

striking liquid GOLD

**The River Run Olive Oil Company
hopes to bring locally-made olive oil
to North Florida.** | Story and photos by KAYLA LOKEINSKY

Mike and Connie Casey spent months traveling the country studying olives. The couple was about to embark on a new agricultural adventure: olive production. After researching how farmers around the country grew olives, Connie asked a question no one else had thought to ask.

“Connie said, ‘If you guys go this way and you’re successful, what are you going to do with the oil?’” Mike said.

So the couple started looking into olive oil stores. After entering into a partnership with local friends Ron and Marcia St. John, they opened River Run Olive Oil Company in March 2016. Located in downtown High Springs, the shop specializes in premium olive oil and balsamic vinegars. Two months later in Trenton, River Run Growers planted their first olive trees. The eventual product of the two businesses and the overall goal for the owners is simple: Florida-grown olive oil.

“We hope someday, if we’re successful, that one of these olive oils will say ‘From Florida,’” Connie said.

Planting Trees

River Run Growers is responsible for 100 acres of olive trees. Since planting the trees in May 2016, they have thrived in the Florida soil. Brooke Williams, who splits her time working at the farm and managing the store, says the farm is about two years out from full olive production.

“People kind of look at us like we’re crazy because it’s very new around here, Brooke said. “I think people are really anxious for Florida-grown olive oil and so far we’re off to a great start.”

Brooke’s mother and step dad are Ron and Marcia, and the family has a deep agricultural background. Brooke, 27, grew up on a dairy farm right down the road from River Run Growers, and has a business management degree from Florida State University. Her experience in both agriculture and business makes her the perfect person to manage the olive oil store and oversee daily operations on the farm.

“I work right alongside the crew out here, pruning trees and pulling weeds, Brooke said. “But I also get to manage the store. It’s the best of both worlds.”



River Run Olive Oil owners Connie and Mike Casey stand in their store in downtown High Springs. River Run Olive Oil opened in March 2016 and specializes in quality olive oils and balsamic vinegars as well as locally-made food products, crafts, home decor and cooking demonstrations.



The variety of trees that the farm produces is strictly for olive oil production. They have there varieties of arbequina trees, which are only used to make olive oil. Although she and her family have plenty of agriculture experience, the olive tree farm is a learning experience for Brooke.

“We’re by no means professional olive growers,” Brooke said. “Although we have an agricultural background, we don’t have an olive background.”

The St. John and Casey families decided that if they were going to have the land and grow the trees and grow the olives, they were going to have a store to sell the oil in. They want to eventually have their own, locally-grown olive oil to sell in the store, and hope to eventually get a mill to make the oil on site.

“I work right alongside the crew out here, pruning trees and pulling weeds. But I also get to mange the store. It’s the best of both worlds.”

Brooke Williams | Manager at River Run Olive Oil

“We want to make sure we can get to that point,” Brooke said. “That’s our long-term goal.”

Oils and Balsamics

The River Run Olive Oil Company store in downtown High Springs is filled to the brim with olive oils and balsamics. Connie and Mike also keep the shelves stocked with local products including everything from honey to home decor.

The walls of the store are lined with fistis containing all of its olive oils and balsamics. They stay in the fistis until someone requests to have a bottle field. In the center of the store are tasting tables, one for olive oils and one for balsamics. Visitors are invited to test the products by dipping small pieces of bread into their sample cups, ensuring they leave the store with a product they love. Once they find one they like, the customer can fill one of four bottle sizes ranging from sample size to a half gallon.

“When you go to a store, you look at the olive oils on the shelf and try and figure out which one to buy,” Connie said. “A lot of people will come in and they’re almost intimidated. So you really have to educate yourself. It’s not something you can come in and spend five minutes doing. It takes

some time.”

If a customer tried to taste every single olive oil and balsamic vinegar at River Run, it would definitely take some time. The store carries 31 types of balsamic vinegars and every olive oil you could imaging, ranging from mild to robust. They also have fused olive oils, which are processed along with other herbs or produce. Some of their fused olive oils include red cayenne chili, blood orange, lemon and rosemary. The store also carries infused olive oils, where the oil is mixed with a plant-based essential oil such as basil, garlic or dill, giving it that plant’s flavor.

Each oil and balsamic is displayed on the tasting table and accompanied with a card that gives a detailed description of the product. Connie, Brooke or the other River Run employees are also available to walk the customer through the process, making sure that they find the right oil or vinegar for them.

Connie, who taught for 30 years in Bell before retiring and opening River Run, says that the habit of teaching is one she still hasn’t gotten out of.

“Now I’m just teaching different,” Connie said with a laugh. “I’m teaching adults instead of second graders.”

River Run Olive Oil is a Veronica Foods store, selling the company’s finest olive oils and balsamic vinegars. This distributor gave Connie and Mike the chance to open their own business, allowing them to choose the name and location as long as they sell their products.

As for when the store gets to the stage where it can produce its own olive oil, the product will be sent off to Veronica Foods for approval.

Other Offerings

The River Run Olive Oil Company offers more than just delicious olives oils and balsamic vinegars. The store also sells cooking products such as spices and bread mixes, artwork, lotions and scrubs and jewelry, many of which are made locally.

“We try to do local as much as we can and we try to sell Florida products as much as we can,” Connie said.

Connie and Mike also try and use every part of the olive they can. They also sell jarred olives, products made from

River Run Olive Oil store manager Brooke Williams stands in the fields of olive trees at the River Run Growers farm in Trenton. Brooke splits her time between working at the farm and working at the olive oil store in High Springs. River Run Growers has two fields totally 100 acres filled with olive trees. They are about two years away from full production.

olive tree wood, bracelets made from olive pits and olive tree branches, which are a popular trend in bridal bouquets.

The store also carries holiday gift packages that make the perfect present for someone who loves to cook.

These specialty items along with the unique olive oils and balsamics keep the customers coming back. According to Connie, 25 percent of the business is repeat customers, while they rest are people who pass through town and are curious about the store.

“High Springs is a very walkable town so we get a lot of different people,” Connie said. “There’s not a lot of places like this.”

Connie is a foodie and loves experimenting with all the products in the kitchen. Her personal favorite olive oil is the tuscan and her favorite fused olive oil is the blood orange.

“My countertops have baskets fill of balsamics and olive oils,” Connie said.

“I now know what it feels like to be a mouse in a test lab,” Mike added.

With a full kitchen in the store, Connie was able to share her passion for food with customers by having Chef Night. On the third Thursday of each month, the store brings in a chef who uses the store’s products for cooking demonstrations. The event can host up to 40 guests, who get to see how the chef uses the product. The chefs usually prepare an appetizer, a main dish and a dessert and give the customers a taste as well as pass out recipes that they can try at home. The store also hosts brunches and once even hosted a birthday party for a loyal customer.

The River Run Olive Oil Company is located at 115 N Main Street in High Springs. It’s hours are Tuesday-Saturday, 11 a.m. to 6 p.m. To find out more about the store visit www.riverrunoliveoil.com.

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