

An ode to OLIVE oil

There's nothing more wonderful than a dish enhanced with olive oil. It can be drizzled over salad, vegetables or cooked pasta, used in marinades for meat or fish and savoured on its own with some freshly-baked bread. Cook, bake, roast, sauté, pour... olive oil's culinary possibilities are endless. However, all that effort is for nothing if low-quality olive oil is used. With a seemingly never-ending choice of brands, how do you know if your olive oil is up to scratch?

Olive oil is technically freshly-squeezed fruit juice. Extra virgin olive oil comes exclusively from the first pressing of the olive harvest and is produced by mechanical means, so no heat or chemicals are involved. Cold-pressed olive oil indicates that all of its flavours, aromas and nutrients are retained. Extra virgin olive oil is the highest quality due to its low acidity.

Even so, different brands of olive oil labelled 'extra virgin' can vary greatly in price. Without delving too deeply into the murky world of olive oil labelling, it's safe to say that a very low price is an indication of a poor-quality oil. Good olive oil is high in vitamin E, loaded with antioxidants and healthy fats, supports heart health and helps prevent a variety of diseases. A fresh and healthy olive oil actually brings a pungent, peppery feel to the back of the throat that may cause you to cough. This reflex is triggered by the presence of healthful antioxidants and anti-inflammatories.

There are some simple things to consider when searching for the good stuff. Provenance and transparency are paramount, so find out where your olive oil comes from, just as you would with other produce. Remember the three Ws: Who, Where and When.

WHO The key to high quality is extra virgin oil (ideally from a single variety of olives) produced from a small co-op of growers or a single family farm. These are real people, not buyers for multi-national corporations. Don't purchase on impulse because the bottle looks nice. Do some research and ask questions. Buy from a farmer or supplier you can get to know and trust.

WHERE Look for estate of origin on the label (if it doesn't have one, it's most likely a blend). Keep in mind that 'product of' can just mean bottled in that country, not grown. Olive oils from single estates or community co-operatives ensure there is no middle-man buying olive oil in bulk from farms scattered across the globe.

WHEN To ensure freshness, look for olive oils with a harvest date and make sure it's within the last year. Unlike wine, olive oil doesn't get better with age. It will degrade and lose its taste and colour. If the olive oil has a 'best before' date, check that it's within two years of bottling. Dark glass bottles or stainless steel tins are

best for keeping out air and light.

To get you started on your olive oil journey, I can make recommendations. Olive Branch (myolivebranch.co.uk) was founded by Maria Koinaki and Kamil Shah who live in London. Maria's father owns olive trees in Crete, Greece, and takes his olives to the local mill where they are pressed, along with those of the surrounding farmers. The olives are all harvested at the same time. Their extra virgin olive oil is produced with the same variety of olives used in the local community co-operative.

The extra virgin olive oil of Cambridgeshire-based couple Rob Marsden and Pam Pantazi of The OOO Company (ooocompany.com) is produced on their family farm in a coastal village in Cyprus. Their single estate olives are hand-picked, cold pressed in the village, then sent to the UK for bottling. This family connection ensures that 100 per cent extra virgin olive oil is going into their bottles.

Pata is a family-owned olive farm in Calabria, Italy, producing organic, monocultivar, single-estate olive oils of superior quality.

Their olives are hand-picked, then pressed and bottled at the estate. They also produce Le Opere e i Giorni organic infused extra virgin olive oils. The agrumatura process crushes the olives together with fresh fruits, herbs or vegetables at harvest time, which allows their essential oils and flavours to be suspended in the olive oil.

Pata extra virgin olive oils are imported exclusively to the UK by Cambridge-based Olioitalia (olioitalia.eu), founded by Julia and Mauro Boero. Mauro was raised on his family's olive grove in Italy and he's a trusted supplier. Pata's olive oils can be purchased online through Agrumia (agrumia.co.uk) and at most of Cambridgeshire's fine food shops. You can listen to the podcast of my interview with Mauro Boero on *Flavour*, the food and drink programme on Cambridge 105 radio (cambridge105.fm/shows/flavour).

There's no doubt a high-quality olive oil adds depth to many dishes. Armed with knowledge of the three Ws, you can embark on your own olive oil discovery. If you ever come across an olive oil tasting from a small producer, jump at the chance to sample their olive oil and hear what they have to say.

Tracking down top-notch olive oil can be a challenge – as Cambridge's Pina Broccoli Anaia, of food blog One Two Culinary Stew, reports.



Find
Pina's blog
onetwoculinarystew.com.