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Darien-made Olive Tapenade selected as Flavor of Georgia food contest winner.

Week after week, customers would return to the farmers markets to replenish their stock of Olive Tapenade, crafted by Vicki Waddell-Forton and Larry Eisenberg of Olive Affairs. They would say “I ‘need’ another jar”.

“I found this interesting. They ‘need’ it”, Forton said. “When we sell our product now, we warn our customers ‘be careful, it is an addictive flavor””.

Judges at the 2010 Flavor of Georgia Food Product Contest agreed that the tasty product was unforgettable and gave it the top prize at the contest in the jams, jellies and sauces category. Winners were announced by Gov. Sonny Perdue at a ceremony held as part of Georgia Agriculture Day, March 16.

The annual contest, conducted by the University of Georgia Center for Agribusiness and Economic Development, was held at the Georgia Freight Depot in downtown Atlanta. Winners were selected in seven categories.

Olive Tapenade was one of 24 products sampled and judged by a panel of food brokers, buyers and other food industry experts. Contestants were awarded points based on flavor, Georgia theme, unique or innovative qualities, commercial appeal and originality. Finalists were chosen from 79 entries from all across Georgia.

The Olive Tapenade uses Spanish and Portuguese olives, extra-virgin cold pressed olive oil, fresh garlic, capers, pimentos, herbs, lemon juice and a hint of anchovy. The company markets the product as “a well-balanced culinary delight with a hint of the Mediterranean.”

“We are using imported olives to make our products now, but olives are an emerging product in Georgia,” Forton said. “When they are ready, we will use locally grown olives.”

Olive Affairs Gourmet Olive Tapenade (www.OliveAffairs.com) has the authentic flavor of New Orleans’ Sicilian Muffaletta olive spread. The product is produced in a downtown Darien facility.

When asked why they chose Darien, GA, as the site of their production facility, Forton said “Darien chose us. We were doing a Farmer’s Market on Amelia Island when Judy Dodd of the Darien Telephone Company discovered us and our products. She was so impressed that she passed our business card along to the Darien Fall Fest organizers and told them they had to get Olive Affairs to participate. When we received the invitation, we had never heard of Darien, GA, so we took a day trip to check it out. At first we were hesitant to commit, but a conversation with Michael Greenway of Waterfront Gourmet Food and Wine Shop closed the deal. We set up in front of the Wine Shop for the festival, right across the street from 106 Broad St., a beautiful three story building with ‘For Sale’ signs on it. Not only did we have a great day at the Fall Festival, but by the end we had found a perfect location for our business, with a production facility/store front on the ground level and living quarters above - a dream we’ve had since we started this business. Within two months of the Festival, we had an arrangement with the owner of this building and began moving in in time for the Darien Blessing of the Fleet Festival. We hope to put Darien on the map as a center for culinary elegance in Georgia” says Vicki Forton.

Jim Daniels, Flavor of Georgia contest organizer and a UGA DAED food business development specialist said “We try to include every major state commodity to get a broad representation. This year’s final products included poultry, peanuts and blueberry juice as well as olives, goat cheese and shrimp.”

Judges indicated it was the best competition so far by marking the highest scores ever received. They were also the closest. Three or four points separated first from fourth place in several categories. “Without a doubt, this is the best group we’ve ever had,” Daniels said.

Other category winners were:

- * Confections - Ricky Vining of Lane Southern Orchards won with Lane’s Fresh Peach Bread
- * Dairy - Cathy Spivey and Robin Schick of CalyRoad Creamery won with Clouds of CalyRoad Camembert
- * Barbecue and hot sauces - Ted Dennard of Savannah Bee Company won with Grill Honey
- * Other products - Douglas Horn of Vidalia Valley won with Organic Vidalia Onion Tomato Basil Dressing
- * Snack food - susan Cordell of Goodness Gracious! Gronola won with You Struck Gold

Winners earn the right to have their products stamped with the 2010 Flavor of Georgia logo.

Food processing is the single largest part of the manufacturing sector of the state,” said John McKissick, director of the Center for Agribusiness and Economic Development. “The importance of this industry is continuing to grow.”

“We gave out awards, but that’s not the point. The contest was designed as a way to develop food entrepreneurs and showcase their products,” McKissick said. “We provide education and applied research together to develop and grow their business. All contestants receive feedback from food industry leaders on packaging, ingredients and taste. The contestants have an opportunity to meet people who can help them grow their business.”

“Flavor of Georgia is only a starting point for many of the category winners“, said Sharon Kane, contest organizer. She followed up with the 2009 winners and found that nearly 80 percent experienced increased interest in their products as a result of the contest. Also, 50 percent saw an increase in the publicity for their products.

The annual food contest is sponsored by the CAED in partnership with the Governor’s Agricultural Advisory Commission, Georgia Agribusiness Council and UGA Department of Food Science and Technology.

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