

VIP

OF SOUTHEAST

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plus

VIPersonality:
Gator hunter
Mark Porter

SE Texas' newest
oil boom: Olives

5 great events
this month

get outside!

Everything you need to become
one with nature this November

kayaking
fall gardening
hunting dogs
geocaching
golfing

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on the cover

A modern take on the leather jacket keeps it classy with feminine structure. When combined with zebra print and preppy gold touches, you can feel edgy and polished at the same time. See VIP's complete fall fashion shoot, pages 13-16.

Photography: Lacie Grant; Styling: Grace Mathis and Larena Head; Hair and makeup: Grace Mathis; Model: Jennifer Green; From Ella + Scott: Faux leather jacket, \$78; Gold hoop earrings, \$14. From S & M Family Outlet: Zebra handbag, \$123.



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A New Oil Gusher?

Acres of olives in
SE Texas produce
pure Texas olive oil



text by CHERYL ROSE

Under blue Texas skies, walking under the shady canopy formed by graceful olive trees, the leaves rustle a secret: Shhh, shhh. That cool breeze coming up from the Gulf of Mexico, gently shaking the leaves, is the secret to why thousands of olive trees are flourishing in Devers.

From vision to groves

Gino Venitucci had a vision. A career engineer in the oil and gas industry, Venitucci had worked in many places around the world, but settled in Kingwood, where he still lives today. “One day when I was traveling in Europe, I noticed that all the owners of olive groves were doing well, driving Ferraris and Lamborghinis, so I went to Southern Italy and Spain to learn to grow olives,” he said.

Venitucci, though originally from Italy, had no previous experience with olives or even farming. Being an engineer, he thoroughly researched the science and data involved in growing olives for several years. He found that the belt of land from San Antonio to Beaumont should be ideal for growing olives, so he purchased land and planted 16,000 olive trees on 34 acres. It took six years of investing and tending the trees to produce the first harvest in 2013.

“I started this venture as an investment, but also because I saw the potential — the potential to do something no one else had done previously,” Venitucci said. “That was exciting.”

However, now 78 years old, Venitucci found he needed to pass the vision to a new generation. Randy Brazil owns a cattle ranch next door and



photography by SCOTT ESLINGER

had assisted Venitucci over the years. Brazil helped Venitucci with the farm equipment and planting and became increasingly intrigued by the idea of a Texan olive farm. He began accompanying Venitucci to meetings of the Texas Olive Council and on site visits to existing olive farms. When Venitucci expressed the desire to sell, Brazil, his wife, Monica, and two other couples, Steve and Rhonda Devillier and Culley and Melissa Devillier, became partners as Southeast Texas Olives and took over the operation.

From tree to bottle

The groves now number 20,000 trees of Arbequina and Koroneiki variety olives. Brazil plans to plant another 7,500 trees this month, taking the acreage under cultivation up to about 50.

"No one thought we could grow olives in Texas, but the Southeast Texas climate is really good for olive trees," Brazil said.

Venitucci explained that olives only grow in certain climates and require a specific temperature range in order to produce. The trees need cold nighttime temperatures, but start to show damage if the temps reach the teens. Temperatures below 12 degrees are fatal. During the winter days, temperatures in the low-to-mid-70s or above will inhibit the flowering that leads to fruit. Olive trees need this mild range for a minimum of 15 to 20 days during the dormant period in winter to thrive.

"The beneficial factor for this region is the breeze from the Gulf – that's the secret," Venitucci said. "In winter, the sun temperature may reach 72 degrees, but the cool breeze decreases the temperature of the leaves by three degrees or so, keeping the tree below 69 degrees and dormant." >>

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Randy Brazil



The trees are planted close together to allow for a mechanical harvester. Brazil uses a modified grape harvester that Venitucci brought back from Italy. In 2013, Brazil said they were on a learning curve and lost a percentage of the fruit during the harvesting process, but still processed 400 gallons of oil. The harvest began at the end of September this year. Brazil hopes they will triple the yield with the improvements they've made.

The olives they grow are intended to be pressed for oil, rather than for table olives. The farm has a large barn with a commercial kitchen that holds the press. The fruit goes in and pure olive oil filters out.

"Once you have your oil, it has to set for about 40 to 50 days to let sediment fall," Brazil explained. "Then we do a final filter and bottle it. No preservatives are added. On our farm, we decided we don't want to blend it or flavor it. We want to keep it pure. This is a Texas-grown product and when we run out, we aren't going to buy in oil from California or anywhere else."

The partners share the chores and

Bottles to Go

Curious to taste a Texas olive oil? You can find Southeast Texas Olive oil at Basic Foods and The Seafood Lover in Beaumont or at the Beaumont Farmer's Market during the season. The 8½ ounce bottles sell for \$10. To order direct from the farm, connect at www.setexasolive.com or on Facebook at Southeast Texas Olive.

responsibilities of running a farm and a business. They've recently obtained the necessary certifications for their labeling and registered a trademark.

From bottle to industry

When the partners began selling Southeast Texas Olive oil at the Beaumont Farmer's Market, they were thrilled at the supportive response of tasters and customers.

"The first six years I was doing this, I wondered if anybody would even want our oil," Brazil said, warmed by the positive attention their product is receiving from

the local public.

People nationwide are consuming more olive oil as it has become a star product of healthy diets, a substitute for butter and other commercial oils. Though California is a big producer of olive oil, the United States still imports about 97 percent of the olive oil in stores. The timing for investing in olives seems ripe.

"The investment hasn't made money yet," Brazil acknowledged, at the beginning of their second harvest. "But there is money to be made at it. There is a lot of money to be made if we can prove a sustainable product year after year."

Brazil said they would like to succeed with their crops and thereby encourage other farmers to cultivate olives in the area. Southeast Texas Olive would mill and process the oil. Olive trees are long lived, up to 500 years, so withstanding the initial investment could provide an income for generations to come.

"Our long-term goal is to help other growers in our area," he said. "If we show a profit, more small farmers would do it." **VIP**