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### Local (sort of) olive oil delights palates in U.S.

Chicago-area restaurateurs sell from family grove

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To find some of the best, freshest olive oil in the world you can travel to Spain, Italy, Greece, Australia, California or ... Alsip.

Yes, Alsip.

This south suburban town is home to the Country House restaurant, run by the Boundas family which just happens to own part of an ancient olive grove in Greece. Like many who live full time in the southwestern coastal town of Pylos, the Boundas family has been pressing koroneiki olives into oil for personal consumption for years.



Pylian Estates Olive Oil, a Grecian o...

"Our family has a lot of trees, and we always brought bottles of oil home from vacation," said Paul Boundas who, with his brother David, runs the restaurant and a school meals catering company that both incorporate the oil into their menus.

In 2008, however, they decided to export a small batch (65 liters) of the cold pressed, unfiltered nectar to Chicago for sale. That tiny shipment of Pylian Estates oil didn't last long as word spread about this delicious artisanal product sold only in Alsip.

This year's shipment has grown to more than 500 gallons — still small compared with most commercial oils — and this summer it will be available in more outlets than ever. In addition to sales online and at the Country House restaurant, the oil will be sold at Hy-Vees stores in Iowa and under a special Courtright's Pylian label from the four-star Courtright's restaurant in Willow Springs, whose owners are David Boundas' parents-in-law.

"I have loved this product since first tasting it," said Rebecca Courtright, noting her enthusiasm is more than family favoritism. "I have gone to Sicily to try award-winning olive oils, and we think this one is just fantastic. We took it to Jerome, our chef from France, and he was so impressed. We asked if it was good enough to use this in the restaurant and he said, 'Absolutely.'"

As usual, the olives for this year's oil were harvested in late November and cold pressed within 24 hours. Stored cool away from air and light, the oil was transported by ship and arrived in Chicago in the spring for bottling.

Sporting a deeply golden green hue and buttery, fruity flavors, the product has mellowed a bit since harvest day in Greece. That ultra fresh oil, Paul says, emerges from the press bright green and slightly spicy from the polyphenol-packed koroneiki olives.

"I love to eat it right there with freshly toasted bread, lemon and a little sea salt," he said rhapsodically. "So you can really taste the flavor of the oil."

If you want to share the experience, you either need to go to Greece or ask the family to bring back a bottle in December. Indeed, family members have taken special requests from customers who've wanted to give the fresh oil as a unique holiday gift.

While this just-pressed peppery oil makes for a special treat for connoisseurs, a few months later, it has become a mellower and fruity version that appeals to a broader audience.

Many things set Pylian Estates oil apart from even some of the most expensive oils on the market. These include information on the label about the location of the grove, the olive varietal, the date of harvest and the date of pressing. They also include, for Chicago area customers, the ability to talk to those who own the trees and oversee the pressing each year.

"We wanted people to know how we make it and where it comes from," Boundas said. "These are the same trees that have been producing olives for thousands of years. People can come in and look through the book at pictures of the last harvest. We want them to know that they can have confidence in what they are getting."

Indeed olive oil confidence has been waning in recent years with scandals that have uncovered adulterated oil, poorly regulated "extra virgin" standards and blending of cheaper oils to save money.

"Now that everyone is selling their oil as extra virgin, they are dragging the price down on the good stuff too," he said. "But as people become more knowledgeable, I think that will change."

With the growth of this family venture, Boundas' uncles in Greece may finally have a reliable direct outlet for their oil — instead of sending it to companies in Italy — and an ever widening grateful American clientele to enjoy it.

[meng@tribune.com](mailto:meng@tribune.com)