

Jamie Edlin: Olive oil fit for royalty

From the [What you need to know for Monday, August 31](#) series

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John Copeland and Shannon Casey work their Rancho Olivos farm stand in Santa Ynez.

Photo contributed, Courtesy of Rancho Olivos



Shannon Casey and John Copeland spent much of their adult lives in the entertainment industry, John as a television producer and Shannon in digital effects. Their careers took them all over the world, but it's the Santa Ynez Valley that they finally call home.

They bought their 20-acre property on North Refugio Road in 1999 as a weekend retreat. [Ancestry.com](#) confirmed that farming ran in John's blood. Growing something was, therefore, a must.

They considered vines until realizing that grapes were too big of an investment. Growing olives and making olive oil seemed to make better sense. Olives are drought-resistant, hardy and well-suited for the Santa Ynez climate.

"I went to Olive School, a short course offered by UC Davis," Shannon explained. "I tasted a lot of olive oils to determine which varieties we wanted to plant. And that's when I met John Belfy of Buona Terra Farming. He's a longtime vineyard manager here in the Valley. He oversaw the planting of our olive trees, a mix of Italian, Spanish and California varietals, and managed the orchard in the beginning. We weren't planning to move up to the Valley full time until the olives were mature enough to harvest. But then 9/11 happened."

"It was a reality moment," John added. "Life is short. Shannon and I agreed that we should be living where we want to wake up every morning, and that precipitated our move from Los Angeles to Santa Ynez in 2002."

Their first harvest was in the winter of 2005.

Since making the move to their Rancho Olivos, Shannon and John have been hands-on every step from tending to the 7 acres of olive trees, all of which are sustainably and organically farmed, to bottling their extra virgin olive oil (EVO).

Their crew of one is John who can often be found in the orchard with his battery-operated electric pruner. It's not that all 800 trees require severe pruning every year, but they still need attention. Everything is done by hand in crafting the estate-grown EVOs, the exception being the milling process which is done at Figueroa Farms in Happy Canyon.

The olives are pressed within hours of harvesting them. The herbs, citrus and fruit used in the various flavored oils are sourced locally and crushed along with the olives. The oils then "age" for a few weeks prior to bottling.

"TV producer or farmer, I'm still up at the crack of dawn," John said.

"There's always something to do. It's magical walking the dogs through

our orchard at sunrise. It's fulfilling to see the stages that the olives go through from the little buds to the flowers to the fruit set, and finally, to watch the olives grow and darken.

"I look out at the orchard and say, 'Wow. We really did this,'" John continued. "Shannon is a force of nature and wouldn't let go during the start of this operation. We persisted."

"It was very slow at the start," Shannon said. "I assumed that all wine drinkers were also foodies and they'd, therefore, be interested in olive oil. Since we're right across from Brander Vineyard and their popular tasting room, I figured we'd attract wine and food people, and they'd buy a lot of olive oil. Wrong! We didn't get the traffic we expected."

Recipe for zucchini olive oil cake

I am one of those foodies to which Shannon referred. Tasting through the lineup of EVOs, I could put any one of them to good use, but I personally like my olive oils to carry a certain green, grassy, spicy element found in Rancho Olivos' Italian blend. It adds irresistible savory notes to my zucchini olive oil cake:

Ingredients:

- Nonstick vegetable oil spray
- 1 ½ cups all-purpose flour
- 2 teaspoons baking powder
- ¾ teaspoon kosher salt
- 3 large eggs
- 1 ½ cups ricotta
- ½ cup extra virgin olive oil
- 1 tablespoon mixed herbs, finely minced
- 1 cup zucchini sliced into very thin coins
- 1/2 cup small cherry or grape tomatoes
- Flaky sea salt (Maldon)
- Lemon zest (optional)

Preparation: Preheat oven to 350 degrees. Coat the bottom and sides of a 9-inch spring form pan with nonstick spray and dust with flour, shaking out any excess flour.

In mixing bowl, blend together the flour, baking powder and salt.

In a second mixing bowl, blend eggs, ricotta, herbs and EVO until smooth. Fold into the dry ingredients until blended. Then gently fold in the zucchini, taking care not to mush the zucchini. Scrape the batter into the prepared pan. Scatter a few more slices of zucchini along with the cherry tomatoes over the top.

Bake for approximately 40-45 minutes until golden and a toothpick inserted in the center comes out clean.

Lightly sprinkle the top with flaky sea salt and a bit of grated lemon zest. Let cool somewhat before unmolding.

Then came a fortuitous report from UC Davis, concluding that a large number of "extra virgin" domestic and imported olive oils were not what they claimed to be. Some were compromised with cheaper, subpar oils, some improperly stored, others damaged during pressing. Most all of them failed EVO standards. In fact, California-grown samples fared the best of the 186 EVOs studied, giving a positive nod to Rancho Olivos' products.

At the same time, the organic food movement was becoming more mainstream. People cared about what they were buying and eating. Local became a big deal, and Rancho Olivos' handcrafted, locally grown olive oils began attracting serious attention.

By 2010, the Rancho Olivos farm stand opened daily and became a regular stop on the wine-tasting tours, offering visitors samplings from the variety of EVOs along with fruits and vegetables also grown on the farm.

With products selling out, the need to increase production and expand the business followed. A year ago, Shannon and John opened a shop in Morro Bay.

"As Queen Elizabeth was turning 90 in 2016, we wrote a birthday letter to the queen under the guise of our Corgi, Scout the Adventure Dog," John said.

"Scout's letter included a special bottle of olive oil. About six weeks later, we received a printed thank you note on the queen's official stationery. There was also a personal note from one of the queen's ladies-in-waiting, telling us how pickled they were with the bottle of EVO from Scout. Scout was promoted to spokesman and the letter hangs at our farm stand."

"People really get excited over our oils," Shannon gushed. "It's fun to be a part of that. It's a connection to people who love food and cooking as much as I do."

Jamie Edlin heads Hollywood & Wine, a marketing communications agency geared to the wine and hospitality industries. She serves on the Advisory Board of Woodbury University's School of Media, Culture & Design and is the recipient of the 2019 Spirit of Entrepreneurship Award in Media & Communications. Jamie can be reached at Jamie@HollywoodandWine.net



Kathy Marcks Hardesty: Vineyard tours create unforgettable lessons

FROM THE VINE Some of the best lessons I've had while learning about wine took place in a winery's vineyards. There's little, other than wine tasting, that is quite as eye-opening as hearing about the hard work of farming.