

# Extra, Extra!

BY MALU LAMBERT

Harvest is winding down at Mount Ceder. Yet the olive trees are still heavy with drupes, glossy purple against silver narrow leaves. Harvesters work in silence, punctuated by the rush and tumble of the midnight ovals as they're

collected in buckets.

The farm is located at the southern entrance of The Cederberg Conservancy, surrounded by dramatic sandstone mountains. The people at **MOUNT CEDER** have been farming olives here for the last ten years; the farm grew tobacco previously. There's harmony in

farming the ancient olive in this millennia-old place. The world's oldest olive groves, in Lebanon, are more than 6 000 years old and still producing. Cederberg is old in its own way, known for both its fossils and Bushman art.

Farm manager, Pieter Vorster says the area is also known as 'the

valley of the waves', from a theory that it used to be under the ocean. Looking at the cliffs, it's not hard to imagine that waves once carved the rock.

Pieter's job is to watch over the 22 000 trees, in an environment 500 metres above sea level. "The climate is perfect," he says. "Hot summers and cold, dry winters. Olive trees don't like getting their feet wet."

"We farm as naturally as possible, using no pesticides or herbicides." Pieter, his wife and two young daughters call the farm home, revelling in the remote location's raw scenery.

The farm has pleasant accommodation, too: simple yet modern cottages, which have been designed to let the outdoors spill in, as well as a variety of camping sites. Pieter tells us a leopard often visits the farm's waterfall. There's no shortage of animal

critters; fox, buck, and porcupine make this olive farm their home, too.

The majority of the olive crop is premium Kalamata, though there are also plantings of Frantoio, which are pressed to make extra virgin olive oil. "It's a delicate oil," says Pieter. "We harvest the olives a little later in the season, when they are 50% ripe." In season, visitors can join in on the olive harvest and take home their pickings.

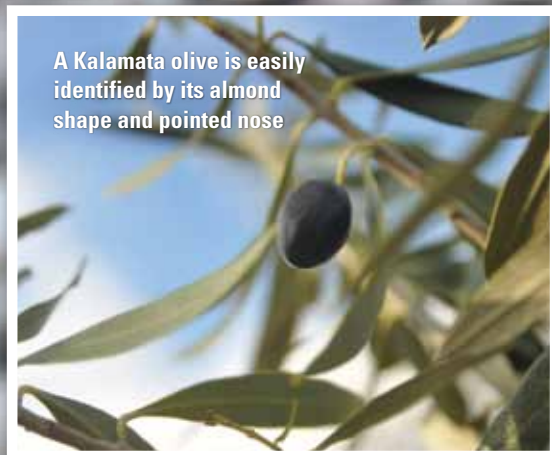
Pieter is positive about this relatively young industry in South Africa. "There's so much opportunity," he says. And, with the South African Olive Industry Association in place to promote the country's olive culture and its producers, the future is looking as golden as its oil, from awards that recognise the best local producers to mentorship programmes for olive farmers.

## How to Taste Olive Oil

In much the same way as in wine-tasting, there's an art to assessing and tasting olive oil. Francie Roodbol, nursery manager at Willow Creek, shares her expertise.

Use a tulip-shaped glass; the narrow top ensures that the aromas don't escape, dilute or evaporate before it is smelled and tasted. The aromatic polyphenols are released best at 28°C, so try to warm it slightly by cupping the glass in your palms and swirling the oil along the sides of the glass. This allows a higher surface area from which the polyphenols can be released and experienced. The aromas should be clean, fresh and pleasant without any traces of rancidity, mould or wine-y volatiles. After smelling the olive oil, take a sip to cover the tongue. The flavour is released when air is sucked over the oil on the palate. This somewhat noisy exercise is known as 'stripaggio' in Italian.

The flavours of the oil are experienced on the tongue, while the bitterness can be tasted at the back of the tongue and the pungency at the back of the throat. The fruity flavour, bitterness and pungency must be in balance, and the intensity of the olive oil is determined by these three combining factors.



A Kalamata olive is easily identified by its almond shape and pointed nose



All picked and ready



Morgenster: it's a hive of activity during harvest.



## OTHER FARMS TO VISIT

### Mount Ceder Olive Farm

In a valley surrounded by the Cederberg and the Koue Bokkeveld mountain ranges in the Western Cape lies Mount Ceder Olive Estate.

Olive trees thrive in this semi-desert region, where the average annual rainfall is about 100mm pa. A total of 25 000 trees have been planted yielding a total production of 600 tons of olives. These genuine Kalamata olives are well known as superior table olives. Frantoia trees are used as cross pollinators, producing an oil of exceptional quality and taste.

Biological friendly farming is practiced on Mont Ceder, using only the absolute minimum foliage fertilizer. The isolated location of the grove, as well as a very healthy natural ecosystem keeps the pests at bay. [www.mountceder.co.za](http://www.mountceder.co.za).

### Olyfberg

Situated on the banks of the Breede River, near Roberstson, Olyfberg produces high quality, flavourful olive oil—proven by the many awards they have won.

Not only do they produce tasty olive products, including tapenade and a delicious balsamic vinegar, they also offer body butter and other beauty products that will leave your skin feeling silky and smooth, all made from their home-grown olives.

They have also just launched an easy-to-use, no mess, no fuss, tap box, now available in stores. Olive trees are also available for sale on the farm. [www.olyfberg.co.za](http://www.olyfberg.co.za)



Morgenster's olive and wine tasting



The silver-green leaf of the olive tree is the United Nation's official Symbol of Peace



Carol Drinkwater

## THE OLIVE FARM

Carol Drinkwater is the best-selling author of autobiographical series, *The Olive Farm*, centred around her farm, *Appassionata*, in the south of France. Her books are a must-read for anyone who loves olives, or indeed the romance of Provençal life.

### TELL US ABOUT YOUR BOOKS.

I live on a shabby olive farm overlooking the Bay of Cannes. I bought the place with a Frenchman who asked me to marry him on our first date (28 years ago!). It has been a story of struggle, success, loss and regeneration. All of my *Olive Farm* books have been inspired by our personal stories. I have also written about my journeys around the Mediterranean in quest of the secrets of the olive tree, its stories and its history.

### WHAT DOES THE OLIVE TREE MEAN TO YOU?

Everything! The beauty and mystery of the tree is an inspiration to me. Earlier this year we completed five documentary films titled *The Olive Route*. Each film takes the viewer to a different region of the Mediterranean and recounts stories of olive trees and olive farming.

### HOW DO YOU KNOW WHEN YOUR GROVE IS READY TO BE HARVESTED?

I make the decision. We pick early, when the fruits are still green or just turning mottled mauve. It gives a sharp, peppery oil high in polyphenols.

### WHAT DO YOU THINK MAKES YOUR BOOKS SO REMARKABLE?

I would like to think they are celebrations of nature, the seasons, the earth and its fruits.

### HAVE YOU EVER VISITED SA?

I love South Africa. I have even visited one or two olive farms, where I tasted excellent olive oil.

**R**IO LARGO OLIVE ESTATE is on the banks of the Breede River between Worcester and Robertson. It netted triple gold for its extra virgin olive oil at South Africa's most recent awards. Owners, Nick and Brenda Wilkinson, spent twenty years in central Africa, where Nick established a reputation for "fixing" failed large-scale farming enterprises. The couple then turned their focus to olive farming. The estate is a one-stop-shop from planting to bottling, with olive groves and an olive tree nursery as well as an Oliomio olive-processing plant, all on-site.

One of the largest olive farms in South Africa is **WILLOW CREEK**. Nursery manager, Francie Roodbol, oversees

200 000 trees on 260 hectares. "You have to respect the trees," says Francie. "The young plants we produce in the nursery will most probably outlive both us and our children. A

*'When you're next trawling the supermarket aisles, look out for the SA Olive CTC seal. Buying local is lekker and in the case of olives, far better too'*

healthy olive tree has a lifespan of far more than 100 years. Nothing happens quickly with olives. Full production potential is sometimes realised only in year six or seven after planting."

The farm has an extensive range

of oils and olive products. The flagship Directors' Reserve is a robust extra virgin with Coratina as the predominant cultivar. It has aromas of "artichoke and tomato vines".

What variety of olive works best in South Africa? "No one cultivar can be singled out," says Francie. "A farmer has to choose cultivars which suit the soil, climate and level of mechanisation. Oils extracted from different cultivars are blended to create complex flavour profiles. Planting a variety of cultivars also allows for more extensive cross pollination and a higher yield."

Gerrie Duvenage, who has been the Olive Division Manager at **MORGENSTER ESTATE** for 18 years, agrees, and says

there are many cultivars that can be grown on SA soil. Though he agrees that varieties Favolosa, Frantoio and Coratina grow the best on our soil, Gerrie thinks the farm's award-winning olive oil is due to a combination of the very rocky terroir and the special cultivars from Italy. The Somerset West farm also produces two high quality Bordeaux style red wines that age beautifully and a range of wines made with Italian grapes.

**T**here are a number of challenges facing the local olive industry. One of the biggest is that South African extra virgin olive oils have to compete in the local market with heavily subsidised, cheaper imports, which are often adulterated or of poor quality, and frequently erroneously

labelled as extra virgin.

Another wine farm pressing and pickling olives is **KLOOVENBURG**. The farm is in the heart of what is becoming South Africa's very own olive country—Riebeek Kasteel, which holds a popular olive festival each year. You can not only try their delicious tapenade, extra virgin oil and table olives, but they also make olive-based beauty products.

Farms aside, when you're next trawling the supermarket aisles, look out for the SA Olive CTC seal. The South African Olive Industry Association has awarded this branding to all the best quality, locally produced olive products.

Buying local is *lekker*—and in the case of olives, far better too. **GT**