

5 food artisans in Napa Valley Wine Country

John Birdsall October 11, 2011



In a place where most of the artisan skill is trained on Cabs and Chardonnays, it can be a challenge for non-winemakers to stand out. But through a blend of talent, determination and in some cases decades of dedication to craft, these five Napa Valley artisans make foods that can stand up to the best wines in the region.

Salute Santé! grapeseed oil

From their small, low-slung plant next to the Napa River, Valentin and Nanette Humer talk about grapeseed oil the way evangelists talk about conversions, and they have been preaching for more than 20 years.

Three years ago, the Humers launched their first varietal grapeseed oils, Chardonnay and Merlot. That number's now at 11 varietals, three from organic wine grapes, plus milling grapeseed flour from the crushed seeds.

Grapeseed oil is popular in Europe, but most are chemically extracted, and the oil that results is good for cooking - it has a high smoke point, so it's good for deep-frying.

The cold-pressed oils offer nuances of varietal character. Cabernet Sauvignon has the shadow of dark fruit and a flash of acidity; Syrah has a tannic, peppery edge. But the Riesling, with its green-apple fruit and citrusy tang, is nothing short of astonishing.

The challenge is getting the peppercorn-size grapeseeds in the first place. You have to convince wineries to let you show up during the frenzy of the crush, then mess with the pomace, the mass of skins and seeds that remain after crushing. "You have a 24- to 48-hour window to take the pomace and get it dried so it doesn't oxidize," Nanette Humer says. Austrian-born Valentin Humer worked with a German manufacturer to fine-tune his three presses to exert enough pressure to crush grapeseeds without the excessive heat from friction that would kill their flavor nuances. "All the life force and energy are still in it," he says.

Salute Santé varietals are available at Whole Foods, Bi-Rite Market, Draeger's, Berkeley Bowl and other retailers. www.grapeseedoil.com