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virgin *harvest*

A group of South Georgia farmers is rolling the dice on a crop straight out of the Bible—olive trees. Will gourmet olive oil be far behind?

by
JIM AUCHMUTEY

PHOTOGRAPHS by JAMEY GUY



ON A SOGGY AUTUMN MORNING,

Jason Shaw was standing in a sandy field and considering the irony of his new calling as a missionary of Southern olives. “The first olive I ever saw was in a martini,” he joked. He was barely exaggerating. Jason grew up in South Georgia during the 1970s and 1980s, a time and place where olive oil seemed almost alien. “We used to have hog killings, and we’d end up with a big container of lard in the laundry room that my mom cooked with.” ¶ Jason’s family is trying to do something that Thomas Jefferson himself dreamed of but was unable to accomplish: grow olives in the South. Instead of the usual row crops—corn, cotton, peanuts—the field was lined with green-and-silver-leaved olive trees. “This,” he said, “is the first commercial crop of olives east of the Mississippi since the 1800s.”

Jason, a jovial thirty-nine-year-old insurance man with a moon face and boyish bangs, is part of a co-op called Georgia Olive Farms that includes his brother, a cousin, and a family friend. In the past three years, they’ve planted twenty-eight acres of olive trees outside Lakeland, near Valdosta, with the intention of making their own oil and marketing seedlings to other farmers in what they envision as an olive belt across the Deep South. On the final day of their first harvest, in late September, the partners invited journalists and other interested parties to their orchard for a kind of coming-out party for Georgia olives.

And then the rain came. Jason and a TV reporter in green mud boots huddled under a couple of golf umbrellas and tried to tape an interview in the downpour. “We’re not looking to be the biggest olive producers,” he said, wet hair dripping down his forehead. “We just want to get olives started in the Southeast.” A few minutes later, he and his cousin had to push the reporter’s car out of the muck, a chore that probably doesn’t come up very often in the drier lands usually associated with olives.

If the co-op succeeds, it will tap into a booming \$1.7 billion domestic market. In the past two decades, Americans have more than doubled their consumption

of olive oil, an essential ingredient of the heart-healthy Mediterranean diet. Like wine and coffee, it has developed a following of connoisseurs who talk about flavor notes and terroir and are willing to pay as much as \$50 a bottle for artisanal products. Williams-Sonoma offers a tiny two-ounce bottle, elaborately packaged with shiny black ribbon and flavored with white truffles, for \$89.50. Could a Southern oil run with such a crowd? The Shaws had to get the fruit out of the field to find out.

Their trees were planted in closely spaced ranks that looked more like hedgerows than postcard images of ancient specimens in Greece or Italy. They were pruned on the sides and topped at about ten feet to facilitate mechanized picking. Blueberry harvesters as large as RVs motored right over them, allowing the trees to pass through an opening beneath the driver’s platform. Sam

Shaw, Jason’s thirty-six-year-old brother, a bank president in nearby Homerville, took the wheel of one of the behemoths. “This is my stress relief,” he said, looking over the field from his lofty perch. “Banking’s been kind of tough lately.”

Beneath him, attachments thrashed the branches like the arms of a car wash, sending olives onto a conveyor belt that dumped them into crates. The fruit was green and burgundy and resembled undersized grapes. A young woman who had come with a group of students from Okefenokee Tech popped one in her mouth. Her face soured. Fresh olives may look sweet, but they taste as bitter as a pulverized aspirin, which is why they have to be pressed into oil or cured with brine to be palatable.

Among the spectators were several blueberry farmers curious about whether olives could become the next big thing. Blueberries, the *last* big thing, have surpassed peaches among Georgia’s most valuable fruit crops, and some of the growers want to plant olives or at least lease out their harvesters to pick them. Another onlooker had driven up from that other Lakeland, in Florida, looking for something to replace the citrus he’d lost in a freeze.

“You wouldn’t believe the interest we’ve

PREVIOUS SPREAD Sam Shaw in the greenhouse with sapling olive trees. **OPPOSITE, TOP LEFT** Sam adjusts the harvester as his dad, Jay, watches. **MIDDLE, LEFT, FROM LEFT TO RIGHT** Georgia Olive Farms partners Berrien Sutton and Kevin, Sam, and Jason Shaw. **BELOW, RIGHT** Olives must be milled within a day of harvesting to preserve optimal flavor.



had in this,” said Jason, who naturally became the public face of the enterprise given that his other job is state representative. “I couldn’t go anywhere during the campaign that someone didn’t ask me about olives. And I’d say, ‘I’m glad you asked,’ because it’s more fun to talk about olives than politics.”



The vision for Georgia Olive Farms began in 1996, when Jason took a two-month study trip to Italy as a senior at the University of Georgia. Acquiring a taste for olive oil was the only way he could enjoy a salad. “They don’t do ranch and blue cheese,” he said. “It’s oil and vinegar or nothing.” During a visit to an olive mill in Verona, he started wondering whether the trees that adorned the Italian hillsides would grow in the flat fields back

home. What he didn’t know was that they already had.

Olive trees are native to the Middle East and the Mediterranean basin, where they can live for hundreds of years, twisting their branches into dramatic contours. They first appeared in Georgia when the Spanish planted them at their missions along

the coast in the 1600s. The English tried to cultivate them after Oglethorpe founded Savannah in 1733, but with little success. Jefferson encountered olives as minister to France and was so delighted that he had 500 seedlings shipped to Charleston in hopes of establishing a crop. “This is the most interesting plant in the world for South Carolina

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and Georgia,” he wrote in 1788. Twenty-five years later, he lamented what had become of his efforts: “If any of [the trees] still exist, it is merely as a curiosity in their gardens; not a single orchard of them has been planted.”

Olives made little headway in the South for several reasons. Many varieties simply didn’t take to the damp climate. Hurricanes destroyed others, and the Civil War devastated the coastal plantations that had experimented with the crop. The market played a role as well; there wasn’t much call for another cooking oil in a region swimming in pork fat and cottonseeds, the main component of shortenings like Crisco (short for “crystallized cottonseed oil”).

The few olive trees that survived in Georgia became a novelty. In an 1889 article in the *Brunswick Times*, a man named W.R. Shadman claimed to have a three-acre commercial grove on St. Simons Island. Other remnants endured well into the twentieth

Using a high-density growing method pioneered in Spain, Georgia Olive Farms prunes its trees on the sides and tops them at about ten feet to facilitate mechanized picking. Blueberry harvesters as large as RVs motor right over the tops (opposite page). The Arbequina olives (above) used for this approach also happen to be more cold tolerant.

century. Gerard Krewer, a retired UGA horticulture professor who researched the history of Georgia olives for the Shaws, remembers seeing a tree on Jekyll Island when he lived there during the 1970s. “It was still fruiting; we used to make pickled olives. And then it was bulldozed.”

In the late 1990s, a Brunswick physician launched the first modern effort to reintroduce olives into Georgia. Mark Hanly, who grew up on a farm in Zimbabwe, set out a hundred trees in widely spaced plantings that had to be harvested the old-fashioned way, with a hand-held comb sweeping

through the branches. Hanly made table olives but never produced enough fruit to press oil. “I had this romantic image of sipping wine and watching the sunset through these gnarly old trees,” he recalled. “I think the Shaws are growing them the right way, at least for Georgia. I’m going to copy them now.”

Kevin Shaw, Jason and Sam’s forty-one-year-old cousin, was the first to get serious about planting olives. The only full-time farmer of the group, Kevin wears a beard and a ponytail and can usually be found tramping the fields in sandals, looking less like a good old boy than the head gardener of Margaritaville. “I’d grown cotton, corn, peanuts, wheat—same old, same old,” he said. “I wanted to do something different. I was thinking about blueberries, but Sam said, ‘Nah, hold off. That market isn’t so good now.’”

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market was tempting. All but 2 percent of the oil consumed in America is imported, and what little domestic product there is comes from California. No one in the eastern half of the country was trying to produce olive oil on a commercial scale. It looked like there might be an opening for a new player.

The Shaws visited California to see the latest innovation in olive cultivation: super-high-density orchards, a method pioneered in Spain that maximizes yield and minimizes labor costs through mechanical harvesting. It relies on concentrated plantings—those hedgerows—using a Spanish variety, the Arbequina, that's rich in oil and more tolerant of cold. Even better, the fruit could be harvested with blueberry pickers, equipment that was readily available in South Georgia and idle after the berry harvest.

Paul Vossen, a California olive expert with the University of California Cooperative Extension, told the Shaws he was skeptical that the trees would thrive in the often-wet Southern weather. "If you get a lot of rain during the spring bloom," he warned, "you won't get a crop. That's why you don't see olives growing in the East: too much rain." But after visiting Georgia and seeing the well-drained soil around Lakeland, Vossen became more optimistic about their chances.

In April 2009, Georgia Olive Farms bought more than 12,000 sixteen-inch-high seedlings from California and began planting them along U.S. Highway 221. There were weather problems almost immediately. Flooding rains threatened to wash away the crop. During the following winter, an extended freeze defoliated trees and some had to be replanted. "We were starting to wonder whether there's something in the Bible that says olives are forbidden," Jason said.

Their farming practices were hardly organic, relying on regular applications of herbicides to kill weeds, fungicides to ward off plant diseases, and fertilizer to accelerate growth. By late last summer, the trees, not even three years old, were bursting with round, green fruit. "They're ahead of schedule because we pushed them hard," Kevin explained. "They're on the main highway and we wanted them to look good. Normal-

ly, you wouldn't harvest them this young—I mean, these trees haven't hit puberty. But we needed to have some oil."

That was the whole point, said Berrien Sutton, the other partner in the co-op, a lawyer from Homerville who is experimenting with organic olive-growing on the side. "You're just not going to get many people planting olives until we can show them some oil."



Crushing olives takes specialized equipment that can cost hundreds of thousands of dollars. No one in the Southeast owned an olive mill, so the partners planned to bring in a mobile unit from California to process their fruit. When the freight proved too expensive for their relatively small crop, they went to plan B: The *olives* had to hit the road.

The closest mill was more than a thousand miles away at the Texas Olive Ranch in Carrizo Springs, southwest of San Antonio. The owner, Jim Henry, had been a buyer for the Pier 1 retail chain and had spent years in Europe admiring the classical olive groves of the Mediterranean. He had planted a profitable 187 acres in three locations around the state and had bought a \$300,000 mill, which the Shaws had seen in action the previous year. Henry agreed to press their fruit.

As soon as the picking was finished in Georgia, the olives were packed in plastic blueberry crates and driven eighteen hours and 1,100 miles to Texas. Timing was critical. Olives are usually milled within a day

to preserve optimal flavor, so a refrigerated Ryder truck was used to keep them at 41 degrees. When the fruit arrived, it was immediately washed and destemmed, and then crushed, pits and all. The resulting paste went into a malaxer, a huge mixing blade that turned the green goo like cookie dough for forty-five minutes, breaking down the mixture and releasing the oil. The paste was then pumped through two centrifuges to separate out the golden liquid.

It took most of a day to turn two tons of olives into oil. Henry tried a sample, still cloudy from suspended fruit particles, and found it pleasantly buttery.

Less than a week after leaving Georgia, the essence of twenty-eight acres returned in a single fifty-five-gallon stainless steel drum. The partners gathered a few days later for an informal tasting with Paul Miller, an olive authority from Australia. As he tried the green liquid, they waited nervously for his verdict, the first informed opinion about whether all their efforts had been worthwhile. "Well done, mates," he announced. "You've produced extra-virgin olive oil."

The term comes from the days when less efficient presses crushed olives more than once, and the first, or virgin, pressing yielded the purest results. Extra virgin, the top grade, is reserved for oils that are free of defects, low in acid, and meet the sensory requirements of a trained tasting panel. Worldwide, less than 10 percent of olive oil makes the cut.

Nancy Ash, a California olive consultant who advised the Shaws, performed a more detailed evaluation of their oil in October.

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She and a colleague poured a sample into blue glasses (the oil's color can affect perceptions), swirled it around, and inhaled the aroma like wine tasters sniffing a bouquet. Then they tasted the oil, straight up, no bread, slurping it into their mouths to coat as many flavor receptors as possible. Their report pronounced it "sweet, smooth, and soft," with a fruity olive aroma that reminded them of a bunch of wholesome things: "green grass, tomatoes, artichokes, apples and butter with hints of hay-straw, green bananas, and green vegetables."

The most important thing was freshness. Unlike vinegar or wine, olive oil does not age well. From the moment of bottling, it oxidizes and declines, and usually passes its prime within a year, two at the most. Some of the oil on grocery shelves isn't as lovely as the picturesque labels might imply. A recent study by the University of California, Davis, found that 69 percent of the imported extra-virgin oils it tested was rancid or adulterated.

"Most people here haven't tasted truly fresh olive oil," said Jon Wolf, chef at the Terrace restaurant in Atlanta's Ellis Hotel. When he heard about Georgia Olive Farms, he contacted the Shaws and asked to try their product in his dining room. They've heard from scores of other chefs too.

Unfortunately, the first harvest didn't leave much olive oil to go around. The partners plan to supply selected restaurants, offer some at tasting events like one they held at Emory University in December, and sell the rest through their website (\$25 for a 250 ml bottle at georgiaolivefarms.com). They've already spent \$400,000 on the enterprise and plan to invest much more. They hope to double their acreage in coming months and eventually buy a mill to process their fruit and that of other local farmers.

One of the first steps in building the olive buzz took place in October when the Georgia oil made its debut in front of an audience of influential foodies. For the chef who made the introduction, it was personal.



Sean Brock needed some olive oil. He was scheduled to speak at the Southern Foodways Alliance symposium, an annual gathering of chefs, academics, and food writers at the University of Mississippi, and he wanted to devote his session to the quest

for locally sourced olives. Brock runs two restaurants in Charleston and has drawn flattering coverage in the *New York Times* and the *New Yorker* for his commitment to authentic regional food. "If it ain't Southern, it ain't coming in the door," he pledged when his latest venture, Husk, opened in late 2010. Olive oil mocked his vow. He needed Southern oil to make vinaigrettes if nothing else, but there was none to be had. The olive tree he planted at his home hardly resolved the dilemma.

When he heard about Georgia Olive Farms, Brock was thrilled. "Southern chefs are going to go crazy for this," he said. "I don't care if it costs \$100 a gallon. I want it."

He phoned Kevin and struck up a lengthy conversation about olives and their shared interest in heirloom corn. As the symposium approached, Brock suggested that Kevin send some of the maiden olive oil to Ole Miss. Kevin dispatched a gallon and 300 seedlings, and when the audience filed in, there was a baby tree waiting on every seat, making the chef seem like the Johnny Appleseed of olives.

Brock took the podium and gave a quick overview of the South's olive history and how Jefferson—"T.J.," he called him—was frustrated in his efforts to bring olive oil to his native region. Southerners were accustomed to other, less healthy cooking oils like lard and shortening. "We can blame it on Crisco," he said, completing the parable of the road not taken. Then he told the assembly about Georgia Olive Farms and its plans to revive the dream. He ended with a sort of culinary altar call: "Let's support the Shaw boys and show them we want this stuff."

With that, ushers fanned out through the audience, carrying silver trays of olive oil in miniature plastic cups. As the trays passed down the rows, Brock noticed how the morning light struck the liquid and illuminated it with a stained-glass glow. He thought there was something almost religious about the scene, as heads bowed to taste in the manner of communion. A few people thought the oil was rather mild, not peppery enough, but any reservations were outweighed by the enthusiasm of a congregation willing to be converted. A long-ago promise was, at last, being redeemed. A murmur of approval swept through the hall. For the Shaws, it was as good as a benediction. ■

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