

RED DEER ADVOCATE

Red Deer's King, Queen of Olive Oil

By Harley Richards - Red Deer Advocate

Invite Dick and Marilyn Jewell for dinner, and they're likely to present you with a nice bottle when they arrive. But don't reach for a wine glass. You'll enjoy the gift more if you have a cob of corn or a bowl of salad handy.

Olive oil, explained Dick Jewell, is a more lasting gift than wine. "Take a bottle of nice olive oil and they'll be able to appreciate it for quite a few meals."

Jewell has a vested interest in promoting olive oil — he and Marilyn produce it at their Te Reke Olives grove in New Zealand, and recently brought 120 dozen bottles to Red Deer, where it retails for \$24.95 per 250 ml bottle.

But the owner of Mitchell and Jewell jewelry store is sincere in his praise.

He enthusiastically describes the taste of First Drop extra-virgin olive oil, using language that you might expect from a wine connoisseur.

"You get a fresh-cut grass flavour and a little peppery after-finish." Te Reke Olives, which is located on the northern tip of New Zealand, has about 2,000 olive trees that Jewell and his wife planted in 2004 and 2005.

They've boosted production by combining resources with three other groves in the area, and First Drop is the name the four partners export under.

The name First Drop reflects the fact that olive oil produced in the Southern Hemisphere country is the first on the market each year.



Photo by RANDY FIEDLER/Advocate staff
OIL BARON - Dick Jewell attaches stickers to bottles showing his First Drop olive oil won silver in the Olives New Zealand competition. for biz story

In 2007, Jewell brought about 40 dozen bottles to Canada, most of which were sold at his store. First Drop is now also available at Parkland Nurseries and Garden Centre, and can be found in Edmonton as well.

Jewell is working to expand the distribution network, with good retail prospects in Calgary, Vancouver and Toronto. “We’ve got our retail displays organized, so it’s coming very, very close.”

He and his partners — who operate collectively as New Zealand Olive Growers and Exporters — are also eyeing other markets, with 50 bottles shipped recently to an olive oil club in the United Kingdom that has about 500 members. “We’ve got negotiations on in Hong Kong and we’ve got some small distribution in the U.S.,” added Jewell

The challenge is educating consumers about how First Drop differs from cheaper but less flavourful olive oils. “It’s a different product that people aren’t used to, so it takes a minute or two,” said Jewell, who likes to illustrate the distinction by way of taste tests. “The response by anybody is all positive and huge.” He describes First Drop as a finishing oil rather than a cooking oil, with an almost endless list of foods that can be improved with a few drops.

Oils produced by members of New Zealand Olive Growers and Exporters have earned a number of awards at international competitions in the past several years. These include a gold rating and best-in-class honours at the 2008 Los Angeles Extra Virgin Olive Oil Competition, and five silver medals at the 2008 Olives New Zealand awards. The olives produced by the partners are very similar because of the common soil and climatic conditions they share, explained Jewell.

“We have four like groves.”

As demand for First Drop grows, it should be possible to add production from other groves in the region. “We’ve got another 100,000 trees right in the area, and if they’re pressed in our press . . . and we like it, we can take their oil.”

Jewell said he’s learned a lot about horticulture since getting into the olive oil business in 2004. He and Marilyn now travel to New Zealand every March to oversee the harvest and “fall” work, and return in October to help with the “spring” work.

He’s confident these efforts will pay off, particularly when it comes to First Drop winning the palates of Canadians. “I want to be able to get it by the first of September and be sold out by the first of December — that’s my goal.”