

Focus

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## Blooming family business

By MAJORIE CHIEW

Olive tree orchards used to be Dr Yahya R. Laleli's playground, when he was a boy around the age of five. He loved harvest time when everyone would get up early, dress and get ready to harvest olives in his native Turkey.

Five years ago, play became work, officially.

As the only son, Dr Laleli, 65, was entrusted with his family's olive tree orchards by his late mother. He has a younger sister.

"I was ready to take over because I was preparing for retirement," said the former professor of biochemistry and nuclear medicine.



Dr Yahya R. Laleli with a bottle of the award-winning Laleli Olive Oil which comes from the trees in his olive orchards in the Edremit Bay area in Turkey.

"I belong to the third generation of the family in the olive business," explained Dr Laleli, who lectured at Hacettepe University in Ankara, Turkey. He was in Kuala Lumpur recently to promote his award-winning Laleli Olive Oil which will hit major supermarket and hypermarket shelves in Malaysia soon.

Now, there is also the fourth generation in the olive oil dynasty. His only son, Mehmet, 32,

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an environmental scientist, returned after four years in Canada, to join him in his business in May this year. "He takes care of the production line," said Dr Laleli, who also has a daughter, Elvan, 35, a biochemist who works in Ankara.

Picking up a bottle of Laleli olive oil, Dr Laleli said: "This label (on the bottle) was designed by my nephew. Another son photographed the olive tree seen on this tag. Everything from (olives from) the tree to (olive oil in) bottle is a family business."

"My mother and father used to cultivate olives but did not produce olive oil because they did not have the facilities," he added. .

His grandfather used to produce olive oil in Lesvos, an island in Greece, before the family migrated to Turkey. He believes the Laleli olive business may be more than 100 years old.

Dr Laleli's mother passed away three years ago. "However, she had a chance to see our success. She told me that she was proud of what I did – producing olive oil as my grandfather once did," he said.

Olive oil is reputed to be good for health, and Laleli is insistent that it helped to prolong his mother's life.

"My father used to eat a lot of saturated (animal) fat. I lost him when he was 62. I lost my mother when she was 85. Although she was overweight, she was healthy because of olive oil."

When Dr Laleli took over the olive oil business, he started off with 5,800 trees. Now, he has 280 orchards and 55,000 trees in the Edremit Bay area, some nine-and-a-half hours' drive from Ankara. The number of trees per orchard varies between eight and 8,000 and most olive trees are 100 years old while the oldest is 300 years old.

There are three olive harvesting seasons. Early harvest is from October to November (first week), mid harvest season is until early December. The late harvest runs from mid-December to January (first to second week).

Dr Laleli said: "Some 40 tonnes of olives are used a day to produce eight tonnes of olive oil." Laleli olive oils are exported to the United States, Canada, Australia, Japan and Germany.

His Extra Virgin Olive Oil was awarded the 2005 Gold Medal at the World Specialty Commodities exposition in Paris. It trumped more than 140 other olive oil producers.

How do you tell if olive oil is of good quality?

Dr Laleli was delighted to share the secret.

"Pour oil (about two tablespoons) into a small plastic cup," he said. "Warm the container with your hands by shaking it. Smell it (good olive oil has a pleasant aroma or is fruity). Take a sip of the oil but don't swallow it."

The oil should be rolled around the mouth, so that it touches all areas, and all tastes and sensations can be noted.

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“Suck air in through clenched teeth. Then, swallow.” I was asked if I detected tangerine hints of the naturally flavoured olive oil with tangerine.

Dr Laleli said that, in his childhood, mothers would mix iodine with olive oil and use it to treat a sore throat. A cotton bud is used to apply the mixture on the affected area. Nowadays, it's no longer practised because there are antibiotics, he said.

Olive oil, he claims, is also good for treating burns. On the scalp, the oil has moisturising properties. It also helps to keep hair stronger and maintains a healthy sheen.

The shelf life of olive oil is mainly two years and the conducive storage temperature should be around 10°C to 20°C or room temperature. The temperature for storing the oil should not exceed 27°C or 28°C or the shelf life of the oil will be shortened.

One can refrigerate olive oil to keep it longer but then it takes time to liquefy it again before usage. Alternatively, Dr Laleli suggests that oil for regular usage be poured into a smaller bottle. The remainder should be kept in the refrigerator.

*For enquiries, call 04-2288123.*