

# EX-MICROSOFTIES CULTIVATE GOLDEN TASTE OF ITALY

Retail Report: Deluxe olive oil, Barneys is staying, Shop to Make a Difference, Pike Place Market fest, wine major, farm tour



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COURTNEY BLETHEN / THE SEATTLE TIMES

Poggio La Noce is sold only in stores in Western Washington. The oil is not bottled until just before shipment.

This fall during the olive harvest in Italy, Dan McCarthy plans to have about 180 bottles of freshly pressed olive oil shipped by air from the 50-acre Tuscan estate of his former Queen Anne customers, Enzo Schiano and Claire Beliard.

To cover the airfreight, McCarthy & Schiering Wine Merchants will add about \$6 to the regular \$27 price of a 500-milliliter bottle of Poggio la Noce.

Last year, customers descended on the retailer's 120 bottles of the "olio nuovo" — new oil — like lovers of French wine greet Beaujolais Nouveau.

Sales of high-end olive oil have slowed, but some Seattleites remain willing and able to pay up for a fresh bottle to drizzle on salads, fresh vegetables and pasta.

Schiano and Beliard, who bought the Italian acreage in 1999 after making millions in marketing and business development at Microsoft, convinced McCarthy that olive oil could be worth a higher price when they brought some Poggio la Noce to Seattle a few years ago.

"I said, 'This is spectacular stuff,'" McCarthy recalled. "I visited the property and saw the groves, and now I can't wait for the next batch."

The couple sell the oil only at stores in Western Washington, including McCarthy & Schiering, several dozen QFCs, the Whole Foods in Bellevue and Roosevelt Square, DeLaurenti Specialty Food & Wine in Pike Place Market and Oil & Vinegar in Bellevue Mall.

They have the capacity to produce about 6,000 bottles a year and want to sell it exclusively in the Northwest, although they have thought about how they might help neighbors with olive groves market their olive oil in the U.S.

"We wanted to make olive oil available in Seattle because here [Italy] there is plenty of good olive oil, although we think ours is one of the best around," Schiano said. "In the U.S., it is not as well known in the sense that people know wine today."

He thinks the U.S. is "at the brink of people discovering the goodness of olive oil, how flavorful and fresh it can be. It doesn't have to be badly made like wine used to be."

To keep their oil fresh, the couple store it in tanks after pressing and don't bottle until it's almost time to ship.

The tanks still hold about a third of the olive oil pressed last fall, and they hope it sells by the end of the year, although Schiano says olive oil has a life of about three years.

"Before the economic crisis, the QFC demand was lively and then it fell off," he said. "With the crisis, people moved to a lower price point, and it's still selling but is not as brisk as before."

As expensive as \$27 olive oil might seem to people used to paying less than \$10 a bottle, Poggio la Noce is not the priciest.

McCarthy carries brands that cost up to \$35 and has seen them reach \$60 or \$70 a bottle. He often puts out a selection of olive oils for customers to try.

"Around \$35, you can still get people to taste the difference between truly fresh olive oil and one that's been sitting around the warehouse too long," McCarthy said.

— *Melissa Allison*