

From olive to oil

By Kathryn Reed

GERBER – Refried beans. Really, that’s what one stage of making olive oil looks like.



No two olive oils taste the same.

Photo/Kathryn Reed

It’s Day 3 of camping, and we find ourselves at a crush party somewhere between Red Bluff and Chico. Joining the four campers are four others who live in the area.

Wine is the first order of the morning (it’s close to noon). For \$3, a commemorative glass is filled umpteen times until the driver of the dirty Jeep cuts off her passenger.

New Clairvaux is pouring its wines from Vina. Burnsini Vineyards came down from Cottonwood.

“The heat causes the Petite Syrah to be intense,” Tom Burnham, Burnsini general manager, said of the winery’s specialty.

Sue described the varietal as, “A little peppery, but not as much as the Zin, with a hint of almond.”□

I just know I liked it.

This is the fourth year Pacific Sun Olive Oil has opened its doors to the public for a one-day crush party. Each year "Love at First Crush" grows, with 300 people attending last year's event and 500 this year.

"People want to know where their food comes from. They are getting back to their agrarian roots," owner Jane Flynn said.

In 2008, the family-run operation bottled 200 gallons of the liquid gold. The crop is smaller this year, so the number of gallons will be less. It takes about 7.6 pounds of olives to fill a 500ml bottle. Olives must be milled within 24 hours of being picked.

The recession has not hurt Pacific Sun.

"People are still eating. They want good olive oil," Flynn said.

Part of the experience includes watching the "crush" from whole olive to oil. The bottling part is skipped for health code reasons.

Mission olives, a mix of green, red and black, fill 4-foot-by4-foot bins. A bin weighs about 1,000 pounds. Olives are sent up a conveyor belt to sort out debris like leaves.

They are washed with a brush that seems like a car wash for olives.

An auger elevator moves the cleaned olives into crushers. These contraptions are important because the type of crusher can affect the flavor of the oil. Pacific Sun has two different crushers.

The mixture has warm water added to it as the malaxers churn the paste for about 45 minutes.

"The pits, skins and all are in there," Brendon Flynn, the owner's son, explained as he kept an eye on the goo that looks

like refried beans.

A decanter centrifuge separates the solids from the liquid as it spins at about 3,600 rpm. What comes out is a really unappetizing mixture that looks like someone got ill.

The liquid, which is carmel color at this point, is poured onto metal that has tiny holes on it to again strain the solids.

Then it's onto another machine where the end product looks closer to something you want to dip bread into or cook with.

When one of the big blue oil drum-looking containers is filled, it's time to sit for a month or two in a temperature controlled setting before bottling begins.

In another section of the operation is an olive oil tasting room set up just for the party. The four oils go from mild to full-bodied. The first, Proprietors Select, is buttery.

No. 3 was the favorite with most of the gang I was with – Manzahillo. It will be good for dipping and cooking.

Two balsamic vinegars “a dark and blueberry” were also on the table for tasting.

My sister, Pam, had brought me a three-pack sample of Pacific Sun's products last year. I stocked up on some more while I was there Nov. 8.

Hayrides through the prune orchard are part of the fun. The Flynn's medium-size orchard is full of prune, walnut and almond trees. The two rows of olive trees are what they used for the initial crush. Most of what is now made into olive oil comes from other orchards.

The whole event – except wine and lunch – is free.

Be careful of strangers taking pictures. Pam and I were on the

cover of the *Red Bluff Daily News* this week tasting olive oil.

For more information, go to www.pacificsunoliveoil.com.

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