

*lunch in an olive grove*

MENU LOCAL CHEESES • OVEN-POACHED FIGS • ORGANIC LETTUCES WITH FIG VINAIGRETTE • ROASTED PORK SHOULDER AND NEW POTATOES • BROCCOLI WITH OLIVES  
WALNUT-OLIVE OIL CAKE • APPLE COMPOTE • CANDIED WALNUTS

**PICKING TIME** *At the McEvoy Ranch near Petaluma, California, Tuscan Frantoio olives hang heavy on the bough (this page), nearly ready to be plucked. With much work at hand, several members of the ranch staff rejuvenate with groveside meals (opposite). Today, chef Gerald Gass pours Domaine Carneros Pinot Noir from the Napa Valley to accompany a main course of roasted pork.*

PHOTOGRAPHS BY VICTORIA PEARSON TEXT BY SUSAN HEEGER



*As a nippy fall wind whips up clouds high above the lunch table, you can feel the energy of those seated—and a little tension. These members of the McEvoy Ranch staff share a concern: Will the rains be early? Can the ranch hands get the crop out before the deluge? Harvest season on a farm is ever fraught with excitement and expectations over the fruits of a year's work.*

To break bread with ranchers at picking time is to grasp an elemental characteristic of fresh food: There is always give-and-take between nature and human beings. Here, the weather's ups and downs are among the things that affect the flavor of the ranch's extra-virgin oil, made from organically grown olives. "From year to year, the oil is never quite the same," says

Shari DeJoseph, who manages the eighty acres of orchards. But it always has a slightly peppery taste and green-gold hue, qualities that depend partly on picking fruit before it's fully ripe, as farmers do in Tuscany. "They have the same problem we do with early storms," DeJoseph says, dipping some still-warm bread into a shallow bowl of the chartreuse oil.

In fact, the landscape of Marin County, California, where the ranch lies, is so similar to northern Italy in look and climate that owner Nan McEvoy hired a Tuscan expert and planted six varieties of Tuscan olives when she began the enterprise about a decade ago. She also hired chef Gerald Gass, who, with colleague Mark Rohrmeier, prepares several staff meals every week, which are occasionally served alfresco (so



long as the weather cooperates). Each lunch features a menu that celebrates olive oil; ranch gardener Margaret Koski-Kent grows additional makings on a couple of acres of organic kitchen-garden beds. She starts all the produce from seed and is pleased to see it savored. "We so enjoy these meals together during our hectic day," she says.

Today's bounty includes figs, new potatoes arranged around Gass's pork shoulder (his favorite cut, perfectly succulent after slow, tenderizing cooking), an array of just-picked lettuces, broccoli, and walnuts in the cake. Not to mention all the ranch-grown-and-cured olives—small green Frantoios and Maurinos—and bowls of oil for crusty bread. So versatile is this elixir that it finds a home in most everything Gass has

**AUTUMN COLOR** The west-southwest view of the ranch landscape features an orderly needlepoint of silver-tufted olive trees and a curving road edged with golden Lombardy poplars (opposite); native oaks and bay laurels blanket hilltops too steep to farm. Orchard manager Shari DeJoseph checks olives for ripeness (this page, clockwise from top left). The table awaits. Margaret Koski-Kent selects the lettuces for lunch. Olive slivers adorn a platter of broccoli. The midday meals include bread that Gass bakes in an outdoor oven. A lug box full of olives, destined for the mill.

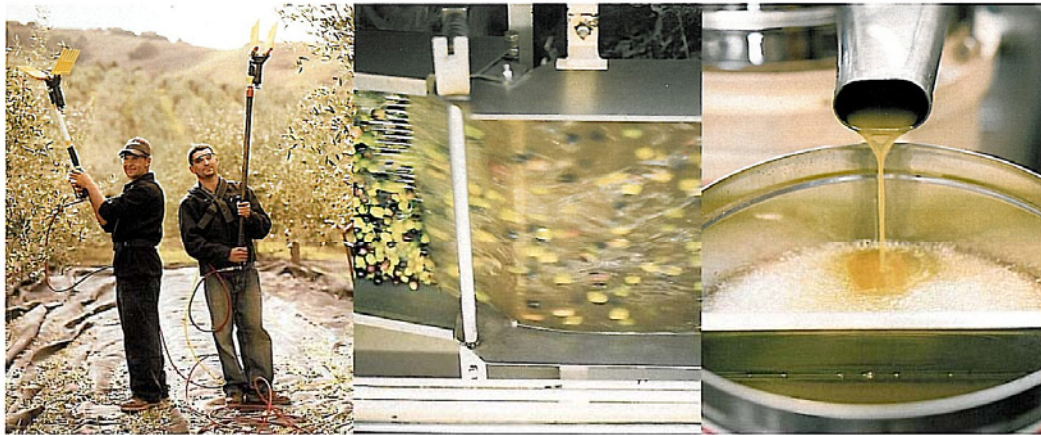
OLIVE OIL ENHANCES EACH OF THE COURSES, BEGINNING WITH  
A VINAIGRETTE FOR FRESH GREENS AND ENDING WITH A SURPRISINGLY AIRY CAKE.

made, even the cake. "Olive oil makes it moist," he says. "And, unlike butter, it adds a certain peppery, assertive taste."

Olive oil is healthful, especially extra-virgin oil, which the ranch produces; it is low in acid and made without chemicals or extreme heat. Rich in vitamin E, antioxidants, and "good" fat, the oil may help fend off heart disease and some cancers.

It wasn't olive oil's nutritional merits, however, that prompted McEvoy, one of the original staff members of the Peace

in 2004, making the ranch the country's largest producer of estate-grown-and-bottled certified-organic olive oil. At harvesttime, the ranks double to one hundred; workers ply the groves with tree-rattling tools, catch the fruit on tarps, and whisk it within hours to an on-site mill. There, with a mix of old and new technology (huge, slow grinding stones; quick, sharp steel blades; and whirring centrifuges), machines separate the solids and water from the oil and funnel the oil into



Corps and retired board chairwoman of the Chronicle Publishing Company, to start this business. In fact, she was looking for a ranch where she could spend time outdoors with her grandchildren. Then, in 1991, an Italian cooking class piqued her curiosity and her appreciation. "I've always particularly loved the oil's subtle richness," McEvoy says. Soon after, she bought the 550-acre former dairy farm near the town of Petaluma. While neighboring ranchers were growing grapes, she flew to Italy, consulted with enologist Maurizio Castelli, and returned with two thousand olive seedlings.

Since then, the number of trees has swelled to eighteen thousand, yielding more than three thousand gallons of oil

a series of settling tanks over the course of months. The delicious results are decanted into bottles as orders are placed.

Then, says Gass, coauthor of the *Olive Harvest Cookbook*, the oil has many applications. Try the obvious, such as whisking it into salad dressings, or use it to scramble eggs, fry fish, or even add moistness to cookies. Heating high-quality olive oil affects taste, so for the purest flavor, finish warm foods such as potatoes with a drizzle—you'll intensify the flavor and fragrance of the whole meal. Experiment with olive oil, Gass suggests, as he and Rohrmeier do, regaling colleagues with ever-changing, inventive menus. "We always eat everything," DeJoseph says, smiling and holding up her empty plate.

*IN PROCESS* Over the monthlong harvest, as olives turn from green to reddish purple, orchard workers use pneumatic combs (left) to shake fruit off the trees onto waiting tarps; from there the olives are collected into picking bins, loaded onto trucks, and brought to the ranch's mill for processing. The mill hums with busy machines (center) and is heavily fragrant with a sweet, earthy bouquet; the olives are ground into a paste and whirled in centrifuges until the solids separate from the oil. To eliminate almost all remaining solids, the oil spends a few months in settling tanks (right) before being bottled.

**WELL-SUITED FINISH**  
*A walnut-flecked olive oil cake, served with apple compote, candied walnuts, and crème fraîche, makes a satisfying coda. Like the olive oil, the nuts and apples come from ranch trees. Ready to pick during the olive harvest, they find their way into many of Gass's fall menus.*

SEE THE RECIPES SECTION  
SEE THE GUIDE FOR SOURCES

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# The guide

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Where to find it

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● **PAGES 136 TO 143** OLIVE OIL, available from McEvoy Ranch, 866-617-6779 or [www.mcevoyranch.com](http://www.mcevoyranch.com). Recommended reading: Gerald Gass with Jacqueline Mallorca, the *Olive Harvest Cookbook* (Chronicle Books, 2004; \$35).

● **PAGE 137** 2002 PINOT NOIR, \$27 for 750 mL, from Domaine Carneros, 1240 Duhig Road, Napa, CA 94559, 707-257-0101 or [www.domainecarneros.com](http://www.domainecarneros.com).

● **PAGE 139** Green CARDAMOM PODS, \$4.99 for 2 oz., from Kalustyan's, 123 Lexington Avenue, New York, NY 10016, 212-685-3451 or [www.kalustyans.com](http://www.kalustyans.com). Coupe DINNER PLATES in Birch (#102), \$30, and Coupe DESSERT BOWLS in Shagreen (#104-70) and Sage (#104-10), \$21, by Heath Ceramics, 400 Gate 5 Road, Sausalito, CA 94965, 415-332-3732 or [www.heathceramics.com](http://www.heathceramics.com). Large Bianco FOOTED PITCHER (BlA-2616), \$63, from Vietri, [www.vietri.com](http://www.vietri.com). Sheer linen TABLECLOTH in Natural (#2913), \$60, and OLIVE TRAYS (#3734), \$10, from the Gardener, 1836 Fourth Street, Berkeley, CA 94710, 510-548-4545 or [www.thegardener.com](http://www.thegardener.com).

● **PAGE 140** MI Tam CHEESE, \$12 for 10 oz., and Red Hawk CHEESE, \$15 for 12 oz., from Cowgirl Creamery, 80 Fourth Street, Point Reyes Station, CA 94956, 415-663-9335 or [www.cowgirlcreamery.com](http://www.cowgirlcreamery.com).

● **PAGE 141** Large Crema OVAL PLATTER (CRM-2622), \$113, by Vietri, see above.

● **PAGE 143** Plaza SALAD PLATES in Redwood (#506), \$21, and deep SERVING BOWL in Linen (#110-17), \$50, from Heath Ceramics, see above. Sheer linen TABLECLOTH in Natural (#2913), \$60, from the Gardener, see above.