

Someone's In The Kitchen

A Special Taste

By **RICHARD** and **AMANDA PAYATT**
Special to CASA

ON VACATION IN 2008 SHORTLY AFTER RETIRING FROM THE COMPUTER INDUSTRY, Jim and Laura Kirkley stopped in at a shop selling olive oil. What they saw amazed them. People were being shown a wide range of olive oils and being asked to sample them. Every face that they saw was interested, engaged, and delighted. Jim and Laura were already big fans of cooking and of olive oil, so watching the reactions of the people who were tasting the oils intrigued them. And then they got an idea: They could do this in a food-savvy town like Santa Barbara. A year later they opened Il Fustino, at 3401 State Street, near the San Roque post office. Lucky for us!

Jim is a charming man. When he

retired from engineering, he came out of his shell and found that he loved working with people. He and Laura, along with their son, James, seem to sincerely enjoy sharing the love of the impressive selection of epicurean oils and vinegars offered in their shop. They procure interesting oils from high quality small batch local California producers, handle it correctly, bottle it directly, and the customer gets a product that we can't get anywhere else: uniquely flavorful fresh olive oils.

If one thinks of olive oil in the same terms that one considers wine, it becomes instantly obvious how one should purchase oil. The common sense is this: You pair an oil with food in the same way that you would pair wine with food. Milder oils, like Mission Extra Virgin, a local oil, go well with milder foods.

This would go well with white fish, for example. But peppery oils with strong flavor are excellent for lamb, or marinating steaks. Oils that come from late-harvested olives tend to be fruity, and aromatic. These are best on salads and with vegetables. The same goes for the wide variety of vinegars that they sell.

The Basil Extra Virgin oil, for example, is an oil where both the olives and the basil are crushed together. The result already tastes like a mouthful of salad. Heat this up in a skillet, sauté the steaks, and then use the remaining oil with some herbs, spices, and perhaps mushrooms to make a sauce. The result will be a steak infused with that sharp tang of basil, balanced by the warm smoothness of an olive oil sauce.

Recipes abound on the Il Fustino website. And they are not just recipes for steak, salad, and pasta. There are recipes for everything from fish to ice cream. And if the recipes seem daunting, you can always attend the cooking classes that the Kirkley's do once every three weeks, or so. For \$40, they will provide the materials and the training to create a series of wonderful dishes with oils and vinegars.

Jim and Laura have been gourmet cooks since their college years together. They have been keen on the endless variations of Italian food since the days when they both worked for the Digital Equipment Corporation (DEC) research labs near Boston. Their son, James, trained as a chef in the City College program, and has worked around town for years. As such, the classes are kept to a concept of simple home cooking, yet there is plenty of detail for the more schooled gourmet.

The best thing about Il Fustino is actually going into the store. It is a lovely space crammed full of shining Italian olive oil dispensers called, you guessed it, "fustis". One of the staff is always available and ready to give you a chance to taste the oils until you find what you like. In this



Jim Kirkley

fashion, every customer gets an education in olive oil and vinegars. They will then decant your choices directly into bottles for you. The variety is wide, and quite surprising. (Don't miss the 25 year-old Balsamic Vinegar!) Every time we go, we leave with a tingling tongue, and a bag full of treats. It is an experience that is difficult to describe. But it is a wonderful taste experience that is very easy for every Santa Barbaran to have. Just drop by and pick up a new habit.

Il Fustino is located at 3401 State St. Store hours are 11am to 6pm Monday through Saturday. For more information call 805.845.3521 or visit ilfustino.com.

Amanda and Richard Payatt combine their considerable writing skills with their incredible knowledge and experience of fine dining to bring you this column.



Visit Il Fustino and indulge in a sample.

