

Extravergin Olive Oil: A Health Food – Not Just a Dressing

So many things can be said about olive oil. During my oil tasting courses, people are often surprised at how a product so often underrated, can be so rich in nutrients and so healthy. High quality extra virgin olive oil is a main staple in the Mediterranean diet and can be used at all times, not only as a dressing.

Extra virgin olive oil is rich in vitamin E and provitamin A (beta-carotene), with a high content of polyphenols, that are strong antioxidants that fight the negative effect of free radicals, responsible for cellular damage and degeneration.

All these precious elements, along with unsaturated fatty acids, are essential to a healthy diet and are effective in lowering LDL levels and reducing risk of atherosclerosis, cardiovascular disease and high blood pressure.

THE FIVE GOLDEN RULES FOR RECOGNIZING QUALITY EXTRA VIRGIN OLIVE OIL

The following information does not cover everything, but can be used as a guideline for those who wish to learn how to appreciate and select a quality extra virgin olive oil.

1. KNOWING WHAT AN EXTRA VIRGIN OLIVE OIL IS

Extra virgin olive oil is the result of a simple mechanical extraction process of oil from olives. The olives do not undergo any kind of treatment except washing, decanting, a spinning cycle and filtration.

By law, extra virgin olive oil must have a free fatty acid content, expressed as oleic acid of not more than 0,8 grams per 100 grams of oil and be free from defects.

Free acidity is one of the main indicators of the quality of

an oil. The higher the level of acidity, the poorer the quality.

Tasting is not an indicator of the free acidity of an oil; this parameter can only be determined by laboratory analyses, so if you associate pungency with acidity, you're wrong!

Actually, pungency is the sensorial proof of the presence of a very important category of substances called polyphenols, that are, as we have already said, potent antioxidants and a precious characteristic of this type of oil. It is polyphenols that make extra virgin olive oil a superior oil to be preferred to all other kinds of fat.

We therefore suggest you select an oil with a very low acid content.

2. GETTING TO KNOW THE CHARACTERISTICS OF OIL

Sensory analysis

We have already mentioned that in order to be considered extra virgin, the oil must be organoleptically defect-free. The aroma should be pleasant, with notes of green or mature olive, but can also carry notes of other fruits like apple, citrus fruit or almond, along with hints of grass and artichoke.

A high quality oil will also present an intense, harmonic pungent and bitter flavor that is due to the presence of phenols.

These flavors will diminish in time and the taste will become less intense, less fruity and bear only a slight bitterness and pungency.

Contrary to popular belief, the color of oil is not an indicator of quality which depends, instead, on the variety of olives, their ripening and the presence of chlorophyll and carotenes.

Therefore, if you can't taste the oil before buying it, don't judge it by its color.

Oil is delicate

Oil cannot stand exposure to very cold or hot temperatures; thus it is important to store it properly in order to maintain

its properties and duration. The ideal storage temperature for oil is 15°C, protected from light and air, in a dry place that is clean and odorless, allowing all its nutritional benefits and aromatic freshness to be preserved.

Avoid purchasing oil sold in plastic bottles or in transparent glass bottles. Once you have opened a bottle of oil, it is always a good idea to seal it well and make sure you keep it in a cool, dark place, away from all sources of heat. Get ready to discover a product that will delight you with its taste and aroma enhancing any kind of food you choose to use it with!

To filter or not to filter?

If you are looking for a long shelf-life, it's advisable to select an oil that has been filtered. What does this mean? It doesn't mean that the oil has been depleted in any way but that right from the beginning, the producer eliminated all olive paste and water residue, that combined, would ferment. If the oil has not undergone this treatment, it can be clarified by decanting it various times, but this will also expose the oil to oxidation, therefore causing loss of precious characteristics.

At any rate, if you wish to enjoy a delicious 'bruschetta' with freshly crushed olive oil, consider buying a non-filtered oil, that you will then have to use up in a short time in order to use it at its best.

3. UNDERSTANDING THE LABEL

The origin

For extra virgin olive oil to be traceable, it is mandatory for the label to specify the EU member state or third country that corresponds to the geographical area where the olives were harvested and the extraction at the oil mill took place. Most of the oils on the shelves of large retailers are a blend of Italian, European and non-European oils. If we are looking for a 100% Italian product, let's remember to check the label to see where the olives are from.

Designation of origin at regional level is reserved for products that have a DOP (Registered Designation of Origin) or an IGP (Protected Geographical Indication).

Expiration date

According to the law, the specific properties of extra virgin olive oils are maintained, in appropriate preservation conditions, up to 18 months from bottling date, not from the production date.

The label must specify «best by», followed by the date.

Only in the case of IGP and DOP oils, is it mandatory to specify the year or the agricultural year of harvest and transformation of the olives. The producer of other oils may wish to be transparent and voluntarily state as much.

Let's therefore select a bottle of oil with a label that states the year of production.

Cold pressed extraction

If the label reads "cold drawn", it means that our extra virgin olive oil was processed at a controlled temperature lower than 27°C.

This is certified by the oil mill and guarantees that the extraction process was quality-conscious, allowing a better preservation of the distinctive properties of the oil.

4. KNOWING THE PRODUCER AND THE QUALITY OF THE PRODUCT

Extra virgin olive oil, A MATTER OF TRUST

It is not easy to find one's way when selecting an extra virgin olive oil, especially when there is no way to taste the oil and you are not an expert. It therefore can be useful to know more about the producer. To provide the customer with transparency, the information the producer gives us (the production process, i.e. the characteristics of the oil from the olive fruit on the tree all the way to the oil in the bottle) is the most important form of certification we can have, along with, naturally, the official paperwork.

5. RETAIL PRICE

Last but not least,: don't trust a bargain price. Price reflects the whole supply chain: the higher the quality of the product and of the process, the higher the cost of production will be, determining the end price. Extra virgin olive oil is, or should be, a staple of our diet and since we use it daily, we deserve a proper investment on our health.