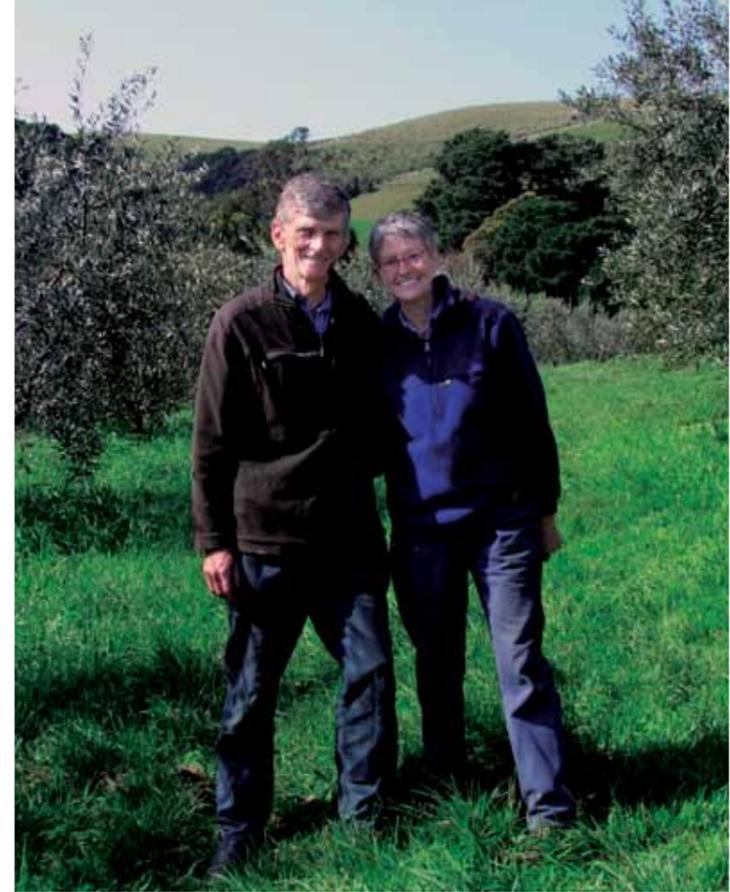




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Growing the good oil

LYN AND ANDREW JAMIESON DON'T DO ANYTHING BY HALVES. IT'S NO SURPRISE, THEN, THAT THEIR TREE-CHANGE, FROM SUBURBAN BALWYN TO BUCOLIC FISH CREEK, HAS SEEN THEM PLANT SEVERAL HUNDRED TREES AND ESTABLISH A SUCCESSFUL BUSINESS PRODUCING OLIVE OIL.

words and pictures Jillian Staton



Fish Creek olive growers, Andrew and Lyn Jamieson. The neighbours' dairy cows cling to the slopes above Hoddle Creek.

Andrew, a surgeon, and Lyn, a former IT specialist, purchased their 100 acre property ten years ago, with a view to planting olives. Avid sail boarders, they were regular visitors to nearby Shallow Inlet and had grown to love the region.

Although there were no other olive growers in the area at the time, they surmised that as it produced great wines, it would also produce great olive oil.

Happily, the couple (who had no previous experience growing or processing olives) was proven correct – but not before embarking on a steep learning curve. One of their first lessons was that the pretty yellow flowers covering the property at settlement were actually the invasive weed ragwort – and that the place was so infested that it was known locally as “Ragwort Flats”!

But ragwort wasn't the only weed they needed to tackle. Blackberries ran a close second, followed by thistles – a daunting job, given their decision to run the property with as few chemicals as practicable. “We had

more ragwort, blackberries and thistles to spray, hoe and root rake than I ever thought possible,” recalled Lyn. “It was another steep learning curve – especially on the slopes!”

While they were learning how to tackle their weeds, Lyn and Andrew were also trying to learn as much as possible about growing olives. They read books, attended courses and workshops, listened to locals and spoke to experts in the industry. In 2000, they planted a small trial plot using six different varieties of olives and over the next year monitored the trees' growth.

In 2001, confident that most varieties would do well in their conditions, they fenced off and planted their first two acres using the Italian varieties Frantoio and Leccino, with Pendolino as a pollinator. As expected, the plants thrived – provided they were securely staked. “The wind that we love so well at Shallow Inlet for sail boarding isn't quite so appreciated here!” laughed Lyn.

The following year, they purchased some state-



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Lyn also enjoys growing native plants at her Fish Creek property. Opposite page is Richie (Benaud), Protector of the Grove and a pruned olive tree. Pruning the olive trees into a vase shape opens up the canopy to assist ripening, and stimulates next year's growth.

of-the-art Italian equipment and began processing their oils, under the name Golden Creek Olives (named after the creek that runs from their back boundary). The assistance of 'Gianni', an Italian processing expert living in Melbourne, was invaluable. "He was so patient, stepping us through all the nuances and problems of processing olives, and helping us learn with our own machine."

Another valuable assistant is their apprentice, Jack, who they took on three years ago when olive tree numbers reached 900. A Fish Creek local, Jack is completing a traineeship in horticulture and is learning all the skills of grove management and olive processing. "He's been a great source of energy for us, and we're possibly an equal source of amusement for him!"

Like any farming enterprise, growing and processing olives has its busy –and its busier times. With six varieties now planted (they added the Italian Coratina, Spanish Arbequina and Greek Koroneiki to the mix) harvesting begins in April and finishes some time in August. All fruit is handpicked at the optimal point of maturation for each variety. This season, they reaped a staggering three tonnes of fruit, an amount that should continue to increase as the trees mature.

The fruit is processed as soon as possible after picking. Golden Creek Olives produces extra virgin olive oil, which means that it is cold pressed and has no additives; It is then bottled and labeled –

again, by hand. "We're boutique in every sense of the word!" said Lyn.

Demand for their oils – which they sell at farmers' markets, in local cafes and restaurants and via the internet - is growing steadily with customers obviously appreciating the different characteristics of each variety. Currently, their most popular variety is Leccino, which has a clean grassy nose, mild bitterness and moderate pepper. The Coratina runs a close second, having an herbaceous aroma and a strong, lingering taste of pepper. It's popular with experienced fresh extra virgin olive oil consumers, especially chefs.

Lyn and Andrew's own favourite is the full bodied Picual. "Its fruitiness and balanced flavours epitomize fresh extra virgin olive oil – ole!"

Lyn and Andrew credit their oils' appeal to a good choice of varieties for their conditions. "Right from the start, we wanted to produce premium olive oils with intense flavour characteristics, and these varieties allow us to do that."

Their low input approach to farming also helps. Apart from minimal hand watering in the first year, the trees are not irrigated, which results in a lower yield but stronger flavour characteristics. They also eschew

chemicals and herbicides around the trees, only using white oil to combat the odd attack of scale.

They fertilise minimally, and mulch with chipped prunings and grass clippings to build humus in the soil, and reduce evaporation.

Lyn and Andrew's care for their plants extends further than their olive grove. Over the past ten years, they have fenced off two gullies to protect them from cattle, and improve water quality in the nearby Battery Creek Reservoir. They have also planted thousands of indigenous shrubs and trees to link up the stands of remnant vegetation that were on the property when they bought it.

They're extremely busy off-farm as well. Supposedly retired, Andrew operates three mornings a month at two nearby hospitals, and Lyn is active within the Gippsland olive growing industry. They're members of a number of community groups, including the Prom Coast Singers and Fish Creek Landcare. And to keep fit, Andrew competes in race-walking, Lyn enjoys cycling and they're both still keen sail boarders. One can't help wondering if life might have been quieter back in Balwyn!