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‘We always focus on those who want us’: Napa Valley grapeseed oil company’s ethos

“We focus on those that appreciate the upcycled, environmental aspect to our production,” says Valentin Humer, chief executive of grapeseed oil company Salute Santé!

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Wine isn't the only thing being made from grapes in the Napa Valley.

Salute Santé in Napa is taking the pomace left over from the winemaking process and turning into grapeseed oil. While seed is in the name, it's really a fruit oil like olive and avocado oils.

“We are 100% upcycled and zero waste cycle,” Valentin Humer, CEO-president-founder, of the company said. “We use everything. We don't use extra water, no extra fertilizer, no extra land, and it's not from GMO seed crops.”

As a chef, Humer understands what restaurants want—they want a cold press oil that can be used under high heat that will add to the flavor of food. Olive oil doesn't have the high smoke point that grapeseed oil does.

Cold press means the oil is extracted from grape seeds strictly using mechanical pressure at a low temperature, without applying heat or chemicals.

Humer has a handful of employees locally, with his wife, Nanette, the executive vice president in charge of marketing.

The plant in Napa is more of a pilot program with its four presses.

“We can grow this business here to a significant size. We welcome the wine and food industries to part of that system,” Hummer said.

The same cold press technique the Humers’ developed in California is being used to make their grapeseed oil in Italy and Portugal. Cold press is also how olive oil is created. Italy is where the bulk of Salute Santé is produced because the industry is set up for it there unlike here.



“There they have a much bigger system in place where it’s supported with government subsidies to transport pomace after being pressed,” the 59-year-old CEO said. “Here in California we are very decentralized and unsupportive when it comes to making a complete cycle. In California they are paying a fortune to have (pomace) thrown away. I’m here to propose turning that expense into a revenue.”

Salute Santé makes a fresh batch of oil every month since the seeds have a longer shelf life and may be stored for two to three years.

Quality of grapes matter. Hummer has tried seeds originating from the Central Valley and said they didn’t meet his standard.

“We have tried 13 different varietals pressed here in Napa Valley. My favorite came from Chardonnay. The grapeseed had a beautiful buttery taste like Chardonnay,” Hummer said.

The following is a Q&A between the Business Journal and Hummer that has been edited for clarity and space.

Why did you develop your cold-pressed grapeseed oil method?

From Day 1 we wanted a cold pressed oil production. It just wasn't done at that time. I am a European trained chef from Austria, so I knew a cold pressed oil was much better for you. It just wasn't available yet.

What makes your oil fall into the upcycled category?

We are a byproduct of the wine industry. The grape plants come back year after year. And there is more than our product being 100% upcycled. We create another product with our cold pressed method. It’s called press cake or GrapeseedEXTRA. We mill the leftover press cake into grapeseed powder branded as GrapeseedEXTRA, meaning extra antioxidants, extra fiber. This is a new

superfood for the pharmaceutical, nutraceutical and cosmetic industry or flour for the food and baking industry.

This completes the cycle of the grape. This makes our production the most socially responsible and good for you food: it's good for the planet, good for our health and good for the people who work at our place, I believe.

How has Salute Santé evolved since it was founded in 1994?

Actually, we haven't changed much. We are still separating wine grape seeds, with one big exception, we started cold-pressing the seeds in 2010.

What about your business keeps you up at night?

It's just the opposite. Because I feel we are bringing the best product available to our customers, I can sleep at night. I often say because we are 100% cold pressed grapeseed oil, with no mystery oils blended in, I can sleep at night knowing we are getting the best oil to our customers.

What is your approach to working with different generations?

Not much difference other than the older generation is more focused on eating healthy, to avoid drugs, and the younger generation has some that do not pay attention to their diet. But we focus on those that appreciate the upcycled, environmental aspect to our production. And they want to eat as healthy as they can. They get the connection.

Other than money how do you measure success?

The more chefs and business that we turn on to our cold pressed grapeseed oil, the better. That means the glass is filling up.

How do you motivate people?

People see and hear how dedicated we are. I believe that motivates people.

What concerns and goals do you have for your business and industry for the next five years?

We are always watching the new oils that are trying to take our market share. They offer sweet deals to chefs, and we cannot compete with that. But more times than not, the chefs come back.

What companies in your industry do you admire and why?

I admire the companies that have people at the helm, rather than a corporation. It takes people, and dreams and desire to make a difference.

How do you handle negative feedback?

Prove them wrong! We always focus on those who want us, rather than spend a lot of energy on someone or something that doesn't get it.

What one government regulation would you change and why?

I would create a regulation for better ingredient control for products being sold. Oils are being blended with fake oils and the labels don't fully disclose this.

What are the benefits and drawbacks to being located in the North Bay?

California is much more conducive to a health food company, so we started in San Francisco, then Mill Valley, then we moved to Napa in 1999. If I could change anything, it would be better mass transit; very hard to get back and forth without a long drive and traffic, and we could pull from the city for employees if there were a way for them to get here.

What was your first job? What was your first career job?

First career path was hotel food and beverage. I trained in Austria in both front of house, and back of house, so I had to be trained as a chef to understand what the kitchen goes through. Then a full business degree, slightly different in Europe, allowed me to build a business.

Is this the job you wanted when you were young? If not, what were your early career aspirations?

I wanted to be a chef on a ship. Glad that never came to pass.

What is the most adventurous thing you have ever done?

Besides skiing black diamonds and climbing the Brooklyn Bridge, I would say Dachstein Mountains in Austria.

What advice would you give someone just starting his or her career in your industry?

Always plan it will take twice as long and twice as expensive, so have an investor at the ready, and a good business plan.

Editor's note: the pulpy residue left over from the winemaking process is called pomace.

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