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Winning olive oil at Horeca comes from long family tradition

By Matt Nash

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BEIRUT: Youssef Fares came out on top in an olive-oil competition this weekend at Beirut's 14th annual Horeca hospitality and foodservice trade show. For the second year in a row, the event staged a taste test pitting small- to medium-sized extra virgin olive oil producers, and Fares' "Zejd" took first place in two of three categories: best commercial brand (based on a blind taste test) and best label.

Horeca, which ran from March 27-30, proceeded as usual despite economic hard times following the summer 2006 war with Israel and the worst political instability since the end of the Civil War. While the show usually draws vendors from across the region, many foreign guests were not invited this year and Cyprus was the only foreign nation represented.

"We wanted to focus on Lebanon," said Joumana salame, managing director of Hospitality Services, Horeca's organizer. They reached out to groups working with rural farmers and small businesses in Lebanon to bring them to the show. The result was farmer's market meets expo center, as dozens of rural producers set up shop under the sky-high ceiling and bright florescent lights of the convention center at BIEL.

Olive oil has been in Fares' family for generations but he stepped up the operation when he started his own company, Olive Trade, in 2004. His family was producing oil and selling it locally in Akkar without marketing, packaging or attempts to expand. He went to Italy to replace the traditional press and the business started to boom.

He grows his own olives in the family orchards but not enough to make the hundreds of gallons of oil he needs, so he also buys olives and oil from other local framers. His mill converts olives to oil for several surrounding villages.

"Before the war I was working a lot for the Lebanese market, selling to hotels and restaurants," he said. "When the war started, everything stopped," leaving him with gallons of oil he had to sell in bulk to a larger business at near-cost to prepare for the next season, which began in October.

Luckily, the season brought plenty of olives, and acting as a local mill helped him bounce back from the \$20,000 hit he estimated he took from the war.

Fares sells mostly to hotels and restaurants in Lebanon but recently broke into the retail market. "My biggest problem now is we're too small for distribution companies [in Lebanon]," he said. "I need to do my own distribution for the Lebanese market."

Zejd reaches the international market mainly through business-to-business sales. "But each year the percentage I sell myself is going up," he said.

He is also starting to sell his product directly in France and England, targeting the Lebanese diaspora. Distribution is a bit easier abroad because companies do not demand as much product and competition is not as fierce as it is at home, he said.

Lebanese abroad will see the product is Lebanese and buy it over other oils, whereas at home Zejd is competing with every other Lebanese oil on the shelf, Fares said.

International contacts came with the help of SRI International, a US-based research group working on economic development in Lebanon. The organization began working with olive oil in Lebanon in 2003 with funds from the US Agency for International Development (USAID). They have taken Lebanese olive oils to similar trade shows in France, Germany and Dubai, among others.

At Horeca, SRI and the Social and Cultural Development Program, a Lebanese non-governmental organization (NGO), brought small- and medium-sized businesses offering food as well as crafts and decorative items like lamps and furniture as part of the Expanding Economic Opportunities project.

Farmer's market Souk al-Tayeb and ACDI/VOCA-Lebanon also brought rural producers to the exhibition space. ACDI/VOCA is an NGO that promotes economic growth in developing countries.

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