrigation system, allowing us to water at the right time and to the right degree." To get to the point (three years later) where they would press the first 15 000 litres of EVOO required extensive research and trips to Italy, Spain, Israel, and also to Australia – a notable new-world producer.

A crucial lesson the research taught was the importance of planting different cultivars in an orchard block to allow for cross-pollination. "This cuts down the time it takes for the flower to seed by a third. It also establishes a staggered harvest period where the varieties of fruit are collected and processed at optimum ripeness – ensuring premium quality extra virgin olive oil," explains Andries. As an example he cites farms in Puglia, Italy, where only Coratina olives are cultivated. "It's just not possible to handle the quantities of a single cultivar harvest at once. You run the risk of a product that is overpoweringly bitter and peppery, because of premature harvesting or fruit so overripe and delicate that it can't be used for extra virgin olive oil," clarifies Andries.

With this knowledge, South Africa and the new-world producing countries (which include Argentina, Australia and Chile) have what Andries terms "frog-legged" the industry, and despite contributing only 3% to the world's total EVOO production, they are placed in the top 5% in terms of quality. Yet a South African perception remains that imported EVOO is of a superior quality. "We need to continually educate our consumers," says Louise, who manages the brand. "Many of the imports masquerade as an authentic product when, in fact, they comprise only a small percentage of extra virgin olive oil – the rest is made up of refined oil. This makes their pricing extremely favourable, but in terms of quality we're not comparing apples with apples – or olives with olives."



Despite an exceedingly competitive market on both the international and local fronts, Willow Creek has maintained a consistent focus on product development, resulting in a diverse portfolio of products. In addition to all three styles of EVOO (delicate, medium and intense), the estate offers a range of 11 flavoured oils. "We realised the only way to substantiate that our products are world-class and, therefore, secure the trust of retailers and consumers, is to enter them into international competitions," says Louise. Year upon year since its inception, Willow Creek has amassed a series of awards for their products – with no less than 20 in 2015 (including Best of Show for their lemon-flavoured oil at the prestigious Los Angeles International Extra Virgin Olive Oil Competition). It also boasts an impressive export market that amounts to 20% of its total yearly production. Canada holds the largest share at 10% and the other half is spread across the UAE, the UK, Germany and China.

One person who has journeyed with the Rabies from the start is Francois Cilliers. Andries took this farm worker under his wing and shared with him his knowledge. Today Francois is the principal oilmaker at Willow Creek Olive Estate. Ugo Ametta assists Francois as the estate's seasonal oil maker. A sixth generation olive-oil maker from Torremaggiore in Italy, Ugo came to Willow Creek on a three-month internship while studying food science and technology. Having enjoyed it so much, he has returned for his third harvest. "It's difficult to sell extra virgin olive oil," he says. "What you sell is a tradition and a history." Andries and Louise Rabie couldn't agree more. "I remember the first batch of oil we bottled – we assembled around it in the kitchen," Andries recalls. Nowadays, we see the products when we go shopping and nothing makes me prouder than my daughter pointing to the oil that 'daddy' makes," he smiles. WILLOW CREEK OLIVE ESTATE, NUY ROAD, WORCESTER, 6851; 023-342-5793; WILLOWCREEK.CO.ZA



For an olive oil to be classified "extra virgin" it must have a free acidity level of less than 0,8% and a peroxide value of less than 20% – proving that no valuable nutrients or antioxidants have been lost through a refinement process. This pertinent information should be clearly displayed on the bottle, along with the year of harvest, because extra virgin olive oil has a shelf life of between 18 – 24 months. For locally produced products, it's advisable to look out for the SA Olive Green Seal, which represents a commitment to compliance with international quality standards.





5 interesting facts about willow creek olive estate

1 The farm was originally named Wilgerivier after the river that irrigates the Nuy. The name was changed to the English version, Willow Creek, upon production of EVOO. The tree in the logo represents both a willow tree and an olive tree; while the curved lines under the tree represent the creek and the oil.

2 The first 15 000 litres of extra virgin olive oil produced in 2002 were bottled in ceramic decanters, the mould made from an actual olive branch cut from the first olive grove on the farm.

3 Today Willow Creek produces around 500 000 litres of extra virgin olive oil every year with olives harvested from 220 000 trees, comprising eight varietals that have been established across 280 hectares.

4 Willow Creek's olive oil is extracted by centrifuge (where an object is spun from a central point) using a top-of-the-range Peralisi continuous decanter which can process 6,5 tonnes per hour – making it the largest South African plant equipped with this leading technology.

5 Willow Creek Olive Estate is ranked the 20th best producer in the world and its Directors' Reserve Extra Virgin Olive Oil is ranked the 50th best extra virgin olive oil in the world. (evooworlddrinking.org)

