

In the spring of 1999, however, their blueberries began to open doors. The first fruit were ready to sell, but farmers' markets were bursting at the seams, frequently relegating new potential vendors to long waiting lists. It was the uniqueness of fresh, locally grown blueberries that put the Lenets in some of the otherwise closed markets.

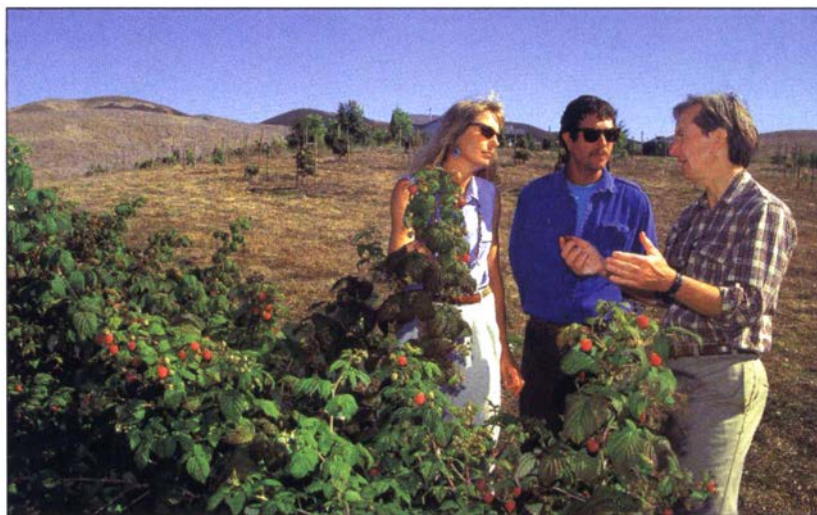
But still, the flavorful fruit, rich in antioxidants and vitamins, hasn't been an easy sell.

"We have some very loyal customers," Lenet says. "But others can't see why they should pay \$2.50 for a half-pint of blueberries. People don't seem to have the sophisticated taste they do back East."

New crop development is critical to the success of small-scale farms, Gaskell says, but it requires capital and courage. His research in blueberries and other exotic crops is helping ease the high risk associated with planting something altogether new to Coastal California.

Gaskell and Ventura County farm advisor Ben Faber began research on new crops with seed money from the UC Small Farm Center. They recently received a \$120,000 grant from the California Department of Agriculture Pest Exclusion Program to study the local-farm potential of lychee and longan, subtropical ping-pong-ball-sized fruit with delicious, white jellylike flesh.

"Because they're often smuggled in from countries that are quarantined, the pest exclusion program was interested in developing the crop within the United States," Gaskell says. "We'll track the price and volume on the U.S. market and establish plantings on local farms to study production and yield."



Jack Kelly Clark

**Small farm advisor Mark Gaskell, right, coaches the Lenets on acidifying the soil and maintaining adequate drainage.**

Another potential new crop is edamame, vegetable soybeans usually boiled in their green pods, shelled and eaten like peanuts or in Asian dishes. A high-protein food rich in isoflavones, a chemical that may inhibit cancer cell growth, edamame is gaining popularity among health-conscious Americans.

"We evaluated several commercial cultivars in unreplicated plots on a number of farms," Gaskell says. "We also established a replicated field trial at the Cal Poly experimental farm in June 1998 to evaluate 54 vegetable soybean cultivars."

Gaskell says edamame grows inexpensively and quickly, but locals haven't been clamoring to buy it.

"It's the kind of thing where you may have to massage the market," he says. "There is a market, people are asking for it, but you may not get into it for whatever reason." — J. Warnert

## *High-tech exec seduced by world-class olive oil*

Ridgely Evers was seduced in the countryside of Northern Italy by a stunning olive oil.

"It's rich, fruity and flavorful, yet unusually delicate," he says of the oil produced from four varieties on a 350-year-old farm overlooking the Tuscan plain. In 1990, he imported cuttings and planted olive trees on his beloved 80-acre farm in picturesque Healdsburg.

His relationship with the olive trees has been bumpy at times, but the love affair continues.

Evers lives for his farm and the world-class oils he and his wife produce. But to pay the bills, the computer executive still makes the 1-to-3-hour commute to San Francisco each Monday.

"Olive oil production is a very slow process," Evers says. "We started spending money in 1987, so we're now in our 12th year, but we're still not breaking even."

Evers runs a still-secret Internet startup called Exactly Vertical. He's been involved in a



Jack Kelly Clark

**UC horticulturist Paul Vossen, left, advises olive oil producer Ridgley Evers on farming for prize-winning olive oil flavor.**

number of high-technology businesses over the years, including 5 years at Intuit, where he led the creation of QuickBooks, the No. 1 accounting system for small businesses.

A Stanford MBA, his success in business is not at odds with his passion for olive oil. In fact, the same attention to detail, dedication to quality, and hard work spell success in both worlds.

Selecting superb Italian olive varieties put Evers in a class apart from most California olive oil producers, who press oil from table olive rejects.

"It's like making wine from Thompson seedless grapes," he says. "Yes, you can do it. But it would be tough to compete with someone growing Chardonnay."

Even with the Chardonnay of olives, a thriving orchard is vital to Evers' venture. That's where a relationship with UC Cooperative Extension horticulturist Paul Vossen has been most fruitful.

"Paul is practically my alter ego," Evers says. "We've become good friends as a result of this madness. Cooperative Extension has been an incredible asset for the whole industry."

Vossen has advised Evers on pruning, irrigation, fertility and cover crops, drawing on the expertise of UC farm advisors and specialists who have worked with olive farmers for decades. However, their expertise has been in producing table olives.

Most California olive oils are without flavor and sold in bulk, primarily for cooking. Evers' oil is a condiment that bestows a fruity, herbaceous flavor when drizzled over cooked pasta or grilled vegetables or eaten plain on chunks of fresh bread. The farmer must ensure cultural practices do not modify the oil's subtle taste.

"Along came this new twist: harvesting for oil instead of table fruit," Vossen says. "I got a lot of my information from Europe. I went to Europe several times, studied what the Europeans were doing and I did a lot of reading."

The fruit must be harvested entirely by hand, accounting for half of the farming costs. Vossen and Evers worked together to finesse tree shape, spray applications and pollination requirements to adapt to the demands of gourmet olive oil production. The same attention was given to the oil production process.

"We did everything in our power to make this oil great," Evers says. "We picked just 2 tons each day. Every afternoon, we took the day's fruit to the mills, where it was pressed into oil the next morning. We even imported our mats from Italy (on which the crushed olives are spread and pressed to release the liquid) just to be sure that everything was perfect."

The result was a much-heralded 1997 olive oil, still not profitable, but for Evers, richly rewarding. A sample of his 1997 DaVero Dry Creek Valley extra virgin oil was slipped into an Italian olive oil tasting event, the "World Series of Italian olive oils," Evers says. "It was judged the first and only American extra virgin olive oil to win a blind tasting in Italy. The '97 oil was also the first American olive oil ever to meet the strict quality standards of the International Olive Oil Council for labeling as "extra virgin."

The 1997 oil is sold on the DaVero web site at <http://www.davero.com> and at gourmet restaurants and retailers in Northern California for about \$24 per 375 mL bottle.

Despite the largesse, Evers says he wouldn't again plant an olive orchard.

"I think the economics are really weak," he says. "It's very difficult to be successful growing olives. The only way for this to work, you must be vertically integrated, growing and processing, branding and selling. We control the whole thing, from end to end. If we didn't do that, it would be impossible." — J. Warnert