

Make Sure You're Getting Extra Virgin Olive Oil



by Alex A. Kecskes

The flavor and nutritional value of extra-virgin olive oil have made it an essential ingredient for discerning chefs and home cooks around the world. As demand for this premium oil rises, so does fraud. Even some well-known Italian olive oil producers have been found guilty of importing lesser-quality olive oil from North Africa and elsewhere, re-labeling and passing it off as a high-quality extra-virgin product.

In such cases, bottles labeled as extra-virgin olive oil are blended with lower-priced sunflower or canola or soybean oils, or with lesser-quality oil extracted using heat or chemical solvents from olive pomace, the by-product of olive oil's first pressing. The words "extra virgin" on a bottle of oil can allow the producer to raise the price by as much as ten-fold. These impostor oils deprive consumers of the heart-health benefits and distinctive flavors of true extra virgin olive oil.

Critics complain that inadequate food labeling regulations and limited enforcement of laws by government inspectors have made it more difficult for consumers to be certain they're buying the real thing. They say olive oil can easily be diluted or substituted with cheaper oils that are difficult to detect, forcing consumers to rely on labeling which is not always truthful. It takes an expert to detect a fraud. And time—up to six weeks to run one series of tests, at a cost of about \$1,100. In one test, chemists beam ultraviolet light at the oil; in another, they identify fatty acids by separating them from the oil.

Under the federal Food and Drug guidelines, products labeled and sold as extra-virgin olive oil must be cold pressed, have a low-acidity, and be made entirely from oil obtained from the fruit of the olive tree (*Olea europea* L). These guidelines must follow the standards set by the International Olive Oil Council, which is the intergovernmental organization based in Madrid, Spain. This council tracks the production of olive oil, defines quality standards and monitors authenticity.

If an olive oil is to be certified as extra virgin, it must pass rigorous chemical and physical analyses in its country of origin. In addition, expert panels must evaluate an oil's color, taste, aroma, "mouth-feel," and "back-of-the-mouth piquancy." Many imitators have a sharp, unpleasant metallic taste, or they smell and taste old and rancid.

To make matters even a little more confusing for buyers, there are hundreds of varieties of extra virgin olive oils. Attributes known to influence flavor include the type of olive, its ripeness and

handling, growing conditions and *terroir*, pressing techniques, and how the oil is actually filtered, bottled and stored. It's best to taste olive oil to recognize the difference between good and defective flavors. When tasting olive oil, much of the oil's characteristics are perceived through the sense of smell. Notice the fruit aroma (fruitiness) by inhaling from the glass. When the oil is in your mouth, evaluate the bitterness on your tongue, and notice the intensity of the oil's pungency as you swallow it. Good extra virgin olive oils will have at least a faint peppery sensation, or pungency, on the back of the throat.

Unscrupulous manufacturers are constantly developing new ways to conceal their fakes. Sunflower oils from genetically modified plants, for example, are extremely hard to spot. And many vegetable oils are now modified to look and taste like olive oil, with a chemical composition closer to olive oil. That makes them harder to detect in an illicit blend.

Of course it's only worth all this trouble because extra virgin olive oil has so many known benefits to our health while doing wonders for our culinary creations. Buy extra virgin olive oil from a reputable source and learn how to conduct your own taste tests. Choose three or four favorites that you can get to know intimately and use those as benchmarks with which to compare new acquisitions.