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Courtesy of Lynn Ketchum

Gov. Kate Brown tastes olive oil made from Oregon-grown olives at the 2017 North Willamette Research and Extension Center Harvest Dinner. Olive Growers of Oregon executive director Bogdan Caceu, right, explains the nuances of the oils.

Olives catch on as new Oregon crop

By GEOFF PARKS
For the Capital Press

Bogdan Caceu of the Olive Growers of Oregon will provide a five-flight, free tasting of olive oil made from locally grown fruit during Dine Around Oregon. The tasting will follow his informational presentation on growing olives in Oregon.

The informational session will be from 3 to 5 p.m. Wednesday. The tasting of olive oil will be from 5:30 to 8 p.m.

His presentation, "Growing Olives and Producing Extra Virgin Olive Oil in Oregon: A New Specialty Crop and Value-Added Product for Oregon Ag," will explain all aspects of growing olives and producing premium olive oil in Oregon.

Caceu, executive director of OGO, counters claims that good-quality extra-virgin olive oil cannot be created from fruit grown at Oregon's cooler climate. Olives are thought by most to be a warm-climate crop, and an abundance of olive oil comes from fruit grown in a Mediterranean-type of climate.

Olives aren't just grown in hot climates at sea level but

also at altitude, Caceu said, such as north of the Mediterranean in Italy's Lake Region and, for example, the higher altitudes of Lebanon and Morocco.

"Olives have been grown on a 5-3/4-acre orchard in Keizer since 2001," he said, adding that small orchards dominate the current Oregon plantings. "Some orchards in this valley are as small as 2 acres. It's a crop that can work well for small farms, because a large acreage is just not needed."

He said after a year-and-a-half of effort on the part of the OGO, Oregon State University started an olive research project with test plots planted at the North Willamette Research and Extension Center in Aurora.

"Over the next three, four or five years (OSU) will put in and look at the cold hardiness of several varieties of olives," Caceu said. "There should be about 100 varieties to study on 1 acre of land at the center."

The OGO is still a small organization, he said, with about 17 members. The goal of the group and its appearance at the Expo is to "introduce olives to a larger audience in Oregon."