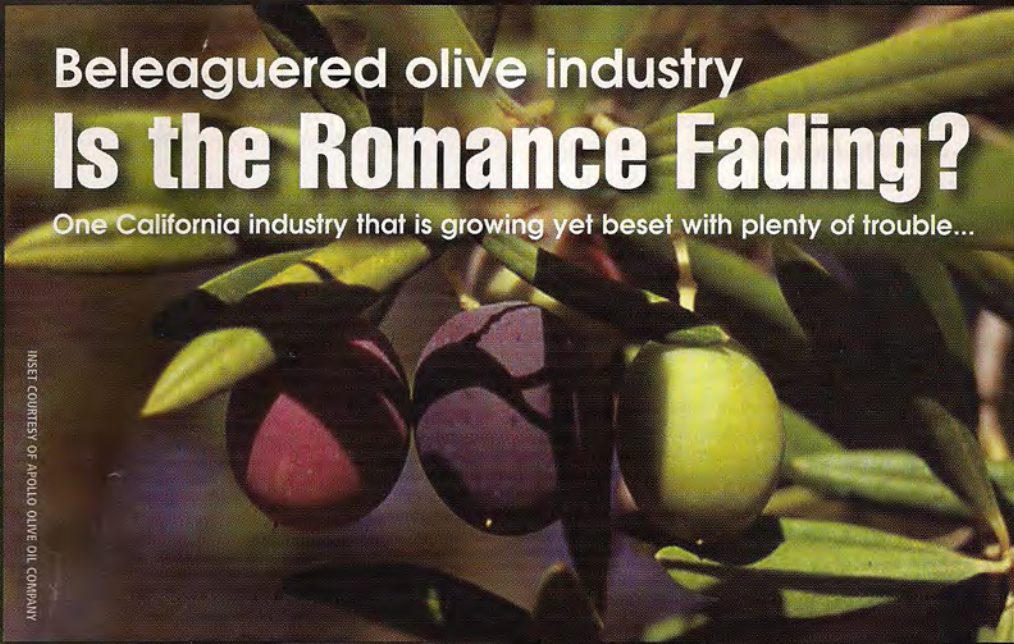


# Beleaguered olive industry Is the Romance Fading?

One California industry that is growing yet beset with plenty of trouble...

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Honey bee working olive blossoms



Story and images by Andrew Glazier

It is around midnight when my wife and I are nearly shaken out of bed by a thunderous racket outside. Something that sounds for all the world like an army tank is moving through the trees on the property next to our place. We live in an agricultural area between an orange grove and another grove of olive trees. While trucks and machinery are often used in these orchards, we are surprised nonetheless to hear such a din in the dead of night. "What the heck is that?" we exclaim.

(turn to page 16)



Cielito Lindo entrance drive



Frank Clarke's ranch, Cielito Lindo



Heat-stunted olives



Heat-stunted olives



Frank Clarke in his olive grove



Some olive groves are getting very old



Some old olive trees are cut up into firewood



Unwanted olive trees prepared for sale to landscapers who no longer need any, courtesy of the recession

We throw back the covers and run to a window, to find our field of view dominated by a gigantic metal beast crashing through the olive grove in a cloud of dust eerily illuminated by powerful lights. As the clanking monster draws closer and finally turns to head back down the next row of olive trees, we finally realize that it is a large tractor at work. The machine is pulling a flail, a device with an array of chains spinning at speed, smashing pruned olive branches into mulch. The din it creates is unbelievable.

I wish I could tell you a romantic story of Old World olive oil presses, a picture that might include European women with perfect skin. But those are nowhere to be seen in this account, and neither are recipes and beautiful bottles. Here in the San Joaquin Valley, there are olive trees, to be sure, thousands of them, but it is a completely different culture. While the growers such as Spain and the Mediterranean region have a longer, richer history of olive production, the industry in California has taken root a bit differently. Here, many farmers grow the fruit and then sell it to wholesalers and middlemen who then broker it to various markets.

While boutique olive growers and producers have in recent years begun to proliferate in California, some in conjunction with vineyards, the U.S. olive industry as a whole is dominated by large farms and massive processing facilities, particularly in olive oil production—and the European industry has also evolved in that direction to a substantial degree. When I asked one local olive farmer, a neighbor named Bob Ward, where he ships his olives, he simply replied, "All over." Although it is not easy in a short article about olives to separate production of olive oil from table olives, my interest here is primarily in discussing the latter.

One day before dawn not long ago, I awaken not to the clanking of a monster machine, but to a different sound... singing. I rub the sleep from my eyes and look out the window to see a small army of migrant workers carrying ladders into the olive groves. Loud whistles carry for many rows as a tree is finished. Repeatedly portable buckets are emptied into large square containers that sit between the rows, eventually filling them to capacity for the forklift to take to the tractor trailer. Olives are labor intensive to be sure. Walnuts can be shaken from a tree. Oranges can be easily hand

picked, contrasted beautifully as they are against green foliage. But ripe olives are not so easy to see; every branch of every tree in every row must be carefully inspected before picking on the next branch begins.

With this meticulous care, yet picking as rapidly as possible, men and women in the olive grove clamber up and down ladders for hours. In years past, I am told, such work would continue until sundown, when camps and small fires would light up the groves. Today, because of labor laws camping among the olive trees is no longer permitted. Even so, the workers still prefer not to waste their wages by overnighting in costly hotels; at the end of a work day they melt away into the shadows among the trees, only to reappear before dawn to resume picking. It's more or less a don't ask-don't tell sort of thing.

Bob Ward grows olives and citrus. Day after day I see him and his sons working in the groves, chasing dirt bike riding kids out, driving all manner of farm equipment from tractors to forklifts and carefully managing their crops. A few days a year the place is full of trucks loading fruit. At night I walk along the grove and it is peaceful and silent, quite a contrast to the activity of a busy harvest day. Occasionally a large owl takes wing, quite a thing to witness.

This year, we had a three-day spell with unusually warm temperatures: The high during that period was 106F, 26 degrees above normal. I called Bob, and he confirmed that the heat had destroyed the flowers that normally are pollinated during the period that the heat wave had occurred. I studied a goodly number of trees and the result of the heat was obvious. The problem is simply that olive trees don't like high heat. Above 75 or 80F, pollen dries out. Fruit already set stops growing. The olives end their development as berry-like balls

about the size of a copper BB and fall easily from the branches.

"Berries" is a dreaded term for an olive grower. It denotes fruit that will develop no further. Where there should be clusters of growing olives, tiny green beads remain and begin falling off. Fruit is aborted from heat-induced stress as the tree goes into survival mode. The harvest is doomed by a few hot days. Hundreds of thousands of dollars of potential profit evaporate in an afternoon.

While there are bad years such as this one, there are good ones as well. Some years there are record harvests. Tonnage is the unit of weight used to describe them. While increases in tonnage make the farmers happy, the brokers get happy too as they begin paying progressively less for olives as the harvest flood hits the market. The olive market is tough for the farmer. Play it right and you do well. Get into it late and lose big. While market demand can fluctuate, some keep at it no matter what. Bob tells me it is a vulnerable business and is just plain hard. He also mentions that nowadays people are planting fewer table olives and more olive oil trees.

Another issue is the age of the trees. Some were planted in 1943, some in 1949 and some in the 1970s. Younger trees produce better, so calculating retirement for a tree is part of the grower's job. Many olive farmers have taken to removing them in favor of citrus, whose market seems a bit more stable. Lately, many retired trees have been sold to landscapers for residential landscaping. Some have appeared in front of Olive Garden restaurants. I remember my brother planting them on his property. These trees make beautiful specimens with their gray foliage, which serves as a nice accent in a green-heavy yard. Many times as I drive to work, I see backhoes trenching around sizeable root balls of olive trees, which are

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then fitted into enormous wooden crates for transport. But in the past few months another problem has cropped up: Just as farmers were catching on to the potential value of digging up old or unwanted olive trees for sale to landscapers, the building boom in California ground to a halt, courtesy of recessionary pressures in the economy. Now those trees sit in crates, their futures unclear, the added cost of preparing them representing more of a potential disadvantage than did their diminished production.

Bob says the biggest hit the industry took was NAFTA. Olive farming was hard enough to begin with. It became even harder as Mexican olives flooded the market. Worse still, Spanish and Italian olive growers began planting heavily just south of the Mexican border. These countries, who already enjoy the lion's share of the world market, and whose subsidies already heavily support their own olive farms, can under NAFTA save even more money as their fruit is transported into the U.S. with lower costs than ever before. Many farmers tell me they wonder why people in Washington, D.C., passed NAFTA. On the surface it seems that such an agreement should help the U.S. In reality, however, it handicaps American growers already heavily regulated and pits them against growers from other countries—who have no laws governing pesticides, labor and who enjoy support from the government. Market theory and farming realities are two worlds far apart.

Unlike so many of the fruits we all love, olives cannot be eaten right off the tree unless you are a raven or a certain species of fly. The imported olive fruit fly, *Bactrocera oleae*, is a seriously destructive pest. It appeared right after Mexican olives first came into the U.S. market. Within a few years it had moved from Los Angeles to the San Joaquin

Valley in central California. The problem is that the fly can travel long distances. Residential trees, which have recently become even more numerous, are now infected without treatment or supervision, which can wreak havoc on a farmer's field even miles distant. The olive fruit fly is here; it has already spread to proportions making any hope of eradication a fantasy. The only solution available now is detection and control, another added cost to U.S. olive growers.


American growers are prohibited from using the same insecticides that European growers use in their groves, a clear edge for them in terms of cost. Meanwhile sprays long illegal here are used on fruit shipped by European growers into the U.S. Moreover, Bob is told that some Europeans spray those substances using backpack devices rather than sprayer-equipped tractors, another cost advantage—yet in human terms a truly dangerous practice for workers employed in groves outside the U.S. when the groves being sprayed are usually hundreds of acres in size.

Also, European growers openly tell American growers that they receive subsidies from the European Union to export to the U.S. To say it is hard these days for American grower would be a gross understatement. I asked Bob what he would tell the reader and his typical pithy reply was, "Buy American." He sells his crops to the Musco Family Olive Company. Their brands, "Black Pearls" and "Early California," are products Bob says you should buy if you are interested in supporting American table olive growers. Individual consumers can certainly produce some effect in this way, but the effects the decisions of corporate consumers can be substantial. For example, Subway, the well-known chain of sandwich shops, used to buy American table olives. They switched to an offshore supplier

to save a few cents per can. If anyone can explain to Bob Ward how it helps America when an American company saves pennies to have olives shipped thousands of miles from outside the U.S., please let him know. Other growers like him might like to know as well.

Another neighbor of mine is Dr. Frank Clarke, a WWII veteran who continues practicing medicine one day each week. An active man, he is high on a ladder, pruning a branch when I arrive at his house. I ask him about how the heat wave affected his table olive crop. He holds a branch and shows me the tiny fruit. Here and there are normal olives, but they are so few and far between that it would be a loss to pay anyone to pick them. The amount of fruit rejected and left on the tree in a good year can outweigh the total weight of a bad year's fruit.

"Once the proteins coagulate, it won't grow anymore," the doctor tells me. His insights about the health of the plant are magnified by his lengthy medical career. A dove lands on the fence next to him and he calls her. She follows him around as he works outdoors and has done so for years. He is philosophical about his struggles with the olives he grows. After riding on warships in the South Pacific, he seems to have a good grasp on what truly hard really is. I ask him what he will do and he says he will look toward next year and the prospect of a better harvest. He recalls the "nine-ton year," which was one of the best.

It is about midnight as I finish this article, and I hear an awful noise coming out of the olive grove. But this time instead of a large tractor, the quiet has been shattered by the horrible screams of exultation coyotes make after a kill. These animals regularly pass among the olive trees, drinking from the irrigation lines and looking for prey that is also there seeking a drink. Judging by the sound of them, they must have killed something better than their customary diet of ground squirrel. I am figuring that is must be a rabbit since they are worked up into a frenzy. Being in a field of olives can be difficult for everyone these days. 

**Andrew Glazier** is a landscaper, writer and commercial artist from Exeter, Calif. His work has appeared in *Time* and *Sunset* magazines and the *San Francisco Chronicle*. He is an avid collector of rare and unusual plants, especially cactus. One can find him lurking at garden shops or online looking for the rare and unusual. He has volunteered to help with propagation for the San Francisco Botanical Gardens at Strybing Arboretum, the origin of much of his epiphyllum collection. He likes plants from the Lily family, the namesake of his daughter Lily, his prettiest flower of all. For more information go to [WildWestGardens.com](http://WildWestGardens.com).



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