

Waikato couple Peter and Eunice Martin with some of their olive crop destined for the bottle.

Slowly DOES IT

Alison Worth meets a pair of Waikato growers who use traditional methods to produce artisan olive oil

PHOTOS: SAM SEATH

Peter and Eunice Martin have been guardians of a one-time sand quarry in Cambridge for more than 20 years. They moved there with the energy and enthusiasm to not only rehabilitate a scar on the Waikato landscape but to grow a commercial crop of something. Exactly what they weren't sure.

It took a couple of years of research into their soil type and climate, coupled with the co-operative spirit of the New Zealand Olive Association, to steer them towards olives. They planted 100 trees of seven different varieties – including 'Picual', 'Manzanilla', 'Koroneiki' and 'Leccino'. Some olives are self-fertile but not all, so they also planted 'Leccino' and 'Pendolino' as they're both productive trees and good pollinators.

The sun shone, the seasons came and went, and the rest of the quarry began to spring into new life, lush with hundreds of specimen and rare trees, shrubs, borders and perennials. The olives however, didn't start producing for four years. Luckily the Martins are patient people.

When the first harvest eventuated, the couple realised that a grove of 100 trees was viewed as a hobby orchard by the larger, mono-cropping growers. They couldn't find anywhere locally to press their fruit and the only factory happy to take smaller batches of olives was two hours away on the East Coast. The logistics of picking, washing and carting their fruit all that way, only to be blended with other varieties from other growers, would completely remove the pleasure of growing olive trees for oil. They looked into buying their own separator, but the cheapest were several thousand dollars.

Enter Peter's skills as a marine engineer, fitter and turner. With an abundant-looking harvest to deal with, he decided to build his own press. He and a good friend set to work using secondhand parts and recycled dairy plant steel pieces. That was Olive Press Mark I.

Over the years it pressed all the olives Peter wanted to pick. "I'd pick until I'd had enough, and enough was generally just the right amount for the family and a few friends until the following season."



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As the trees grew bigger, so did the annual crop, so the Martins decided it was time to build a bigger press. Steel girders were salvaged from local factory demolitions and together with the same friendly hydraulic expert, the couple built Olive Press Mark II: capable of providing up to 50 tonnes of pressure.

I asked if they thought there was a difference between oils that have been pressed and those spun using modern machines. The Martins reckon hand-harvesting and pressing the olives instills an indefinable essence. So what if they're labelled Luddites! The fact that many crops nowadays are untouched by human hands removes much of the understanding and connection we should have with our food, they say.

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Peter picks and presses each variety separately. Each has its own flavour, and some suit pickling better than others. Eunice shows me a bottle of last season's oil that contains homegrown saffron too – the threads are suspended in a rich, amber-coloured liquid.

The Martins have never sold any of the oil they've grown and pressed, preferring to give it away to friends and family. But as Peter nears retirement, the idea of supplying the local organic farm shop seems increasingly attractive. Suggestions of offering the Olive Press Mark II to other local growers and hobbyists to use also appeal.

Build your own olive press

Most commercially grown olives are now processed using centrifugal-type spinners. You can buy small ones but they're really expensive, especially for hobby growers. If Peter has inspired you to build your own, here's how: • **Make it strong.** Olives need a lot of pressure to extract a reasonable amount of oil. Fifty tonnes of pressure will bend even the thickest steel plates in time.

• **Have plenty of power.** Peter uses a hand pump on his hydraulic ram. It's slower but it gives him more control. • **Make sure it's hygienic.** Use stainless steel for parts that come into contact with fruit; it's easier to clean too. • **Be thrifty.** Look for secondhand parts and scrap stainless steel from food-processing factories, or it can get too costly.

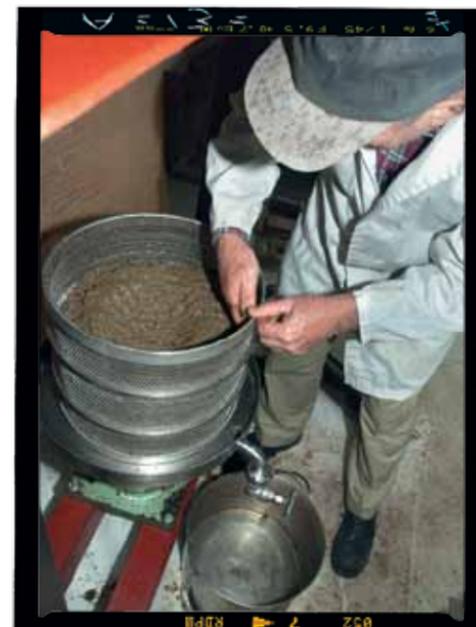
"If we can help other growers and gardeners make the most of their olives and reap their rewards, then why not?" says Peter.

Did you know?

The term "first press" traditionally referred to oil produced at the start of pressing. As the pressure increased on the olive paste, the quality of the oil declined, so first press was an indicator of quality. But first-press oils are commercially obsolete now due to the continual centrifugal process of extracting oil. Peter saves the oil that's produced from the olive paste during the malaxing (mixing) process as his first press because its taste is the most flavourful.

The description "cold pressed" is also outdated, again due to modern methods of extraction. When presses were used the first pressing of the olive paste – which produced the best quality oil – would be done when the paste was cold. The remaining paste would then be steamed and sometimes mixed with hot water to release more oil for the second press. This oil was inferior to the first pressed oil.

Cold-pressed oils are still available, although they're less likely to have been pressed and more likely to have been spun and kept below the regulatory temperature of 27°C.



How Peter Martin makes his own olive oil

Pick olives as they begin to turn brown. Wash them gently to remove dirt, spray residue, stalks and twigs. Do your picking in the morning: pressing must take place within 24 hours to ensure a good-quality oil with a long shelf life.

• **Grinding** (pictured top left): Crush the clean olives into a paste or slurry to open the cells and release the oil. **Mixing or malaxing** (pictured top centre): This involves stirring the crushed olives; it's most important as it allows the smaller droplets of oil to combine with larger ones. It can take 10-60 minutes, but you have to take care not to over-mix as it speeds up the oxidation process, resulting in a shorter shelf life for the oil and increased risk of early rancidity.

Press the paste (pictured top right) at room temperature slowly and carefully between stainless plates and sheets of strong muslin-like cloth. The oil and liquid residue is forced out of the press and into a waiting bucket. **Final separation or racking** (pictured middle row, from left): The contents of the bucket are poured into a cylinder where they're left to settle; the oil will float to the top and the residue will sink. Peter then uses water piped into the bottom of the cylinder to force the oil up and out of a tap into bottles for storage (pictured bottom row). Further filtering can take place through cloths, but any remaining residue or water will sink to the bottom of the bottle anyway. **Store olive oil** in a cool, dark place at a constant temperature below 18°C.