

Queen Creek

BY BARBI WALKER

With Fall in full swing, it is the perfect time to get out and enjoy a taste of the Mediterranean. You won't need to travel to Greece, just drive east to the Queen Creek Olive Mill (QCOM). This olive mill is a sustainable, pesticide-free farm located at the base of the San Tan Mountains, where fertile soil, sunshine-filled days and cool desert nights nourish its 10-year-old grove.

Surprisingly, Arizona has a similar climate and farming history as some Mediterranean destinations. The QCOM is the only working olive mill in Arizona and offers tours, and event hosting, a gourmet marketplace and a Tuscan-inspired cafe.

"We provide a unique experience for the individual or large group," said Rob Holmes, QCOM spokesman.

QCOM's has been featured on the Discovery Channel's "Dirty Jobs," where host Mike Rowe worked the dirtier side of olive oil production, and the Food Network's "The Best Thing I Ever Ate," which showcased QCOM owner Perry Rea's Kalamata sandwich.

QCOM grows, harvests and presses their olives onsite. The mill operates an Italian-made cold press expeller that extracts oil from the perfectly-ripened olives. No solvents or heat are ever used, making QCOM's handcrafted, chemical-free extra virgin olive oils (EVOO) a delight to the taste buds.

"Fresh olives give you fresh oil, it's as simple as that," owner Perry Reas said.

QCOM olives go through an eight-step process before becoming EVOO. The olives first get a defoliation and wash – not so much a day at the spa, but a gentle shake and spray. Stems and twigs are removed using a defoliator – essentially a five-gallon sieved bucket – that allows all but the olives to filter out. After defoliation and washing, the whole olives are milled into a coarse paste with a hammer mill. The pits and seeds add to the distinct character of the olive oil.

The paste is mixed slowly to produce the first droplets of oil, then it is spun at high speeds in a centrifugal decanter so the olive skin, pits and most of the water separate from the oil. From there, the oil goes into an oxygen-free stainless steel decanter, where oil and water separate naturally as they flow through the decanter, producing the freshest oil.



Olive Mill

Next, owner and "master blender," Rea adds his signature finish to the oil. He blends the oil to create QCOM's Tuscan Estate Virgin Olive Oil, which has grassy overtones and a peppery finish. The mill blends every six weeks and bottles every three weeks. Feel free to stock up when you visit QCOM stock up, because unopened, bottled olive oil will stay fresh for up to one year.

Rea, who runs the business with his wife Brenda, believes the time of harvest is important in producing high quality EVOO. There are three stages of ripeness: early, mid and late. Each stage produces different colored olives that have their own taste characteristics. Green, or early harvest olives, produce a grassy, bitter and peppery flavor that has a long shelf life.

Red olives occur during mid-harvest, and

are buttery in flavor, and brown, late harvest olives have buttery to fruity notes.

Olive oil has been shown to have multiple health effects, from lowering cholesterol to combating a myriad of cancers, and even for skin repair. Promising studies indicate olive oil may even lower incidents of arthritis, asthma and diabetes, due to olive oil's anti-inflammatory agents.

Olive oil is a multi-functional product, and can be used in salad dressings, beauty products, baking and cooking. It can even soothe sunburned skin. In fact, recent studies quoted on oliveoilsource.com suggest olive oil's anti-inflammatory properties may lessen the chances of skin cancer when applied to sun-damaged skin.

EVOO is prized for its antioxidant properties, which can be lost through the refining process. According to the North American Olive Oil Association (NAOOA), EVOO must have an oleic acid content of eight percent or less. QCOM's olive oils have an oleic oil content of just three percent, making it some of the best EVOO you can find.

So before you decide to take a trip overseas, pay a visit to Queen Creek Olive Mill for some vanilla olive oil waffles or antipasto. Then grab some olive oil for your kitchen, and at the same time, support an Arizona business.

