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## A Purist's Guide to Olive Oil



**New regulations and some shopping savvy can help you find an oil that makes the grade**

BY Julie O'Hara  
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What image comes to mind when you pick up a bottle of extra virgin olive oil? A small, sunny grove buzzing with workers rushing their olives to the local mill for pressing? The reality may in fact be quite different. While many producers in the Mediterranean turn out fresh, estate-bottled olive oil, some large manufacturers may blend oils from Turkey and North Africa along with local pressings. It's even possible that the "extra virgin" bottle in your kitchen doesn't meet the extra virgin standards set by the International Olive Council (IOC), which is based in Madrid.

### MASKING AND MASS-MARKET MISINFORMATION

Purchasing high-quality oil isn't as simple as looking for the words "extra virgin" or "product of Italy" on the label. Producers in Spain, Italy, and Greece account for the bulk of the world's olive oil. But producers in Tunisia, Syria, and Morocco have steady output too. Some of this oil is exported for bottling to countries such as Italy, which has greater cachet

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"Product of Italy" on the label could mask the oil's origins by implying it was produced there. (To meet U.S. Customs regulations, the label should also list the countries where the oil's olives came from.) "The mass market olive oils may or may not be blends from different countries, but they rarely come from one farm," says Ari Weinzweig, cofounder of Zingerman's, a food specialty business in Ann Arbor, Mich.

### CALIFORNIA RAISES THE BAR

Most olive oil—producing countries are members of the IOC, but the United States is not—which means importers and distributors of olive oil in the U.S. are not bound by IOC guidelines.

But a new California state law, which went into effect in January, defines grades of olive oil comparable to IOC standards and requires producers to follow them. The main categories are extra virgin: oil with low acidity extracted only by physical means (ideally within 24 hours of harvest); olive oil: a blend of heat-refined oils and virgin oils; and olive-pomace oil: a blend of virgin oils and the oils extracted with chemical solvents from the flesh and pits of olives after pressing.

Until now, quality control fell to trade groups such as the North American Olive Oil Association (NAOOA), which represents companies selling imported oil. "The overwhelming majority of the industry already follows the international standard that was created by the IOC. In fact, our members have to agree to abide by that as a point of membership, and that is one of the reasons we test their oils," says NAOOA President Bob Bauer. His organization would like national grade standards instituted and supports the California law. Connecticut's new regulation, which went in to effect in November, matches the IOC standards for olive oil sold in that state.

California produces 99 percent of U.S. olive oil and is on track to plant 10,000 additional acres every year through 2020. Advocates hope the new standards will help put the state's olive oil on a level playing field with imports. "Almost all California olive oil is at the top grade—extra virgin—so the law probably won't have too much impact on California because they're already producing really high-quality olive oil," says Dan Flynn, executive director of the University of California Davis Olive

Center. "Where the impact will be more strongly seen is with the olive oil imported into the U.S., which to date really has not needed to conform to any kind of grade standards." Not only will the new law eliminate blend masking and clarify olive oil grades in California, but other states will benefit as well, says Patricia Darragh, executive director of the California Olive Oil Council. "It would be difficult to send a big shipment to the U.S. and segregate some product for California, so importers will most likely heed the California grade standards," she adds.

### TASTE THE DIFFERENCE

When it comes to evaluating the olive oil you buy, the truest test of quality is its flavor. Weinzweig's advice? "If it's not good stuff, it won't taste good!" To train your palate, Flynn suggests taste-testing an inexpensive extra virgin olive oil against a high-end one to discover the differences.

"Extra virgin can have a degree of bitterness and a degree of spiciness, which some people might interpret as flaws, but in fact are positive attributes, as long as they don't outweigh the fruitiness of the oil," he says. Think of how bitterness enhances dark chocolate or espresso, he suggests; compare spiciness to the pleasant heat of fresh chiles. "Because really fine olive oil is used as a condiment, these elements are intended to enhance the food you're eating in the same way tannin in red wine can enhance a

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dish," adds Flynn.

For vegetarian cooks, olive oil adds flavor and richness to vegetable-based dishes. "I like using extra virgin olive oil because it allows me to get down to much more simple flavors, tastes, and cooking styles," says Steve Petusevsky, executive chef and author of *The Whole Foods Market Cookbook*. "If I'm grilling vegetables, I'll baste them with extra virgin olive oil, fresh lemon, vinegar, and fresh herbs for a really simple cooking medium."

And remember: blends and nonvirgin oils can be great additions to your cooking arsenal as long as you know what you're getting. For sautéing and roasting, supermarket extra virgins, such as Bertolli, Colavita, and Carapelli, are reliable. Just save those artisan-made, premium extra virgin oils to dress salads, dip bread, or finish cooked dishes where you can really taste the sunshine of the groves and the care of the producers.

### How to Choose an Extra Virgin

- 1. Look for a seal** from the North American Olive Oil Association or the California Olive Oil Council (COOC) to guarantee the extra virgin grade. Note whether the oil comes from a single country or is a blend of several countries' oils, which may be of varying quality.
- 2. Check the date** "If there's not a pressing or harvest date or a seal on the bottle, I would be careful," cautions COOC Executive Director Patricia Darragh. Most oils stay fresh up to 24 months after pressing.
- 3. Less is more** "Buy in small quantities so you can go through it quickly instead of storing for a long time," says Darragh. Dark-colored glass bottles reduce damage from natural and artificial light. Preserve freshness by keeping in a dark, cool cupboard away from the stove.
- 4. Mind the store** Buy from a retailer that has fast product turnover, displays olive oil away from windows or fluorescent lights, and offers tastes before you buy. He or she should be able to match you up with the right oil, much like a clerk in a wine shop.

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