

# Ricchiuti Family Farms: Organic olives fill a niche

By **JULIA HOLLISTER**  
For the Capital Press

FRESNO, Calif. — When Vincenzo Ricchiuti came from Italy in 1914, he was looking to farm in a place with a Mediterranean climate. California's San Joaquin Valley had the climate, and he had the determination.

"Initially, my great-grandfather planted vegetables, but knew diversification was key for long term sustainability," said Vincent Ricchiuti. "With this in mind, he planted the first family acreage with grapes and figs."

Pat Ricchiuti joined his father in 1947 and expanded the family farming business as a grower, packer and shipper of stone fruit.

Vincent's father, Patrick, entered the business and diversified plantings to include cotton, citrus, almonds, canning olives, apples, raisins and grapes.

After graduation from Fresno State University, Vincent became



Ricchiuti Farms

**Patrick and Vincent Ricchiuti have been growing organic olives since 2008 and milled their first olive oil in 2011.**

involved full-time in the business.

"My father and I learned that 98% of the olive oil consumed in America was produced in foreign countries," he said. "We were already experienced and successful in the process of growing olives for

canning and realized a great opportunity for us."

In 2008, they planted three varieties of organic olives — Arbequina, Arbosana and Koroneiki — to create delicate, medium and bold olive oils in an expanding niche

market of organic consumers.

Today, there are approximately 450 acres of organic olive trees.

Olive trees, although susceptible to frost damage and "olive knot" disease, grow well in California's fertile soil and Mediterranean climate. Olives are an alternate bearing crop with heavy yields one year followed by lighter yields the next. They are typically harvested and milled in November.

"The olive oil mill is located on our farm," Vincent said. "At the facility, we crush, store, bottle, label and ship all our estate grown organic extra virgin Enzo Olive Oil."

While there are many challenges facing California agriculture — including escalating labor and production costs — the No. 1 issue remains water. The California drought is a costly problem for the state and local farms, he said.

Anytime there is a shortage of water, farmers have to modify their irrigation inputs, which affects

crop yields and fruit size. If there is not enough dedicated water for a specific ranch or farm to meet irrigation needs of the crop, then purchasing additional water is extremely costly and often limited.

With the demand for fresh California olive oil continually increasing across the country, more olive trees are being planted.

Vincent says the state must address and remedy the limited water allotments for agriculture and build additional water storage facilities to help farmers in their quest to feed the world.

Ryan Jacobsen, CEO of the Fresno County Farm Bureau, said the Ricchiuti family is a stalwart of the Fresno community.

"Their farming legacy in the region the past century is iconic, and Vincent is carrying on the family tradition. Under his guidance, the ENZO olive oil brand has flourished, with even celebrity chefs celebrating the quality of their products."

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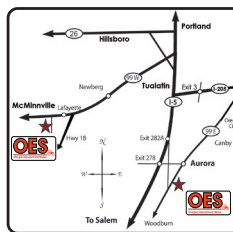
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