



THE BEST STUFF YOU'VE NEVER TRIED

WHY ISN'T SALUTE SANTÉ'S GRAPESEED OIL THE FAVORITE THING IN YOUR KITCHEN?

BY GRETCHEN GILES • PHOTOGRAPHS BY ROBB MCDONOUGH

The national Fancy Food Shows held annually in both San Francisco and New York are not for the faint of heart. Held at the Moscone and Javits centers respectively, these massive, multi-story undertakings feature some 1,000 exhibitors elbowing one another for prominence in a crowded field of relishes, jams, frozen delicacies, new spices, teas, snacks, desserts, oils, vinegars, salsas and other comestibles you've never before considered.

Imagine the jostle of the scene in 2016 when Napa's Nanette and Valentin Humer were standing quietly at their table in the Javits, offering thousands of passersby sips of their grapeseed oil, when Oprah's (yes, THAT Oprah) creative director Adam Glassman appeared breathlessly at their booth.

"This is it!" he exulted (if the Humers' collective memory serves). "We'll take six bottles."

The "we" in this instance was the Oprah "machine," and the "it," a boxed set of the Humers' Salute Santé! line of plain and infused oils cold-pressed from the very tiny, very hard and very unforgiving seed that lies at the center of each small wine grape.

When Oprah calls, you listen, and thus the Humers found themselves ushered into the "Favorite Things" universe that only Ms. Winfrey can conjure, suddenly quite literally embraced (cue Oprah photographed hugging their wares) by the Queen of Commerce herself and absolutely inundated with orders.



In 2019, Oprah did it again, and Nanette Humer found herself so saturated with holiday requests that she sent her daughter to Mexico with orders to stay there until she had sourced enough fresh basil to infuse the bottles of oil that Oprah's legion demanded.

Landing on Planet Oprah is one of the few satisfactions that some 25 years in the grapeseed oil business has rewarded Nanette and husband Valentin Humer since they first launched their line of European kitchen staples, which most American home cooks still don't even know about.

A recent rainy afternoon found the Humers in the low-slung industrial offices they keep along the Napa River, where they package and distribute the grapeseed oil products that they largely import from Europe (only a portion of their products are produced in the U.S.), as well as the other products they produce from the end point of the wine business—pomace.

Odorless, estimable at carrying flavor, blessed with the highest known smoke point of any oil, low in the “bad” cholesterol and high in the “good,” said to be excellent for curing impotency and reducing the risk of heart disease, lower in saturated fat than olive oil and high in vitamin E, grapeseed oil just may be the promised land of food and beauty that we've always been told of but mostly never found.

Valentin is from Austria; Nanette, from New York. He came to the U.S. in the late '80s as a hospitality professional and suffered the usual

culture shock that a national palate reared on the Golden Arches tends to produce in European chefs. Curious, polite, handsome and affable, Valentin made friends with other European chefs, the smart ones who didn't merely pooh-pooh our industrialized foodscape, but sought to improve it.

Chef Jean-Louis Palladin was one of them. Having won two Michelin stars for his small French restaurant at age 28, he was brought over by the Watergate Hotel in 1979 to help salvage an image so tarred by Richard Nixon that “-gate” remains a suffix to any political disaster. Palladin didn't deride our lack; he set out to fix it. He employed divers to harvest scallops, he encouraged ranchers to feed garlic scapes to lambs to flavor their meat, and he loved grapeseed oil so well that he is said to have regularly rubbed it all over his chest to improve his virility. He also changed the American fine dining landscape, using Valentin's grapeseed oil in his quest to alter taste buds and expectations about what honest farm-based food should taste like when elevated by French culinary culture.

Valentin had just begun to import the oil and Palladin encouraged him and supported him, giving testimonials to its quality and suggesting it to Daniel Boulud and others. Today, the Humers' Salute Santé! Grapeseed oil is used by “Iron Chef” Masaharu Morimoto at his eponymous Napa restaurant, by Ron Siegel at Madcap in



Balsamic Vinaigrette

Recipe courtesy of Nanette and Valentin Humer, Salute Santé

This balsamic vinaigrette is a house staple of ours and a favorite of all who taste it! It's so simple to make and only takes a few ingredients. Whip it together right before serving and save what you don't finish in the refrigerator (it keeps for up to a week). We serve it over fresh salad greens, sliced avocado and grains. Roasted beets, persimmons, walnuts and fresh goat cheese also make delicious additions.

INGREDIENTS

- ½ cup Salute Santé! Original Grapeseed Oil
- ½ cup Salute Santé! Balsamic Vinegar
- 1 tablespoon honey
- 1 clove garlic minced, or 1 tablespoon Salute Santé! Roasted Garlic Grapeseed Oil
- Sea salt and freshly ground black pepper, to taste

TO PREPARE

Place all ingredients into a Mason jar. Tightly close the top and shake the jar until the ingredients are well combined.

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San Anselmo, by the cool kids at State Bird Provisions, Saison, the Angler and the Progress in San Francisco, and by countless other professional chefs across the U.S.

So why aren't you using it in your own kitchen? Actually, when you're not dressing your salads with it or sautéing your mushrooms in it, why aren't you using it to soothe your face, soften your hair and strengthen your nails? All are lauded applications of the stuff.

Well, perhaps because it takes a ton of grapes to produce just three liters of grapeseed oil. So why would anyone even try? Because the oil that comes from the vibrant, life-loving vigor of a grape plant has an energy of its own. Because it's a food just waiting to be used and we are a species that is very, *very* good at using things up.

For the Humers, it's about tradition, but it's also about modern values. Grape seeds are found in winemaking's waste. In Europe, the government subsidizes the transport of wine grape pomace to an extraction facility to harvest its oil. In the U.S., not so much, so they are rescuing a valuable resource that otherwise might not get used.

The Humers use steel cans to store their oil to protect it from heat and light, but also because it is significantly recyclable. They grow the herbs included in their infusions themselves (unless Oprah's orders cause their daughter to frantically source additional supplies in Mexico), they know the farmer who raises their lemons, are friends with the importer who provides the truffles. It's family, it's among friends. It's how business often gets done on the other side of the ocean.

The Humers have recently launched a new five-liter bottle of their grapeseed oil suitable for big-box buying, not that Costco has yet picked it up. They're seeing more local stores carry their wares, not just the fancy infusions but the day-to-day oil that can soften your skin as well as it dresses your salads.

It's a slog, but the Humers are in it for the long haul, planning to launch an "oil club" that would ship the good stuff to you every six months so that sourcing Salute Santé! isn't a question.

Valentin notes that chefs are still their biggest customers. Nanette is sanguine about being on Whole Foods' shelves—and then off again. It's a business, but really—it's a passion.

"I'm just interested," Nanette says as we wrap up our interview, "in bringing the product to the people who want it." 🍷

GrapeseedOil.com

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Grape Seeds