

## *SOUP TO NUTS* Unusual partnership strikes oil in the County

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MEREDITH GOAD, Staff Writer January 7, 2009



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Maine Natural Oils' canola oil will be processed on-site at family farms with a mobile seed press. The byproduct will be used as animal feed.

Every Sunday since the war in Iraq began, three Aroostook County men have made their way to the bridge in Presque Isle to protest the conflict.

Business deals have been struck in stranger places, I suppose.

Their weekly gatherings – in rain, snow and below-zero temperatures – gave Steve DeMaio, Peter Sexton and John Cancelarich lots of time to talk, and they gradually hatched a plan to develop a line of culinary oils cold-pressed from crops harvested on local family farms.

DeMaio, who lives in Wade, is a retired state employee, Sexton is an agronomist who has dabbled in turning canola into biodiesel, and Cancelarich is a businessman who has managed potato processing plants in the County. Sexton and Cancelarich are both from Presque Isle.

They brought in a fourth partner who was not part of the protests, Doug Callnan of Houlton, who is in the animal feed business. The result is Maine Natural Oils.

The men already have 20 tons of seeds to press and hope they can be in full production by the end of the month, turning out canola oil for home cooks in New England and mustard oil for Asian markets elsewhere on the East Coast.

Their target market is the natural foods consumer who is interested in healthy, locally made products. While the canola oil is not organic, it is made from seeds that have not been genetically modified. Most canola oil currently on the market, DeMaio said, is grown from genetically modified seeds that produce higher yields.

"The second thing is (our oil is) cold-pressed, as opposed to chemically extracted," DeMaio said. "The typical oil extraction process, which will get you more oil, is done with a petrochemical called hexane. Obviously, the government thinks that's safe, (but) a lot of people don't like it. Cold-pressing is the typical thing you'll see on good grades of olive oil, so we wanted to go with that all along."

Cold pressing retains aromatics in the oil that give it more flavor. It takes about 20 to 25 pounds of canola seeds to make a gallon of oil.

DeMaio said he's unaware of any other companies producing food oil in the northeast. John Harker of the Maine Department of Agriculture said he can't speak for the entire northeast, but the Maine Natural Oils project is indeed a first for the state.

"As far as I know, there has not been anybody else doing that kind of thing up there," Harker said. "This is new to Maine."

Maine Natural Oils is building a mobile press to travel from farm to farm for on-site processing. The oil comes out of one end of the contraption, and a dry meal comes out of the other end. The farmers keep the meal to use as animal feed, and for other uses.

"One of the nice things about this business is it produces practically zero waste," DeMaio said. "Canola meal is a well-accepted feed in the agricultural markets, and we're probably going to be marketing the mustard meal as an organic soil amendment."

"It has a biofungal action on the soil. It helps suppress microorganisms and nematodes you don't want in the soil. And also there have been some studies where it's been shown to suppress certain kinds of weeds, so we have a lot of hope for the mustard meal."

The mustard oil is a specialty for East Asian markets and is not expected to be a big seller in Maine. It's used for cooking and as a topical agent for skin and hair.

If the canola and mustard oils are successful, the business partners might explore some other specialty crops, such as caraway or camelina.

So far, the partners have been bankrolling the project themselves, but they are also applying for small business loans from the state's agricultural marketing loan fund, the Coastal Enterprises program, and a local bank.

If you'd like to try out the oils, DeMaio says he'll send three free, 4-ounce samples to anyone who contacts him at [www.mainenaturaloils.com](http://www.mainenaturaloils.com). You'll pay shipping and handling costs, which run \$5 to \$6. The samples will include the canola oil, the mustard oil and a spicy mustard oil pressed from a different variety of seed.

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