

# BOOM

A JOURNAL OF CALIFORNIA



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MARC FLACKS

## New Missionaries

In the olive groves of the Golden State

**T**he production of olive oil in California has deep roots. Generations of Californians have been seduced by olive trees and their promise of a liquid bonanza. California is now reported to be in the midst of an olive oil boom or a “liquid gold rush,” but in fact, the state is witnessing its third or fourth effort to establish a viable olive oil industry. The Spanish missionaries began producing olive oil in California around 1803. After that, Italian immigrants in the mid-nineteenth century started producing olive oil when their Gold Rush dreams failed to pan out, and in the twentieth century, entrepreneurs tried to compete against the dominant European olive oil industry.

Even though California olive oil represents only a tiny fraction of today’s world market, the state may be poised to become a major global player because of the creative efforts of family-run agribusinesses, legislation aimed at defining high quality, “extra

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The super-high-density olive grove at California Olive Ranch.

virgin” oil, and the implementation of a relatively new high-density growing method imported from Spain. Every new attempt to cultivate this industry in the Golden State has been accompanied by new myths about olive trees and the natural suitability of California for producing the golden oil. As something of an insider to the industry and an academic researcher, and therefore something of an outsider too, I’ve been curious about the people at the forefront of this potential boom and the new myths they are creating.

My own olive oil journey began by accident in Santa Barbara, where I grew up. When I rode my bike or moped down Olive Street on my way to Santa Barbara High School, my tires would slide perilously when braking, and I would wonder why the city allowed all the fruit from the olive trees lining the road to drop and grease the street, instead of harvesting them and putting them to good use. Then, when I moved to the Sacramento area in 2007 to begin teaching sociology at Yuba College, I read in the *Sacramento Bee* that University of California, Davis, having settled too many suits filed by bicyclists injured in accidents caused by oil from fallen olives, decided to harvest their trees and ultimately establish the UC Davis Olive Center, transforming a liability into an asset. Yuba College, it turns out, sits on the site of an old olive grove and, when I noticed a feral grove near campus, I obtained permission to hold a volunteer community olive harvest there and began establishing 49er Olive Oil, a nonprofit olive oil venture.

My self-appointed olive oil mission has been not only to get 49er Olive Oil up and running, but to immerse myself in the world of California olive oil and to try to grasp its significance in sociological, historical, geographical, and mythical terms. Traversing a California divided into familiar binaries such as Northern/Southern, coastal/inland, organic/conventional, liberal/conservative, urban/rural, government/industry, profit/nonprofit, etc. I’ve talked with many of today’s olive oil missionaries to better understand the ideals, goals, and strategies they hope this time will avoid the industry busts of the past.

### Santa Barbara’s Old Missions

Because my curiosity about California olive oil began in Santa Barbara, I started my exploration there.

There is an old myth that California’s first olive tree was planted by Father Junipero Serra in 1769, the year that the governor of Baja and Alta California, Gaspar de Portolá, led an expedition to San Diego to establish the first of California’s twenty-one missions. Aside from shade and food, Spanish missionaries needed olive oil for sacramental purposes. Although the actual historical record of olive propagation and Spanish conquest diverges from myth—there is no reliable evidence that Serra planted the first tree—the evidence that olive trees and their fruit were central to the lives and work of Spanish missionaries is still visible up and down the state.



As this Mission olive tree on the State Capitol grounds grew over the past century, the tags bent and were embedded in its trunk.

In partnership with the Santa Barbara Trust for Historic Preservation, Santa Barbara's Old Mission has planted a new olive grove called Stations of the Cross Olive Garden Path. The grove is meant to serve multiple purposes, including providing revenue to the mission and the trust through olive oil sales, providing shade, connecting visitors to biblical history, and simply providing a place for quiet contemplation.

The trust has also partnered with Mission Santa Inés to grow olive trees and involve citizen volunteers in helping to produce nonprofit olive oil. They are hoping to gain state park status for a historic grist and mill, and they are creating new opportunities for visitors to gain hands-on understanding of California history.

### Olivos Del Mar

Over the coastal range from Santa Ynez, near Refugio Canyon, is the Makela family spread. The Makelas trace

their heritage back to the original Spanish settlers in Santa Barbara and acknowledge that, while planting avocados would probably be more profitable, they consider olives to be their family tradition and legacy. A sign hanging above the entrance to their offices reads, "100 years and 9 generations of Santa Barbara tradition in every product."

The Makela family's work blends historical preservation and innovation. Craig Makela, past president of the Santa Barbara Trust for Historic Preservation, led the planting of olive trees at the Old Missions in Santa Barbara and Santa Ynez. He also has helped plant olive trees to support the nonprofit mission of the Young America Foundation, which now operates the Ronald Reagan ranch, situated in Refugio Canyon in the mountains overlooking the Makelas' olive ranch.

Aside from the "social entrepreneurship" of planting olive trees to help nonprofit organizations, though, the Makelas are energetic businesspeople. They recently received a patent for Oleavicin, a lip balm made from olive leaves.



The cemetery at Mission Santa Inés is shaded by historic Mission Olive trees.

### Rancho Olivos

Shannon Casey and John Copeland operate all aspects of their olive venture, Rancho Olivos, from planting the trees to selling the oil—and with it, a promise of a Californian lifestyle.

Their mission goes beyond earning money and includes protecting the environment. In planting their orchard, they were careful to plant around existing oak trees, even dead ones. They also see their work as connecting to their community's history. Antique items are repurposed—for example, an old carriage that was once used for house calls by the country doctor of Los Olivos and is now a sign holder at their farm stand.

Los Olivos, in the Santa Ynez Valley in North Santa Barbara County, was once heavily planted with olive groves, but today there are only a handful of small operations, hoping to capitalize on the winery "agritourism" that has thrived in that region at least since the release of the movie *Sideways*.

As a product, olive oil promises a whiff of the Mediterranean *dolce vita* that blends labor with leisure. Casey and Copeland are particularly proud of their oil infused with Meyer lemons. They live, work, and play at their olive ranch, and they sell visitors an entire California lifestyle with every bottle of olive oil.

### Berkeley Olive Grove

Darro and Olivia Grieco purchased a 400-acre grove of Mission olive trees planted in 1913 by University of California, Berkeley professors, in the shadow of Table Mountain in Oroville in the Sacramento Valley. The Berkeley professors had hoped to create a pension for themselves by making olive oil, and the Griecos hoped to finance their retirement by selling off pieces of the land for luxury villas. But they fell in love with the old trees and decided to put the land in trust so the trees would always be protected.



Dan Flynn and Selina Wang in the Olive Center's lab at UC Davis.

Now the Griecos generate income by making olive oil from the fruit of the vintage trees and by capitalizing on the particular qualities of their historic trees. The Griecos also emphasize conviviality and the healthful benefits of their oil as part of an Old World lifestyle. In marketing their oil, the Griecos emphasize its exceptionally high levels of polyphenols, the antioxidants that provide much of the healthful qualities of extra virgin olive oil. Visiting chemists from Greece have found unique genetic qualities in their trees. Their oils have won numerous medals, including Best in Show at the Los Angeles Olive Oil Competition, one of the most prestigious medals in the industry.

### The California Olive Oil Council

In 1992, the Northern California Olive Oil Council changed its name to the California Olive Oil Council, and ever since it has been working to unite the state's producers in an effort to define and standardize high-quality California extra

virgin olive oil. Previous efforts to grow the California olive oil industry—including the era of the Berkeley professors—have faltered because prices for European olive oil are consistently lower than California producers have historically been able to achieve. The main reason for this, industry insiders insist, is that European olive oil imported into the United States is not high quality and/or not authentic. In some cases, the oil is not extra virgin, even though it may be labeled as such, and in other cases, the oil is adulterated with other ingredients, such as vegetable oil.

The council's main activity is a certification program that allows producers to have their oil tested and, if their product passes muster, to include a seal on their label certifying it as "extra virgin." The council's testing process uses both laboratory analysis and sensory analysis. To pass, oils must have an acidity level of less than 0.5 percent and have a low primary oxidation level. In addition, the majority of an eight-member panel of trained tasters must find that the oil is free of defects (such as being "musty," "fusty," or



Sample products from the Makela family's Olivos Del Mar company.

“dreggy”) while also possessing “fruity” characteristics. The council’s standards for extra virginity are more stringent than those of the International Olive Council (the free acidity level standard is higher, for example). Unfortunately, even those standards don’t apply to imported olive oil because the United States does not belong to the international council.

The California council is hoping to establish a clear line between the imported oils Americans are used to and the higher-quality oil now being produced in California. The hope is that consumers will be willing to pay a premium for certified California extra virgin oil once they understand the differences. Aside from serving as a trade organization for the state’s producers, the council’s highest priority mission is educating consumers around themes such as “Why California?” and “Olive Oil 101,” helping them better understand olive oil characteristics—for example, that the bitterness and astringency of some California olive oils are not defects but are indications of their high levels of polyphenol antioxidants, which are attributes of high-quality olive oil.

### UC Davis Olive Center

California produces only a tiny fraction of all the olive oil consumed in the United States today. Although establishing quality standards for the state’s oil and educating consumers are necessary steps for gaining market share from the imports, they are not sufficient. The industry’s biggest players—producers like the California Olive Ranch—see a need for a research and training program that can help growers, millers, and retailers build a mature industry that can challenge the large multinationals that dominate the world market for olive oil.

In 2008, UC Davis opened the Olive Center housed in the Robert Mondavi Institute for Wine and Food Science. The Center’s tag line is “Doing for olives what UC Davis did for wine.” Dan Flynn, the founding executive director of the center, jokes that the olive oil industry is currently in the “Hearty Burgundy” phase that wine used to be in during the 1970s, when cheap jug wines defined California oenology.



The grove at Rancho Olivos is planted around old oak trees.

In 2011, the Center released “Evaluation of Extra-Virgin Olive Oil Sold in California,” a report that created an international stir. The report found that 70 percent of imported oils failed the International Olive Council’s standard for extra virgin olive oil. This and other research has provided ammunition in the Olive Center’s efforts to advocate for legislation aimed at regulating California olive oil.

### State Senator Lois Wolk

State Senator Lois Wolk, whose Third Senate District includes parts of Napa County, Sonoma County, and Yolo County, among others, is well-versed in the concerns of high-end agricultural crop producers. She has become the point person for the olive oil industry’s efforts to establish quality and labeling standards for various grades of olive oil. Senator Wolk authored SB 250, passed unanimously by the legislature and signed by Governor Jerry Brown in March 2014, to create the Olive Oil Commission of California.

Soon thereafter, the commission proposed grade and labeling standards for olive oils, refined oils, and pomace oils. In July 2014, the California Department of Food and Agriculture held a hearing, and in September, the department largely adopted those new standards. In her own testimony before the commission, Senator Wolk aligned the concerns of consumers and producers, of government and business, and state and nation, when in fact there are potentially conflicting interests at stake. At least some olive oil producers, for their part, grant that they have “chosen to regulate themselves,” but say this is only because European producers benefit from government subsidies and other market interventions.

California’s olive oil industry and Senator Wolk face some opposition, including from the Spanish Embassy. Ana Cuartero, the embassy’s commercial attaché, submitted written testimony to oppose the proposed standards, while appealing to noble goals and making a not-so-veiled threat:





On the California Olive Ranch bottling line.

“As you all may well know, Spain is the world’s leading producer and exporter country of olive oil. As such, please allow me to say, we have expertise in all that concerns this product. Therefore, Spain perfectly shares with the California oil production industry its legitimate interest in developing trade strategies leading to improve the quality of olive oil, its fair competition, as well as consumer protection. Spain, as well as the European Union, for decades has supported policies leading to the continuity in the improvement of the quality of olive oil. These strategies have made olive oil more and more present in the international markets, not only in the Mediterranean countries, where olive oil is part of our identity, our culture, gastronomy and, of course, an important share of economy and trade... Having said all this, let the technical experts speak now, let them develop standards, allow them to discuss, but please, do it in a manner respectful to international commitments already existing in the framework of the trade relations. Otherwise, we shall encounter a new

and potential trade barrier, from which nothing ‘good’ is to come.”

This international pushback may be a sign California is already viewed as an important emerging presence in the world olive oil market.

### California Olive Ranch

Greg Kelley, president and CEO of California Olive Ranch, by far the largest olive oil company in the state, recently testified in Sacramento that California currently has 30,000 acres of olive trees for oil production, yet the state produces less than 4 percent of the oil consumed in the United States. According to Kelley, just to meet domestic demand, California would have to have 350,000 acres planted in olive trees. But Kelley also noted that California’s pistachio and walnut crops used to be too small to meet domestic demand and the state is now a net exporter of these commodities.

Ironically, the answer to the challenge of efficiently using land in California to produce more olive oil may come from Spain, where a technology developed in 1999 may prove more threatening to Spain's dominance of the olive oil industry than any legislation crafted in Sacramento or Washington. "Super high-density" cultivation of olives, which allows many more trees per acre than traditional methods and, most importantly, allows mechanical harvesting of olives, promises to increase vastly the volume of California olive oil. Spain has thousands upon thousands of acres of trees planted in the traditional manner on steep, rocky slopes that are impossible to harvest with machines. Because of this, growers often depend on old harvesting methods, such as raking fallen olives from the ground—whereas California has miles of rolling golden hills that are ideal for super high density olive cultivation.

Compared to most other olive oil ventures in the state, the scale of California Olive Ranch's operations is breathtaking. Kelley says that roughly a half billion dollars have been invested in California olive oil since 1999. Much of that has come, in another ironic twist, from Spanish investors.

California Olive Ranch's approach is breaking new ground in using state-of-the-art technology to generate massive amounts of data, while also squeezing efficiencies from a vertically integrated system of cultivation, harvest, milling, bottling, and distribution. From soil sensors that wirelessly transmit data, to GPS-enabled harvest vehicles, to trucks outfitted with up-to-the-minute tracking systems, to laser-stamping machines that record the harvest and milling dates of every single bottle on a production line, California Olive Ranch is creating an industry model that it claims blends the best of Spain and California, of Old World and

New World, of agribusiness and boutique production, of localism and globalism, and produces the highest quality oil. Although the California Olive Ranch considered removing both the words "California" and "olive" from its brand, in order to distinguish their product from the many others that use those two words, Kelley told me they quickly realized the company's interests are aligned with the desires of California's foodie culture and that this is an advantage for their corporate image, rather than a disadvantage.

I told Kelley that I was frankly a bit scared of such a large olive oil company, especially one that has invested millions in training trees to be bushes so they can be harvested by massive machines, and whose storage tanks were at least fifty times larger than the largest olive oil tank I have ever seen. I wondered aloud whether his success could spell the end of small olive oil ventures like 49er Olive Oil and several others profiled here, which use historic trees that are harvested by hand and therefore ask premium prices for a high-quality product. He assured me that I need not worry, because only three kinds of olive cultivars—Koroneiki, Arbequina, and Arbosana—can be used in super high-density groves. Manzanillo, Mission, Ascolano, and many other olive varieties will still be commercially viable. He added that, above all, California Olive Ranch wants to see California olive oil succeed, because a growing market is good for all players. According to Kelley, "We don't do things differently than other California olive oil producers, we just do it bigger." **B**

#### Note

On facing page: CEO of California Olive Ranch Greg Kelley. All photographs by the author.