

How to Shop for Olive Oil

By Nancy Loseke

I know people who can deftly maneuver through a restaurant wine list the size of a New York City phone book, but who absolutely clutch when they have to choose a bottle of olive oil at their supermarket or gourmet store. “How much do I want to spend? Is Italian oil better than Spanish? Virgin? Extra virgin?” They scroll through the questions in their minds, all the while suppressing an urge to make a run for the canola oil and leave all that uncertainty in Aisle 2.

There are, admittedly, a mind-boggling number of olive oil choices on store shelves compared to just a few years ago. Even the tiny neighborhood market around the corner from my office—the place I go when I need cat food or laundry detergent on short notice—displays more than half a dozen olive oils. Nearby, an “upscale” grocery stocks more than 100.

Countries of Origin

At dinner recently, I was seated with a couple I had just met. The conversation turned to olive oil when the waiter brought bowls of dipping oil for our bread. I mentioned I had just returned from Chile, and said I was awed by the quality of the oils being produced there, even though its olive oil industry is barely ten years old.

The male glared at me over his wife's plate.

“The best oil in the world comes from Tuscany,” he said dismissively. “Everyone knows that.” And for the benefit of everyone at the table, he launched into a 15 minute lecture. And here's me without duct tape in my handbag.

This fellow is not alone in his thinking. There is a general perception—here, and certainly in Italy!—that Italian oils, and particularly, Tuscan oils, are the best. There are four things few people realize:

America's collective insecurity about olive oil is rooted in inexperience. Even today, with all the hype about olive oil's health benefits (see below) and foodie curb appeal, only 30 percent of Americans have a bottle or two in their pantry. We've been, in the eyes of the world's olive oil cultures, a bit sophomoric in our tastes, gravitating to the “extra light” oils some Europeans wouldn't use in their lamps.

But we're trainable, and I daresay, quick studies. Take wine, for example: Seems to me we went from Riunite to Petrus in zero to sixty. Hey, wine is, afterall, just grape juice, and olive oil is just olive juice. It ain't that intimidating. Armed with a few facts, you can make intelligent choices the next time you shop for or cook with the stuff Homer dubbed “liquid gold.”

- 1) Italian oils vary wildly from region to region. This is the case with virtually all olive oil-producing countries.
- 2) The olive oil harvest in Tuscany must, by law, take place by a certain date, and the olives must be pressed within 72 hours of being picked. Unfortunately, the bureaucrats failed to take into consideration the vagaries of Mother Nature: The olives aren't always mature by their mandated harvest date. So they are picked young. Young olives yield oil that leans toward bitter, flavorwise, and that produce a peppery “pinch” in the back of the throat. Moreover, 72 hours is considered a bit long for olives to languish; they can break down, especially in warmer weather, and begin to exhibit, in the finished oil, what professional tasters perceive as flaws. However, the Tuscans have

Grades of Oils and Their Uses

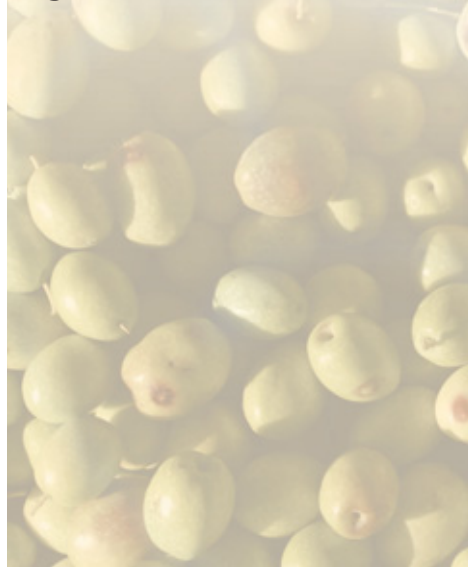
Technically, there are eight grades of olive oil. For practical purposes, you only need to know about the four that are sold in U.S. food markets:

- **EXTRA VIRGIN OLIVE OIL** - This is the *ur* oil, the first-pressed oil that is technically flawless and has an acidity level of 0.8 percent or less. According to International Olive Oil Council regulations, these oils must be mechanically produced (meaning no chemicals are used to coax oil from the olives), and are usually processed within 24 hours of being harvested. Usually the priciest. Some are labeled “single estate,” meaning all the olives came from the same grower; some are products of arranged marriages between the olives of two or more growers.

- **VIRGIN OLIVE OIL** - Technically flawless oil, also first-pressed, that has a slightly higher acidity level than Extra Virgin, up to 2 percent.

- **OLIVE OIL** - Usually a blend of refined oil (i.e., treated with chemicals to neutralize flaws and flavor) and Virgin or Extra Virgin olive oil with an acidity level of 1 percent or less. In America, it is often sold in economical bulk.

- **EXTRA LIGHT OLIVE OIL** - This is oil that has had most of its color and flavor removed through filtering and refining. It is edible, but mimics common vegetable oil in blandness.



been wildly successful in promoting their oils as the world's standard of excellence.

- 3) For centuries, Italy has been unable to satisfy its own need for olive oil, and imports oil from other countries, most notably, Spain.

Sometimes, oils from Italy and Spain are blended, and then sold in bottles whose labels proclaim them, "Bottled in Italy."

- 4) Olives have been grown in the Mediterranean countries since ancient times; Spain is the largest producer, followed by Italy and Greece. But olives thrive in other regions of the world, too—Chile, as mentioned previously, Australia, New Zealand, and of course, our own California.

You may find several countries of origin represented in the oils available where you shop.

Bottom line? It's impossible to proclaim that any one country is best. Olives are an agricultural product, and like wine, represent their particular *terroir* (a collective term referencing environment and growing conditions).

Using Olive Oil

One of the most sublime olive oil experiences I've ever had occurred in Sicily a few years ago. To celebrate the new harvest, an olive oil grower hosted a picnic at an impossibly idyllic outbuilding at the edge of his olive groves. As an appetizer, he served freshly made ricotta cheese (it was still warm!) on crusty slabs of bread, anointed it with olive oil pressed the previous day, and sprinkled it with coarse salt and freshly ground black pepper. I couldn't get enough, and barely had room for the arancini (baseball-sized portions of saffron risotto molded around mozzarella and prosciutto, coated with breadcrumbs, and then deep-fried), the grilled pork chops (also drizzled with fresh olive oil) and sausages, or the eye-popping *cassata* cake, a Sicilian specialty, heavy with marzipan and glazed fruits.

13 Shopping Tips for Olive Oil Success

Even if you're an olive oil shopping virgin (meaning you've never purchased a bottle), or *extra* virgin (meaning you've demurely averted your gaze when walking by the stuff), these tips will help you put an olive oil in your basket or cart that won't spark what the marketers call "buyer's remorse." As in, no regrets!

1. **Shop at a market that has a brisk turnover.** A store that replenishes its stock frequently is less likely to carry tired-tasting or rancid oil. High-profile web retailers can be good sources, too, as they usually have discriminating palates tasting the oils they elect to carry.
2. **Do look for harvest dates and/or "use by" dates on the label.** Sometimes, these dates are on the front; sometimes, they're on the back. They might even be printed vertically. Be suspicious of bottles that don't carry this information, as they could be past their prime, i.e., over a year old. Know that olive oil, unlike wine, has a short shelf life. It begins to deteriorate after it's bottled. Buy the freshest olive oil you can find and use it within a few months. In the industry, just-bottled oil is known as "nuevo." Sometimes it will be labeled simply "new oil." But it can be difficult to find in the U.S. as most of the world's producers delay shipping their oils for several months after the harvest.
3. **Patronize stores that encourage customers to taste the oils before purchase.** The more innovative ones have even set up olive oil tasting bars with disposable cups. But you could ask the proprietor or manager to taste an individual bottle; your request would be more likely to be honored at a gourmet shop or specialty market than a supermarket or big-lot megastore, of course.
4. **Buy smaller bottles or tins if you're not a heavy olive oil user, or share the purchase with a friend.** (Be sure to store the oil in sterilized bottles, preferably sunlight-blocking green.)
5. **Avoid purchasing oil that is displayed in direct sunlight.** Once home, store it in a dark cupboard. I can't recommend storing it in the refrigerator, though I know people do: Personally, I think refrigeration robs the oil of some of its vibrancy. If you insist, know that cold oil will congeal and cloud; it

will clear when it returns to room temperature.)

Whatever you do, don't store your oil by the stove; heat and light accelerate the aging process.

6. **There's a presumption that oils that are more golden in color are less pungent, more buttery flavored, while an intense green color portends herbal, grassy, peppery flavors.** Not true. Color is not a predictor of flavor, so don't make it a factor in your olive oil purchasing decisions. Even professional olive oil judges fall prey to this illusion, which is why tasting glasses are usually made of blue glass.
7. **Nearly all extra-virgin olive oil sold in this country is "cold-pressed."** In the old days, heat was often used to aid oil extraction, but that is no longer the case. On labels, the term is virtually meaningless today. Ditto for "first-pressed."
8. **For olive oil, like wine, there will be good years and bad years.** The small, artisanal producers are most susceptible to the whims of Mother Nature, so an oil you purchased and loved last year might have an entirely different flavor profile this year. (Common commercial brands—the ones you might use for everyday cooking—are fairly consistent.)
9. **Olive oil snobs might argue that single-estate, single-varietal oils are superior to blends.** But that's not always true. Just as grape blends can yield beautiful wines, the skilled and artful combination of olives and oils can lead to organoleptic synergy.
10. **Unfiltered olive oil is just that—unfiltered, and may have a bit of sediment lurking in the bottom of the bottle.** Some people prefer the clarity of filtered oil. Personally, I don't care. There's been some talk that unfiltered oil has a shorter shelf life than filtered oil, but the jury's still out. Use your oil up quickly, and you won't have to worry one way or the other.
11. **Educate your olive oil palate by tasting.** One shortcut toward developing your own preferences is to host an olive oil tasting party. (See details on p.3)
12. **Elaborate packaging—wooden boxes, artful bottles, eye-catching labels—do often indicate a producer's monolithic pride in its product, and is a better indicator of quality than you might think!**
13. **Oil labeled "organic" is not necessarily better.** The term is ill-defined in olive oil growing countries in the world (including the U.S.) and is not an indicator of quality.

Olive Oil and Health

A number of health benefits have been attributed to olive oil, which is rich in antioxidants:

- Cancer prevention, particularly skin and colon cancer;
- Positively affects cholesterol by lowering LDL levels (“bad cholesterol”) while raising HDL (“good cholesterol”) levels;
- Prevents cardiovascular disease;
- Fresh olive oil contains some of the same compounds as the anti-inflammatory ibuprofen (marketed as Motrin).

How to Host an Olive Oil Tasting Party

An olive oil tasting party is a magnificent way for you and your friends and family to develop an olive oil palate. And unlike a wine-tasting, no one will need a designated driver at the end of the evening.

You can select the oils you want to taste—six or eight is a good number—representing different countries or different producers within a region, or, you can make it a “B.Y.O.B” party and involve everyone in the fun (while minimizing expenses for you).

Keep the menu simple. Set out an antipasto platter and baskets of bread.

Have plenty of bottled water on hand; I prefer sparkling as it’s a more efficient palate cleanser. Wine or cocktails are optional of course. But hold off on serving them until after the tasting as they will affect the oils’ flavor.

(Professional tasters sometimes like to clear their palate between tastings with sliced apples such as Granny Smith.) You can stop there, if you want, or you can serve a hearty soup and a salad after the tasting. One terrific dessert that’s easy and olive oil friendly is made by lightly toasting bread in the oven, melting good quality semi-sweet chocolate on top, and drizzling it with olive oil. Finish with a sprinkle of crunchy sea salt such as Maldon.

Professionals taste olive oil from glasses designed specifically for that purpose. Usually made out of blue

Tasting Olive Oil

Olive oil, like wine, has a diversity of flavors and viscosities. Fundamentally, oils are either delicate or mild, peppery and intense, fruity and fragrant, or herbal and grassy. These qualities can be described a number of ways. (See below.) What is the “weight” of the oil? Is it light, medium, or heavy? Does it have a pleasant mouthfeel? How long is the finish (the length of time the flavors linger in your mouth)?

A Glossary of Olive Oil Tasting Terms

A vocabulary has evolved among professionals in the olive oil business that can be useful in categorizing perceptions on the palate. Here are some of the more commonly used ones:

Positive Terms:

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|----------|-----------|---------------|-------------|-----------|----------------|----------------|
| • Fruity | • Olive-y | • Green Apple | • Artichoke | • Tomato | • Green Tomato | • Tomato Stems |
| • Sorrel | • Arugula | • Guava | • Grassy | • Herbal | • Almond | • Nut skins |
| • Hay | • Sweet | • Pineapple | • Banana | • Peppery | • Spicy | • Complex |

Negative Terms:

- | | | | | | | | |
|------------------|--------|------------------------|------------|------------|---------|------------|--------------|
| • Fusty or musty | • Sour | • Rancid | • Metallic | • Vinegary | • Catty | • Cooked | • Astringent |
| • Resin | • Flat | • Bitter (excessively) | | • Burnt | • Rough | • Cucumber | • Simplistic |

Point being, if you’re in possession of a wonderful bottle of extra virgin olive oil, fragrant and balanced and freighted with just the right amount of spice, fruit, or herbal essence, keep it simple. Drizzle it on pasta, grilled meat, vegetables, white beans, or green salads. Use it as a dipping sauce. Dip your finger in it while no one’s looking. I have one in my pantry right now that tastes like a distillation of ripe tomatoes; I could drink it straight from the bottle. I could invent a cocktail in its honor. I could obsessively conserve it, and trot it out for special occasions, like the good china. But that would be dumb. It’s

meant to be enjoyed in the ways I described above.

A good bottle of oil, as opposed to an extraordinary one, is the equivalent of what I call “hamburger wine.” It’s the stuff you grab for everyday cooking; it’s great for vinaigrettes, it’s an able foccacia partner, or a sturdy ingredient in a meat marinade or ragu.

Finally, there’s the inexpensive oil that’s suitable for baking, frying, or sauteing. Frankly, I prefer vegetable oil for these tasks as it has a higher smoking point than olive oil; olive oil smokes around 350 degrees F, a lower temperature than you need for successful frying.

glass (though they can also be clear, brown, or black), they concentrate the oils’ aromas and fit comfortably in the palm so the oil is slightly warmed by body heat. They can be difficult to find, but are available from Corti Brothers, the magnificent market in Sacramento, California; they retail for about \$10 each.

It is perfectly acceptable to use wine glasses or even 1-ounce plastic disposable cups, which can be found at most party supply stores.

Provide your guests with paper and pens in case they want to record their impressions. You may also want to put

small white plates or bowls out for everyone in case they want to dip their bread in oil.

You might begin by demonstrating the proper way to taste oil:

1. Pour 1/2 to 1 tablespoon of oil into your glass or cup. Hold it in the palm of one hand, and place your other hand over the top of it. Carefully swirl it.

Now, remove your hand from the top and bring the oil close to your nose. How does it smell? Does it remind you of fruit or herbs? You can, of course, observe the color, but color is not a predictor of flavor.

2. Now, take a small sip and roll the oil around in your mouth. Professional tasters usually open their lips and draw air in through their teeth to release the oils' volatile components, a rather noisy but effective technique. (If you feel silly, don't do it.) Does the oil have a good mouthfeel, or is it heavy and greasy? What does it taste like? (Some helpful terms are listed above, and may help you describe your impressions.) Does it have any obvious defects, such as rancidity? Is it bitter? Does it make you cough, something Tuscan oils and very fresh oils are known for?
3. Swallow the oil, or spit it into another cup. Keep the remaining oil in the tasting cup in case you want to compare it to one of the other oils. Take a sip of water to cleanse your palate, and move on to the next oil.

Olive Oil Trivia

1. Plato delivered his "Plato-isms" from an olive grove called "Academe."
2. Per person, Greece consumes the most olive oil in the world—20 quarts, versus 10 for Italy.
3. Spain is the world's largest olive oil producer.
4. It takes about 10 pounds of olives to produce 1 quart of olive oil.
5. One of the most important factors in determining olive oil quality is the time that elapses between the picking and the pressing as the olives, particularly in warm weather, begin to ferment and degrade. An old Middle-Eastern proverb puts it best: "Olives that are not pressed on the day they are picked are like a bride whose husband does not come to bed on their wedding night."
6. Table olives account for only 10 per cent of the world's olive production.
7. More than 30 million acres of land in the world are planted with over 1 billion olive trees.
8. According to mythology, the goddess Athena's gift of olives was considered more valuable than the god Poseidon's gift of fish, so a certain Greek city was named after her.
9. Olive trees can bear fruit for more than 500 years. Some trees in the Mediterranean are believed to predate Jesus Christ.
10. Italian immigrants to Australia illegally brought olive oil cuttings into the country by concealing them in their ties and the waistbands of their pants.

RECIPES

Pesto Trapanese

This flavorful pesto is traditionally made with a mortar and pestle. You can, however, make quick work of it by using a blender or food processor.

Serves 6

6 garlic cloves, roughly chopped
1 teaspoon salt or more to taste
1 cup fresh basil leaves
1 cup blanched almonds, roughly chopped

6 sun-dried tomato halves packed in oil, diced
1/2 cup extra virgin olive oil
Freshly ground black pepper
1 pound spaghetti

Using a mortar and pestle, pound the garlic, salt, and basil into a paste. Add the almonds slowly, breaking up with the pestle after each addition. Add the tomatoes and break up with the pestle. When the ingredients have been reduced to a paste, add the oil and the pepper. Cook the pasta until al dente in salted boiling water. Drain, and toss with the pesto. Serve immediately.

Orange, Fennel, and Onion Salad

If you have one, a mandoline or Japanese slicer works well for thinly slicing the fennel and onion.

Serves 6 to 8

2 bulbs fennel
1 red onion
6 navel oranges

1/3 cup extra virgin olive oil
Salt
Freshly ground black pepper

Remove the fennel tops and the tough outer layer from the bulb; slice vertically into very thin slices. Thinly slice the onion and separate the rings. Peel the oranges, and making long vertical cuts with a sharp knife, remove the white membrane. Cut into thin crosswise slices, collecting the juice. Arrange the fennel, onion, and orange slices (alternate them) on a platter with a deep well. Drizzle with the olive oil and any collected orange juice. Sprinkle with salt and pepper. Cover and refrigerate several hours before serving.

Cannellini Beans with Gorgonzola and Fresh Sage

This recipe, adapted from one in the Dean and DeLuca Cookbook by David Rosengarten (Random House, 1996), is astonishingly easy to make and never fails to elicit raves. You can even use canned beans if you're short on time. It's great with roasted beef or lamb.

Serves 4

2 cups cooked cannellini beans, drained
4 ounces mild Gorgonzola cheese, diced or crumbled

1/3 cup minced fresh sage leaves (do not substitute dried sage)
1/3 cup extra virgin olive oil

In a saucepan, combine the beans, cheese, and sage leaves. Warm gently until the cheese melts, stirring often to prevent scorching. (Can also heat in the microwave.) Stir in the olive oil and serve immediately.

Other Uses for Olive Oil

- Furniture Polish: Mix 1/4 cup of olive oil with the juice of one lemon and 1 tablespoon of water. Apply to a soft cloth and polish with the grain of the wood.
- Lightly oil cast iron skillets with olive oil after each use to enhance the surface and prevent rust.
- Apply olive oil to your dog's nose and paws to prevent wintertime chapping and cracking.
- Exfoliate your skin with a mixture of olive oil and kosher salt. Wash with soap and warm water.
- Apply to wooden cutting boards to keep them in good condition.
- Use as a lip balm.
- Pour 1/4 cup of olive oil into your bath to lubricate and soften dry skin.