



A BEGINNER'S GUIDE TO BUYING AND USING OLIVE OIL

Did your doctor, nutritionist, trainer or best friend tell you to start using olive oil in your daily diet? Unless you grew up in a Mediterranean household, most of us do not know where to begin. We are even more confused when we go to the grocery store and check out the “wall” of olive oils. We are faced with a collage of colors, flavors and prices that would confound even a professional chef! There are a lot of differing opinions out there, so we would like to share a few tips that we have learned about choosing and using olive oil in your kitchen every day.

#1 Extra Virgin is Healthiest

Most of the health benefits of olive oil are found in the antioxidant properties of the plant polyphenols. These compounds are volatile, and degrade when exposed to heat, light, water, various chemicals, and oxygen, causing the flavor of the oil to become bland, flat, and eventually rancid. This is why highly-processed industrial extra virgin oils are often oxidized and spoiled before you even open the bottle. Look for oils that are packaged in dark glass or stainless steel. Avoid oils in clear glass or plastic, or that were stored on the top shelf in your grocery store, exposed to fluorescent lights. Since our government does not regulate a standard for using the term “extra virgin,” many industrial oils, both imported and domestic, do not meet the International Olive Oil Council (IOOC) standards. Beware of vague labeling practices, such as using the words “made in...” or “produced in...” or “bottled in ...” rather than talking about where and how the olives were grown. Reputable producers are proud of their sources, and will give you more information rather than less about their methods of production. The less the oil is handled, the more likely that the volatile compounds are intact. **Note:** Olive oil is not like wine, younger is better; so buy what you can use today and don't save it for a special occasion. “Light” olive oils are **not** lower in calories, they are just lighter in color due to extensive refining and processing. “Pure” olive oils are actually a lower grade oil, produced using heat and chemicals to get the last trace of oil out of the olive pulp already pressed to produce the higher quality oils.

#2 Use Different Oils for Different Cooking Methods

Use the least expensive extra virgin oil for high heat cooking such as frying or sautéing. The heat destroys the volatile flavor components in more expensive (less processed) oils so it is like burning up money to fry with your best oil. Also, the pulp left in an unprocessed or unfiltered oil will burn at these temperatures, imparting an off flavor to the dish. Use a medium grade extra virgin oil for salad dressings and marinades, where you want the flavor of olives to come through. Save your best artisan oils for finishing dishes. Similar to using sesame oil or chili oil in Asian cooking, drizzle some of your premium oils over just about anything, from veggies to meats to risotto to pasta to soups. The easiest and healthiest pasta sauce you can use is a full flavored extra virgin olive oil or one of the many flavored olive oils, tossed with the warm noodles.

#3 Taste the Oils Before You Buy

We are so used to the neutral flavor of highly processed industrial grade olive oils that most of us don't know what a good olive oil tastes like. **Simply put, a good olive oil tastes like green olives.** A reputable retailer will allow you to taste before you buy. Some of the words used to describe the flavor are buttery, grassy, peppery, vegetal, and spicy. Some of the not so desirable flavors are greasy, oily, flat, chemical, stale or rancid. **Note:** it is easy to mistake a strong, peppery flavor in some oils for rancidity. Rancid oils taste of petroleum by-products like turpentine or acetone. Just because an oil has a bite, particularly on the finish, it is not necessarily rancid. Peppery oils catch in the back of your throat and make you want to cough. This is the sign of an oil with a high concentration of anti-oxidant polyphenols. A rancid oil will linger in your mouth long after you have swallowed or spit it out, and tastes vaguely like varnish. Smell the oil if in doubt. Peppery oils smell like olive leaves, rancid oils smell like paint or chemicals. Highly refined or processed oils taste and smell like vegetable oil.

#4 Olive Oil is a Agricultural Food Product

As with all farm products, it helps to know your producers. Purchase oils that are produced closer to home, and you will not need certifications or industry buzz words to guarantee the quality of the product. Your local natural foods or specialty retailer can be a great resource for information about the producers and their products. Using olive oil is a great way to eat local, and reduce your carbon footprint in terms of costs of production and transportation. It costs more to purchase an artisan product made in California, but the results are worth the trade off. Many of the inexpensive industrial olive oils are produced in countries where the government subsidized production resources do not return the money to the farmers. Sometimes cheaper is not always less expensive in the long run.

#5 Use the Olive Oils You Like

You will be more likely to cook with and enjoy olive oil if you like the taste. Different types of olives make different flavored oils, so keep tasting until you find one you like. Just as with wine, don't let someone else's palate dictate your preferences. Use the table below as a guide.

California Mission or Manzanillo Olives: grown in the Central Valley and Sierra foothills, these olives yield a golden, buttery oil because they are harvested ripe, in December or January. If you like California ripe black or green olives, you will like this oil, which is mild and fruity. Good for salad dressings, but also used as a base for many of the citrus or herb flavored oils recommended as a finishing or garnishing oil. California Mission olives came here with Father Serra, and are the grandfathers of California's olive industry.

Italian or Tuscan Varietal Olives: grown in the Wine Country, both in Northern and Central California, these olives are harvest earlier and greener, and produce a full flavored, sometimes peppery oil with a taste reminiscent of tomato leaves and a bright olive green color. This is the type of oil best used as a condiment or finishing oil, and will often be the most expensive, as the olives are usually hand picked and stone crushed. The oils vary by producer due to differences in soils and climate, so taste until you find one you enjoy.

Spanish or Greek Varietal Olives: grown all over California, often in large, high-density plantings based on the newest technologies out of Spain and Tunisia. The oils derived from these olives will be milder than the Italian style oils, and less expensive due to the higher production volumes and automated harvesting methods. These oils are great for frying or everyday cooking, where a heavy olive flavor is not preferred. Sometimes, they are picked early and sold as Olio Nuovo, and will yield a greener and spicier oil with a shorter shelf life.