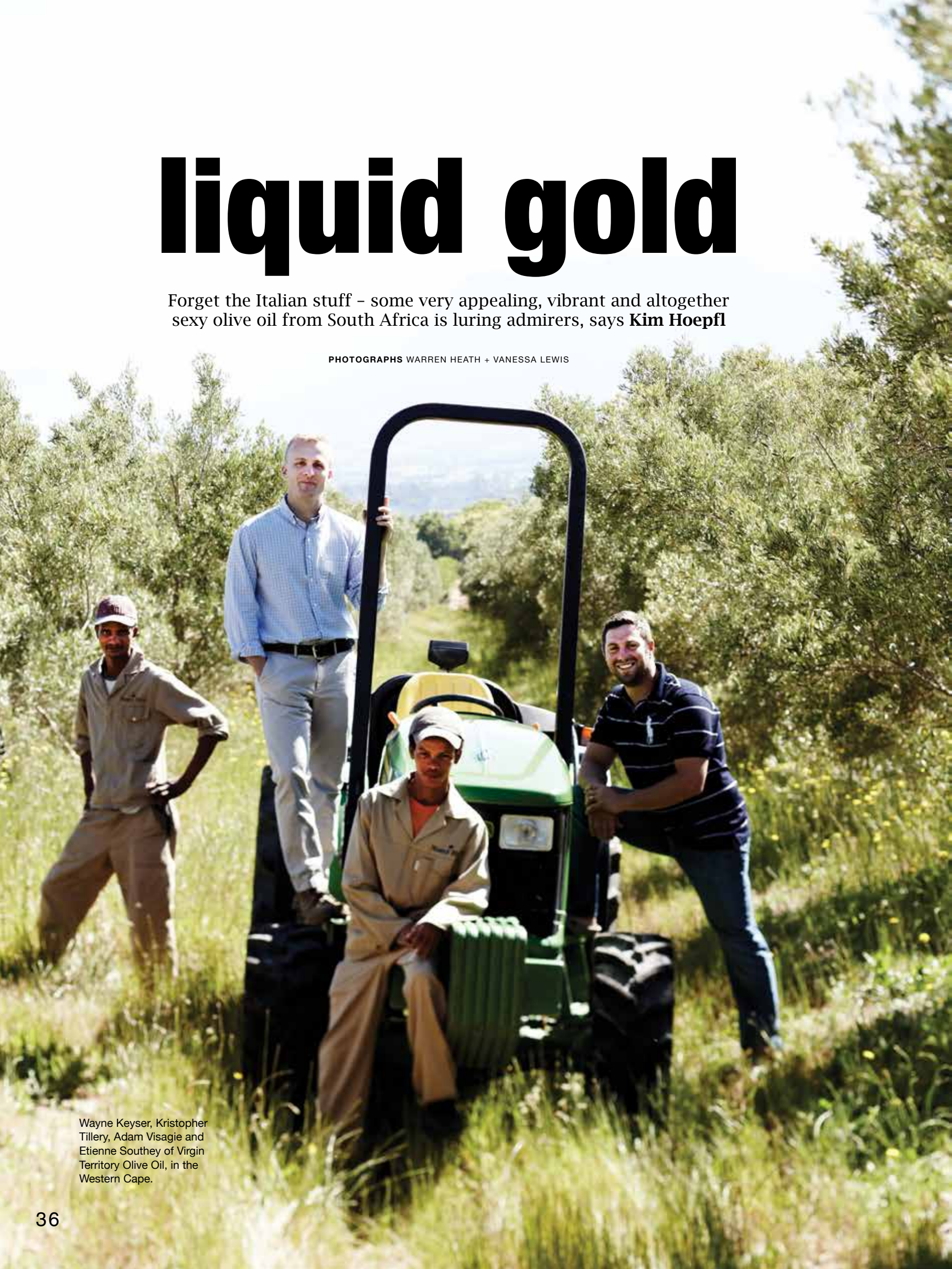


liquid gold

Forget the Italian stuff – some very appealing, vibrant and altogether sexy olive oil from South Africa is luring admirers, says **Kim Hoepfl**

PHOTOGRAPHS WARREN HEATH + VANESSA LEWIS



Wayne Keyser, Kristopher Tillery, Adam Visagie and Etienne Southey of Virgin Territory Olive Oil, in the Western Cape.



craft.

THE GOOD NEWS IS THAT THE CAPE, winelands and beyond, is the emerging home of excellent olive oil, comparable to the best oils that its Spanish and Italian counterparts can offer, with awards to prove it. As a cook, I can support this, having long ago ditched the perception that olive oils shipped in from another hemisphere are, at the price, fresher or nicer than anything that the Cape has to offer.

where it all begins – the olive tree

The olive tree is extremely hardy. Its wide and deep root system ensures its survival even in conditions of next to no water. It might also explain why olive trees can end up looking gnarled and twisted, from age and lack of moisture. It prospers in the hot, dry climates of the eastern Mediterranean, its home, where you'll find famous olive oil producing regions in Spain and Southern Italy. It also thrives close to the sea where, unlike other plants, it can cope with the increased salinity of the underground water. In fact, the more poor and saline the soil, the better the olive tree fares. The Cape has a similar climate to the eastern Mediterranean – mild, with wet winters and long, hot, dry summers – so it's no surprise that olive trees flourish here too.

olive oil in South Africa

Ferdinando Costa, an Italian immigrant who alighted in the Cape in 1903, is credited as being the first person to unite the Cape's climate with the growing of olives on a commercial basis. He began experimenting by grafting cultivated olives onto the rootstock of the indigenous wild olive, and later propagated thousands of grafted olive trees using his native Italian cultivars of Leccino and Frantoio. But Ferdinando truly set the ball rolling on commercial olive growing when, in the mid-1920s, he bought a farm in Paarl. This he populated with olive trees, and later ramped into full production by installing a mill on the farm, to produce Costa's Olive Oil.

Even though olives are now dotted all over South Africa, even the Northern Cape and Gauteng, the Western Cape is still the most productive region, where olive growing has expanded from Paarl to the Riebeek Valley, McGregor and Hermanus, and the Klein Karoo. Olive oils emanating from the Klein Karoo especially are gaining a reputation for being the most exciting of all. This is because the slow-growing olive tree is partial to slightly limestone soils, which are found in the area.

making olive oil

Eaten raw, olives are indescribably bitter and foul, practically inedible. To render them edible, you either have to immerse them for days in a saline solution to remove this bitterness, as in the case of table olives, or press them, to make olive oil.

The only difference between a green olive and a black olive is that a black olive is ripe, and a green olive is not. A green olive will have been picked early in the season, and a black olive much later. In South Africa, olives are gathered at the end of their growing season, in autumn and through into early winter. A nearly ripe olive (not green, but not yet completely black either) possesses a lot more phenolics (those delicious grassy, peppery aromas that make fresh extra virgin olive oil smell the way it does), so olive oil makers like to include a few of those. 'An oil made purely from thoroughly ripe olives,' says Linda Costa, granddaughter of Ferdinando, 'will be a lot more viscous in texture and a lot more subdued.'

Olive collecting and processing is relatively straightforward and needs minimal mechanical technology. Olives are gathered, either by picking by hand (the gentlest method which does not bruise the fruit) or shaking the tree (slightly more aggressive). A fresh olive's aromatic compounds will dissipate in the heat, so, to retain them, says Linda, 'you need cool olives. So if the olives are picked in the midday heat, they should be allowed to cool before pressing. Either that or pick them early in the morning – and keep them cool while pressing'. This is why the 'cold pressed' olive oils are the ones to look out for. To make olive oil, the olives – skin, pit and all – are gently crushed or ground by a giant press that extrudes the oil.

what should a good olive oil taste like?

A good olive oil has a clear bright green colour and an intense fragrance akin to freshly cut grass. In the mouth, its feel is full and silky, ridged with a pleasant biting acidity. It should taste unmistakably fresh and peppery and catch the back of your throat a bit when it goes down, leaving a sweetish, peppery aftertaste.

what to look for when buying an olive oil

In a supermarket, you are likely to be confronted with three quality variants of olive oil. In descending order, they are: extra virgin olive oil (preferably cold pressed), olive oil and pomace olive oil.



COLD PRESSED EXTRA VIRGIN OLIVE OIL A good olive oil is a cold pressed extra virgin olive oil. If the label says ‘extra virgin olive oil’, it means several things: that the oil was the first to run off the press; that the oil is completely natural and unadulterated, and free of chemical additives; that the oil will have the fresh, grassy characteristics so prized by olive oil lovers; that it retains all the wonderful aromas and antioxidants of having been cold pressed; and, on the palate, that it could vary from being very delicate and mellow in taste to quite bitter and pungent.

Of course, an oil like this will carry a premium price. You can expect to pay anything from R50 to R80 for 500ml of the good stuff, and upward of R120 for a litre. But you need very little of it, and it’s good for you, so it’s worth it.

OLIVE OIL Next in line off the press is olive oil, not as pure a product as the extra virgin. Olive oil is a combination of refined olive oil and extra virgin oil, or the second pressing of the pile of olive mash left over from the first pressing. As the poorer cousin, deprived of the zippy flavours and aromas of extra virgin olive oil, and cheaper as a result, olive oil is the one to use for cooking.

POMACE OLIVE OIL Avoid pomace olive oil, no matter how attractive the price. It is a product arrived at by adding chemical solvent to the olive pomace (mashed skins and pips left over from the first and second pressing) to extract the last possible drops of oil. It is a refined product devoid of the flavour and health benefits of the real McCoy. Given the choice, you are far better off with a sunflower or canola oil.

how long does it last?

Correctly stored (sealed in an airtight container, kept away from light and heat), an olive oil can keep for up to a year. Its ability to withstand aging depends on the quantity of antioxidants (phenols) it contains and how well it is sealed.

olive cultivars

There are many, many different cultivars, or varieties, of olive from which oil can be made, almost as many as there are countries that historically have produced olive oil. Greece, Italy, Syria, Spain, Portugal, Croatia and more, each have cultivars they like to call their own. Locally, you’ll see more exotic-sounding names starting to appear on labels, like Nocellara del Belice, Barnea and Koroneiki, but for the time being, Leccino, Frantoio, Coratina and Mission cultivars dominate oil making. These are favoured for a number of reasons – the quantity of oil they yield, the flavour and aroma of that oil, its acidity, when it ripens, and its shelf life, determined by the quantity of antioxidants it contains.

Frantoio, Leccino and Coratina comprise the principal cultivars from which Tuscan olive oil is made. With the industry’s Italian origins, historically Frantoio and Leccino have been the most favoured for planting in South Africa. Leccino is the milder and sweeter of the two (a medium intensity oil), while Frantoio is far more intense – robust, pungently fragrant and its aftertaste more lingering. The robustness and intensity of Coratina is somewhere between the two.

Mission olives, from Southern California via Spain, are dual purpose. They suit being made into table olives as well as conversion into olive oil. For the latter, Mission olives produce a delicate oil with a lower phenol content, making it considerably less bitter and pungent than oil produced from Frantoio olives.

...and matching cultivars with food

According to SA Olive, the South African Olive Oil Industry watchdog that monitors the quality of our oils, olive oils can be classified according to their personality – intensely fruity, medium intensity or delicate.

When matching oils with food, similar rules apply to matching with wine – more robust oils go with more robust cooking methods and flavours. For example, olive oil and roast fillet of beef are great friends, and a Frantoio olive oil can stand up to the charred, smoky, meaty flavours. On the other hand, a delicate salad of leaves or simply prepared artichokes would prefer a milder oil, like Leccino. Medium to soft oils are also better with fresh fish, chicken and salads – and mayonnaise, if you’re up to making it from scratch. If you are, try using half olive oil and half sunflower, grape seed or canola oil. If made purely from olive oil, the resulting mayonnaise can be quite overpowering.

PRODUCT PIC C+D HEIERLI



Lucia, Piero and Gabriele Viglietti, of Miramonti Olive Oil, in the Western Cape.

craft.



Patrick and Veronica
Jonsson of Mkholo Olive
Farm, in Gauteng.

olive oil is healthy stuff

Olive oil is so delicious because it's almost pure fat. This means that while it's dense in calories it's still so good for you that it's practically medicinal – there are good kinds and bad kinds of fat, and olive oil is most definitely a good one. Our bodies actually need the fats it contains. The good ones allow certain vitamins that are soluble in fat only to be available to you; it contains essential fatty acids, omega-3 or omega-6, that your body cannot manufacture and it actively combats cholesterol in the blood stream. When I say olive oil, I mean the cold pressed extra virgin kind – this is the richest source of cholesterol combating polyphenols (antioxidants) that do this.

Any other oil, like that labeled 'olive oil' or worse yet 'pomace olive oil', is not going to be able to help you to the same extent. This is because the mechanical and chemical processing to which they have been subjected has stripped them of the precise ingredients that do the good work.

olive oil producers

VIRGIN TERRITORY OLIVE OIL Kristopher Tillery is a fun-loving American who came to town via Nebraska and a long stint in Nigeria where his family was in 'the oil business' of another kind. At 29 years of age, this management consultant snubbed the rat race early to take up farming instead 'because there are very few businesses left in the modern world where you see a product through from start to finish'. His farm, on the opposite side of the Simonsberg mountain to Stellenbosch, is called Noble Hill and here he 'loves the whole story' of making wine and olive oil, being especially glad to produce something where his customers can trace the origin of what they buy. Mother and business partner, Kathleen, busies herself in Cosecho, the farm eatery that specialises in her native Southern Californian cuisine (think Mexican and Latin American). The Tillerys decided to farm here because the scenery was good, but also because 'the Simonsberg/Paarl region defines the soil and weather, and is well suited to olives'. His harvest of Mission, Frantoio, Kalamata and Manzanilla olives is so small that the fruit is picked by hand, an individual treatment that allows the olives to be picked at exact ripeness, allowing for a very consistent product. Virgin Territory olive oil bottles are beguilingly beautiful, highlighting again the 'distinction and authenticity' of his product. Designed to be fully re-usable, they are aimed at 'people making conscious decisions about what they buy'. Even though we have a lot to thank the Italians for, Tillery is on a mission to change perceptions that good olive oil only comes from Italy, something



which all the products on this page support. **VIRGIN TERRITORY OLIVE OIL IS AVAILABLE FROM MELISSA'S IN THE CAPE OR DIRECTLY FROM THE FARM. TEL. 021 874 3844; WWW.NOBLEHILL.CO.ZA.**

MIRAMONTI OLIVE OIL Gabriele Viglietti is the son of Mario and Otavia Viglietti, Italians from Turin. His accountant father accepted the rule that accountants are boring, loved hunting and followed a Missionary priest uncle to Tanzania to pursue his pleasure. With time, the family ended up in Cape Town where the seven mechanic-and-engineer sons followed Papa's wishes and went into business together, opening a small motor car repair firm. Unsurprisingly, it specialised in Italian cars. Today, most of Gabriele's brothers have retired and Viglietti Motors has established itself as the sole importer of all Ferraris and Maseratis in South Africa, as well as being responsible for the delicate work of their maintenance. Round about the time Viglietti Motors opened up, Gabriele started dating Linda Hands. He also eyed her family's olive trees on their farm near Kuil's River. These had been planted by Linda's father, Harry, from saplings he had brought back from Italian groves after the second World War, where he had been won over by their good looks. Gabriele married Linda and was 'dying to make my own olive oil', so the couple planted more trees. But there was no pressing machine locally available that was capable of handling small batches of a few kilograms to make Gabriele's dream come true. Most machines were designed to accommodate three tons at a time. But Gabriele is a mechanic and loves machines and working with his hands, so he started scouting around for something dinky and Italian to press his olives with. He even tinkered with making his own for a while before fellow Italian, Giorgio Dalla Cia, put him onto the Ogliomio brand. The result is that Gabriele now imports this little Italian machine too. It presses about 50 kilograms at a time, and Gabriele delights in showing his farmer clients how his little beauties work. 'Olive oil producers are a different kind of people,' he says, 'they are all wonderful'. The 2 000-odd litres of Mission and Frantoio oil that the Ogliomio presses for the Viglietti family is distributed between their dinner table and lucky friends. None of it is for sale I'm afraid,

“Olive oil is so delicious because it’s almost pure fat. This means that while it’s dense in calories it’s still so good for you that it’s practically medicinal – there are good kinds and bad kinds of fat, and olive oil is most definitely a good one.”

but Gabriele has been known to throw in a bottle or two if you buy a Ferrari from him.

MKHOLO OLIVE FARM Like each producer listed here, Mkholo Olive Farm is a family-run boutique operation producing a superior product. What makes it unusual is that Mkholo olive groves burgeon on the rain-shadowed southern slopes of a valley that lean off the edge of the Highveld escarpment. The combination of rain shadow and southern slopes create conditions which make it possible to grow olives in the Highveld, an area where the climate is otherwise the reverse of what olives need, with its very cold winters and wet summers. Although there are about 50 olive growers in the Gauteng area, this is the first commercially viable olive grove. Owner Patrick Jonsson describes it as ‘an extraordinary pioneering feat’ and die-hard Johannesburg olive oil enthusiasts can’t get on his database quickly enough. Where else could they purchase the seasons’ new olive oil straight from pressing? Actually, the groves are located in Johannesburg’s immediate periphery, in Broederstroom, 50 kilometres away. It was never this retired cattle rancher and maize and tobacco farmer from Zimbabwe’s idea to grow olives, when he and his wife Veronica, the green fingers in the family, planted a few olive trees because they ‘thought they would look pretty’. But Patrick is a farmer and the idea took, and now they have a couple of hundred trees in the ground – Frantoio, Mission and Coratina – and are producing 3 000 litres of oil yearly, enough to keep Veronica busy around the clock. Due to their distinctive ‘terroir’, Gauteng olives taste different to Cape olives, says Patrick: ‘They are softer and more aromatic, with a gentler aroma and less peppery.’ So far the Jonsson’s, who have been producing olive oil since 2008, have only sold their olive oil to customers lucky enough to be on their database. Even though their production is expanding, they intend to stick to their policy of maintaining personal relationships with clients, ‘just like a small wine producer’. Plans for the future include a small farm shop (which will be open by December) and days of olive picking on the farm. I can’t wait. **MKHOLO OLIVE OIL IS AVAILABLE FROM THE FARM AND CAN BE ORDERED ONLINE. TEL. 074 146 1706; MKHOLO@IAFRICA.CO.ZA; WWW.MKHOLO.CO.ZA**

OLIVES GO WILD Linda Costa is the granddaughter of Ferdinando Costa, an Italian from Tuscany. This is the man who, back in the 30s, began a small nursery in Woodstock with the bright idea of

grafting Italian olive cultivars onto the rootstock of the indigenous South African olienhout tree (some trees still prosper in an orchard in Hout Bay and at the Mount Nelson Hotel). The olienhout tree flourished but did not produce fruit, so it made sense, he figured, to graft his native fruit-bearing Tuscan stock onto these sturdy African roots. The ball for olives and olive oil produced by the Costa family has been rolling ever since. Entrepreneurism ran thick in Granddad’s veins: he went on to establish the Cape’s first commercially productive olive grove. His eldest son, in the grand old Italian tradition, inherited that farm. Linda’s father, being the younger, inherited nothing but the name. Instead he bought his own farm and produced table olives instead. Needless to say, Linda ate a lot of olives and olive oil when she was growing up. It literally runs in her veins, so it’s not really surprising that she now produces her own. What is surprising is that she is a microbiologist by training, and had no intention of following this path. Things changed when suddenly her father needed help with his harvest and she relented, eventually learning everything she knows from him. She said goodbye to her PhD and hello to becoming an olive oil entrepreneur and industry champion, just like granddad. ‘Olives go Wild’ is the latest embodiment of Costa family olive oil. Linda and her partner Sandra van Schaik produce it by sourcing fresh seasonal olives according to where they find quality they are prepared to put their name to. ‘Climatic conditions differ from year to year, so will cultivars. Our blend differs according to what is good that year,’ says Linda. These days, Linda favours olives that come from the Klein Karoo region. Her training in microbiology is handy – her oil is packaged anaerobically so that the precious liquid within is never exposed to its greatest enemy: oxygen. ‘This makes such a difference, because the oil never loses aroma. Released as you need it from a tap, the oil remains fresh to the last drop.’ **OLIVES GO WILD IS AVAILABLE FROM SELECTED PICK ‘N PAY STORES IN THE WESTERN CAPE, AND ONLINE FROM WWW.OLIVESGOWILD.CO.ZA. LINDA’S OTHER WEBSITE WWW.OLIVEDIRECTORY.CO.ZA IS PACKED WITH INFORMATION ABOUT OLIVES AND OLIVE GROWING IN SOUTH AFRICA. ♦**

Visit www.wine-style.co.za for more info about olive oil and to find out when the next olive oil festival is on.

RIGHT Linda Costa and Sandra van Schaik of Olives Go Wild, in the Western Cape.

