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SPOTLIGHT

Owatonna native makes name as world-leading olive oil expert

By WILLIAM MORRIS wmorris@owatonna.com Jun 30, 2017



Joanne Lacina, an Owatonna native and founder of e-commerce company Olive Oil Lovers, recently became the first person ever to score 100 percent on a rigorous olive oil tasting skills test. (Submitted photo)

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Like most Minnesotans, Joanne Lacina says olive oil wasn't a big part of her diet growing up.

"Most of the oil we've grown up with, especially in the Midwest, is a really generic oil that has probably been crushed from olives that haven't been handled as well, that have started fermenting, that were left out for a long time before pressing," said Lacina, an Owatonna native and 1997 Owatonna High School graduate. "The oil we've grown up with probably has little to no flavor, and if it does, it has flavors of rancidity and muskiness, kind of the skunky-funky flavor is what I call it."

So when Lacina, by then working for "a really good company ... that was not a passion" in Minneapolis, traveled to the island of Crete in 2006, the olive oil she encountered there was a revelation.

"I learned a lot moving to Greece and realizing, no, this is delicious! I wanted to put it all over my food," she said. "It's just this beautiful fresh fruit juice, and it should taste like that."

Lacina speaks with authority on the subject. After remaining in Crete for several years, learning about and working in the olive oil trade, in 2012 she founded Olive Oil Lovers, an e-commerce and community website headquartered in New Jersey that sells a wide range of specialty olive oils, some for \$100 or more per bottle.

"I personally choose every single oil we have on our website, and I oversee control of the product in the warehouse," she said. "Really we're the only people between the farmer and the consumer, so it really guarantees the oil is really fresh and at a good quality, and a good price."

Her voice hums with enthusiasm as she describes the qualities she looks for in top-tier olive oil, of which she keeps at least four in her cupboard at all times.

"Extra virgin olive oil that's handled properly should have lots of fruity notes in the mouth," she said. "You should be smelling green grass and fruit and fresh herbs. You walk into a mill when olives are being pressed, it smells like someone is mowing the lawn. It's a really wonderful, fresh smell. ... Think of fruit trees and garden vegetables. You want to get some of those aromas ... and you want a hint of bitterness, of pungency, in the back of your throats."

If that sounds like the way wine experts talk about wine, it's because there are many similarities in the industries. As with wine, there are numerous varieties of olive oil that very depending on the region, soil, handling of the olives and crushing process. There are varieties recommended to accompany certain types of food. And there are professional organizations, such as Extra Virgin Olive Oil Savantes, that train industry members in tasting, ranking and categorizing the different varieties of olive oil.

And it's by Savantes' ranking that Lacina is now arguably the foremost olive oil expert in the world. On June 23, she became the first person in the group's history to score a perfect 30 out of 30 on the rigorous group's rigorous skills test, which includes detecting, identifying and ranking defects in different olive oils; picking which oil out of a group of samples is different from the others; and what she said was hardest, to correctly identify eight different varieties, all in an hour and a half.

Acing the test puts her in an elite group in the olive oil trade.

"There's only two other people in the world who've received an honorary Savante certificate," she said. "One scored 28 points, one scored 29 points. So there's only three of us in the 10 years they've been giving this test, and I'm the only one to get 30."

It's a big achievement, for Lacina and the producers she works with, especially for someone who describes herself as "an American who didn't grow up under an olive tree." But in a sense, she says, her relative newness to the olive oil scene has helped her develop her palate.

"I think that's because my particular business is I'm identifying olive oil from all over the world in different regions," she said. "I'm unbiased to different regions."

With her Savantes certification behind her, Lacina says she'll continue to expand her business and recruit new producers. And she hopes as she does so, she can change her fellow Americans' attitude toward her favorite ingredient.

"We need to very much up the standard of the olive oil that we're consuming here in the U.S.," she said. "Unfortunately, the U.S. has been seen sort of a dumping ground for the poor-quality oil, because they think 'oh, they don't know, they'll keep buying this stuff.' Now, people are getting exposed to the higher quality oil."

William Morris is a reporter for the Owatonna People's Press. He can be reached at 444-2372; follow him on Twitter @OPWilliam

Find out more

Joanne Lacina's company, Olive Oil Lovers, offers recipes, expert guidance and a store offering dozens of products for olive oil fans. They can be found online at www.oliveoillovers.com.

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