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Friends launch successful olive oil business

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FOR THE STAR

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This year Bonnie Storm and Nena Talcott qualified for Social Security and Medicare. It's also the year the longtime friends launched a business venture that has taken off with a roar of success that has astonished the two farming women.

Their Grove 45 Extra Virgin Olive Oil, named for the year in which they were both born, sold out within weeks.

And, Talcott noted, "We haven't had to sell it to our friends."

The story of Grove 45 olive oil begins with the friendship of the two women who met on a tennis court — "Nena knocked me down," Storm recalled — in St. Helena almost two decades ago.

Storm, a native of Sonoma, had moved over the hill when she and her husband purchased the historic Storm Ranch in Chiles Valley, a place whose lively anecdotes include tales that the Symbionese Liberation Army, notorious for kidnapping newspaper heiress Patty Hearst, had used the place as a hideout in the 1970s.

Storm was interested in olives, and imported a shipment of bare root trees from Italy, which she planted on the ranch and began to grow organically. She produced an olive oil that by 1997 she was selling commercially, and that won the first gold medal awarded to a California olive oil in Italy at the Orchiolo d'Oro.

Talcott and her husband had moved to the Napa Valley in 1974 "to have a good life for our kids." She planted her first vineyard in 1975 and by the mid-'80s she was growing more than 60 acres of premium grapes for wineries in the valley.

After their meeting on the tennis courts, Talcott became interested in olives, and in 1996 Storm shared 500 cuttings from her greenhouse. Talcott tended them in pots at her home until they were ready to go in the ground, and then she planted them around her vineyard. Soon, she too was making olive oil and selling locally. Tra Vigne restaurant in St. Helena was one of her clients.

Then came a series of life-changing events. Both women were diagnosed with cancer. Both went through divorces.

"By 2005, my vineyards were in escrow and I moved into St. Helena," Talcott said. "I had no more farming. I decided I wanted to do something."

In a conversation with Storm, now the owner of Storm Ranch as a result of her divorce, Talcott learned her



Bonnie Storm, left, and Nena Talcott of Grove 45 harvest the olives from two separate groves at Storm Ranch in Chiles Valley. Jorgen Gulliksen/NVP Services photo

friend was thinking of retiring from the olive oil business.

“When Bonnie said she wanted to quit producing olive oil, I had an idea. I said, ‘Let’s try it together.’ Then I had a nightmare. What were we doing?”

They decided to try producing 60 cases. Storm recalled, “I said if we sell 60 cases, it’s a miracle.”

“And I said, ‘If we can’t, there’s something wrong,’” Talcott said.

With their combined experience — more than 45 years of farming between them — they knew they could produce a good olive oil, “but there are a lot of really good olive oils out there,” Talcott said. “We knew what we had to have is a stunning packaging.”

While rows and rows of artisan olive oils now line grocers’ shelves, most are in glass containers. Their choice to package their olive oil in round, aluminum cans with pewter labels came from a decision to find a container that was “both beautiful and practical.”

“We knew that metal is the best container for olive oil,” Storm said. “It preserves olive oil from UV rays that can swiftly deteriorate a fine olive oil.”

This explains why dark green glass is more effective than clear for preserving olive oil, but metal is even better. Their eye-catching bottle, however, would prove to be more than just the best choice for preserving quality. Its distinctive style was an eye-catcher, their product stands out on a shelf filled with bottles.

They harvested their olives last Nov. 23-24 and pressed them the same day. By Jan. 30 they were ready to bottle their product. The finished oil is a blend of pendolino, maurino, leccinoio and frantoio varietals with 25 percent nocellara de bellici.

Then came the real test: selling it.

Feb. 6 they delivered their first case to Sunshine Foods in St. Helena. Diane Defilipi, a local olive oil expert, tasted their product and promptly ordered a case. In late February, the two women set off on a marketing trip to Washington, D.C., and New York City, setting up accounts with Zabar’s and Murray’s Cheese.

Back in California, Draeger’s Markets in Menlo Park and Blackhawk wanted it. Oakville Grocery took five cases and in two weeks sold all but three cans.

Then came the real shocker. They’d called on Dean & DeLuca in New York. “By the time they got back to us we had to say, ‘We’re sold out.’”

“I was in shock,” Talcott said.

And requests keep coming in.

It’s like we came in the back door and went out the front,” Storm said. “It’s happened so fast. We misjudged how fast it would move.”

Not only has their product gotten off to a flying start, but their friendship has grown too. “Our friends were concerned when we said what we were going to do,” Talcott said. “They said, ‘you’re such good friends, but you’re so different.’”

"Nena likes manicures," Storm pointed out.

"And Bonnie is the farmer," Nena added.

"But this has been fun for both of us," Talcott said. "We are good friends and like to travel. When we have a good day, we stop and have a martini.

"We both like to laugh a lot and find humor in our own lives."

They credit much of their success to their product and to the fact that they are the ones selling it. Whether talking to retailers or pouring samples at demonstrations, "We tell people 'we are Grove 45; it's us,'" Talcott said.

And factor into this age and experience. "No one has been unkind or closed a door, but even if they had, at our age we don't take it personally," Storm said. "It's knowing yourself and not being intimidated."

"It's one of the pleasures of arriving at this stage of life, to be comfortable in our skin," Talcott added.

Storm quipped, "What you see is what you get."

They're now looking ahead to next year, when, to meet demand, they'll be making more than 60 cases.

For any woman of a certain age, Talcott concluded with this advice, "Don't slow down; don't stop. Just keep reaching for something. Just keep reminding yourself — find something that makes you happy to get up in the morning."

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