



Editor [Jennifer Wadsworth](#): Heard some news you want us to check out? Let me know:
jenniferw@patch.com


[Home](#)
[News](#)
[Events](#)
[Places](#)
[Marketplace](#)
[Q&A](#)
[Volunteer](#)
[Elections](#)

[Opinion](#)

Good Stewards of California History and Olive Oil

Darro and Olivia Grieco serve up gold-medal olive oil at the San Ramon Artisan Food Market.

By [Amy McCurdy](#) [Email the author](#) August 18, 2011

[Print](#)
[1 Comment](#)

Deborah Cochran Glass and 10 others recommend this.

[View full size](#)


This is the story of a couple who rescued and restored an abandoned 100-year-old olive grove, now producing award-winning olive oil.

Meet Darro and Olivia Grieco, owners of the [Berkeley Olive Grove](#), a historic, certified organic estate near Oroville, CA, which happens to be the largest single-planted Mission olive grove in the world.

The story actually begins before Darro and Olivia were born.

In 1900, an olive oil from Oroville received the Grand Gold Medal at the Paris Exposition. Soon after, a group of agriculture professors from UC Berkeley set out to find the optimal location for growing olives.

It turns out that California's north central valley features a unique Mediterranean climate belt that occurs in only five locations around the world.

The Berkeley professors spent three years conducting climate research and testing soils in the area. In 1913, they selected 500 acres on the rolling mesas just outside of Oroville to plant their grove of Mission olive trees.

By the time the Griecos discovered the orchard in 2003, it was bank-owned and the trees were suffering from neglect and damaged by the olive fruit fly.

"When I found the property, I was very drawn to it," says Darro, who grew up in Yankee Hill, just 15 miles north of the orchard. He was raised by parents who shared a reverence for nature and living sustainably. His mother was an avid gardener and grew much of the family's food.

Darro was a real estate investor and developer when he discovered the abandoned orchard.

"My original plan was to create the most beautiful living environment possible, and then sell it as parcels," he says.

And when his wife Olivia researched the property's history, the couple learned how special it was, and that the professors who planted it did so with the intention of it lasting a very long time.

That's when they committed themselves to preserving the orchard.

"We realized that if we kept the integrity of the property as a whole, there would be greater benefit for posterity," Darro says. "We began thinking of it in terms of a 1,000-year project."

For Olivia, whose very name seems to suggest it was fate, walking through the orchard with Darro is what truly won her over.

"I could feel how special it was," Olivia says. "It whispered to my heart."

She relates the story of how, one day shortly after they bought the property, she saw a coyote trotting down the dirt road that divides the orchard.

“When he saw me, he sat right down in the road, looking at me, as if to say, ‘*So you’re the new guy,*’” Olivia says.

Once the orchard was theirs — a long process that took about a year, in which time 19 other serious buyers had become interested — the first thing the Griecos did was to establish the entire property as organic.

At the time, organic olives were rare.

“The day after it became certified, someone came to our driveway asking to buy olives from me,” Darro says.

Darro and Olivia have been good stewards of this unique and precious land, employing traditional, sustainable organic practices.

For example, they allow the trees to grow in natural conditions, using dry irrigation.

“The trees are sustained by nature,” Darro says, “which produces some of the most antioxidant-rich olive oil on the planet.”

Each tree is hand-picked and hand-pruned. Chipped prunings are returned to the soil as mulch.

The couple hires specialists to help cultivate mushrooms that thrive on an olive orchard floor, and they utilize goats to manage excess edibles in the orchard.

Wild turkeys, quail, doves and deer are welcome, and wander freely through the orchard.

So do their three horses, which Olivia adopted as part of the nonprofit animal rescue she started after 25 years of teaching and working with autistic students.

For Darro, hand-harvesting olives is a sort of homecoming.

Throughout his childhood, Darro hand-picked and cured olives from an old grove owned by family friends.

“It’s very solitary and sort of spiritual,” Darro explains. “It’s just you and the trees, which can be a significant experience — it was for me.”

When the Griecos began producing [Berkeley Olive Grove 1913](#) extra virgin olive oil in 2008, their goal was to make “the best and most healthful olive oil we can,” Darro says.

It appears they have accomplished exactly that. Their olive oils have won gold medals every year since they started producing them.

In 2009, their California Mission Gold won Best of Show at the Los Angeles International Extra Virgin Olive Oil Competition.

In 2010, they won a gold medal at the same L.A. competition, for Presentation. Judges described their olive oil as “understated timeless elegance.”

This year, they won four golds, and the rest silver.

Today, Berkeley Olive Grove 1913 oils are available in a variety of places. In addition to the [San Ramon Artisan Food Market](#) and the Berkeley Farmers Market, they can be purchased at several Whole Foods markets (including [San Ramon](#), Walnut Creek, Lafayette, Berkeley, and San Francisco), and restaurants and specialty stores throughout Butte County.

The Griecos' low-tech, low-density orchard recently captured the attention of a celebrity chef from Chicago, who flew out to spend several days learning about the olives and pairing the oils with various foods on site.

She ended up purchasing 500 gallons of oil for her restaurant back in Chicago.

A doctor from Georgia, who is studying olives for their curative properties, visited the Berkeley Olive Grove earlier this month. He has a 600-acre wellness retreat where he teaches people about living a healthy lifestyle.

One of Darro’s goals is to increase production through better pruning processes. He hopes to continue offering the best and healthiest olive oil possible at the most economical price.

He and Olivia are currently preparing a tasting room, and they plan to eventually host a visitors' center and offer seminars where people can learn how a traditional olive grove is managed.

“This is a unique place, where people can come experience a historic grove,” Darro says. “Something that will never happen again.”

“We’re on a path, there’s no other way for us to live,” says Olivia. “It’s like it’s our destiny.”

The San Ramon Artisan Food Market is open Thursdays from 10 a.m. to 2 p.m. at Bishop Ranch, 2641 Camino Ramon (at the corner of Bishop Drive and Camino Ramon).

Related Topics: [Farmers Market](#), [Mission olives](#), [Olive Oil](#), [Organic](#), [San Ramon Artisan Food Market](#), [Sustainable](#), [dry-irrigation](#), and [olives](#)

Interested in a follow-up to this article?

Keep me posted!