

Olives in the valley

FOR olive grower Odell Sugrue of Stone Valley Grove, the geography of her 10 hectare property - situated between Greytown and Tauherenikau - decided her to move from the security of her Hutt Valley job in horticulture to olive growing in Wairarapa.

"The key ingredients for growing olives are free draining stony alluvial soil and a relatively frost-free climate," she says. "Certain areas of Wairarapa offer just that."

The decision to move six years ago was also very much connected with a lifestyle change, one which would include working on the land, a venture that would produce a sustainable return for the future.

"It was a toss up between grapes or olives, but olives won out because they can be managed organically very easily and they're more robust than grapes. To be fully organic is my future intention."

As Odell's 10 hectare property was a former bull paddock, her first undertaking was to find an old villa that could be relocated onto the site. She bought a charming 100-year-old house from Fielding. This was installed in the middle of the property and since then restoration has been

slow and steady. Odell admits that establishing living quarters and an olive grove has been hard, hard work, but she rejoices in the fact that she's inherited her parent's strong work ethic and doesn't mind the workaholic label that sometimes goes with it.

Shortly after the house was relocated she commenced planting the 2,250 trees which would finally produce for her some surprises, including a job processing oil, a supreme award and a chance to spend a month in Tuscany.

"Although I'm almost a one woman band, it took my parents who live locally, some enthusiastic friends and me several seasons to complete the plantings. We planted eight different varieties because I didn't know what was going to do well in our microclimate," she says.

As it turned out, after just four years of growth, the Tuscan varieties and the Kororeiki trees from Greece performed well, giving a return of 17 percent oil recovery. This was a higher percentage than budgeted for and produced an oil with balanced complex flavours.

Odell says last year Masterton-based olive processor The Olive Press Limited (TOP for short) not only employed her, but

processed her first crop, 1.2 tonnes of olives.

She was impressed with the quality of oil they processed from their \$380,000 state-of-the-art centrifugal press, imported from Italy three years ago.

Surprise number two occurred last November when her Stone Valley Kororeiki oil, was named the supreme winner at the Wairarapa Olive Oil Awards. Her Frantoio/Leccino blend won gold.

"That really blew me away," says Odell. "However, it did reinforce my hunch that some good oil could come from the right Wairarapa soils."

Good things happen in trees, so they say. Last November TOP partly financed Odell to spend a month in Tuscany, to learn more about oil processing.

"This was a great educational experience for me, especially as I learned about some different ways of



Odell has planted eight different olive varieties, but the Tuscan varieties and the Kororeiki trees from Greece (pictured) have performed exceptionally well.

mechanical harvesting, plus the finer details of pressing olive oil."

And what's the best way to enjoy a top of the range olive oil? Odell has some suggestions.

"You just can't beat fresh outdoor tomatoes, wonderful with local bread and drizzled with good oil. Reach for a glass of good wine and savour the taste experience!"



Odell Sugrue displays her award winning olive oil which is marketed under the Stone Valley label.