

A man wearing a light-colored long-sleeved shirt, blue jeans, and a white cowboy hat stands in a field. He is looking to his right with a slight smile. A brown dog is sitting on the ground in front of him, looking up at him. The background shows a line of trees and a hazy landscape under a bright sky.

Limerock Orchards

Not Just a Nut

By Jamie Relth

The walnut is on fire right now. Health experts, such as Dr. Mehmet Oz, rave about the high quantities of omega 3 fatty acids and antioxidants in walnuts, and just in February 2013, the Walnut Commission showed that walnuts can reduce your risk of stroke and heart attack. “That’s been a big plus,” says Olivia Wenger of Limerock Orchards walnut farm and retailer in Paso Robles. “[Walnuts] are definitely a lot more popular than they used to be.”

Despite this recent boom in popularity, most consumers are just beginning to understand that when it comes to flavor, all walnuts are not created equally. Wenger’s family orchard is doing its part to educate the public on this matter, as well as on issues of sustainability. Because, as it turns out, rich walnut flavor and eco-friendly farming methods go hand-in-hand.

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Wenger explains that the average store-bought walnuts are Chandler or Tulare varieties—often from the Central Valley where they are heavily flood irrigated and sprayed with pesticides—produce high yields and a bigger, more attractive nut, “But, frankly, the flavor is really meh... it’s not really all that great,” says Wenger.

Limerock Orchards’ walnuts, on the other hand, are heirloom Hartley and Franquette varieties, meaning they weren’t genetically modified to produce more than they would in nature. “What you’ll find is they have a buttery, sweeter flavor to them. With store-bought walnuts, the skin is really bitter,” Wenger explains, adding that many people who come to their tasting room (where walnuts are paired with Chateau Margene and Roxo Port Cellars wines) think they don’t like walnuts, and leave with an all new outlook.

At least part of the reason for the superior flavor of Limerock’s walnuts can be found on the farm. Wenger’s parents, Richard and Deanne Gonzales, have been dry-farming walnuts organically on their 23 acre orchard and selling them wholesale for more than 20 years. “We’re 100% dry-land farmed; we don’t irrigate at all,” says Wenger. “We’ve found that it makes the product really flavorful and unique.”

In 2009, Wenger decided that it was time for their nuts to stand apart from the mixed bag of mediocre grocery store nuts. As her senior project at Cal Poly, she launched a retail enterprise and increased her family farm’s product offerings to include walnut oil, flavored walnuts, walnut butter and other specialty items. Limerock Orchards also went on the books for their longstanding farming methods, finally becoming certified organic.

And while it may be true that Limerock Orchards’ organic and dry-farming methods result in a richer, better tasting, gourmet nut experience, Wenger says flavor is not the only motivation. By abstaining from irrigation and chemical fertilizers, and by lending healthy diversity to the crops in the grape-rich area, they also work to protect Paso Robles’ future stability as a farm land and agri-tourist destination. 🍷



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