



Olive Oil

Extra virgin olive oil is a universe made of thousands of extra virgin olive oils, not one, produced using different “varietal”, variety of olives, in every corner of the world, from Spain to Italy, from Australia to USA, from Palestine to Tunisia and every oil has its unique characteristics given by varietal, olive mill and climate, the mains, and uses, with the general rule of delicate oils going with delicate food and more intense oils with richer, flavoursome food.

Extra virgin olive oil is a fascinating ingredient and world, similar to the wine, where each olive oil is different from the others, making each olive oil unique. Below we explain how professionals taste olive oil, but even non professionals can appreciate the differences by simply taking three different extra virgin olive oils with different characteristics, possibly one delicate, one medium and one robust with a selection of food, and taste the same food dipped in each of the oils, you will notice differences in the taste, in some case the oil will be stronger than the flavour of the food, some time will be too delicate and some time their flavours will complement each other perfectly.

Lets start with defining an extra virgin olive oil. An extra virgin olive oil is a superior oil obtained directly from the first pressing of the olives and only using mechanical processes, without the use of chemicals to extract the oil, and with an acidity not exceeding 0,8%.

Just below extra virgin oil is the virgin olive oil, rarely found, also obtained from first pressing, but with a slightly higher acidity level (under 2%) followed by the olive oil, cheaper, with an almost bland taste, mainly used as cooking oil. At the bottom of the pyramid, there is the pomace oil, the cheapest olive oil, obtained through the use of solvents/chemicals.

Extra virgin olive oil is produced all over the world, north and south, east and west, but being an Italian specialist, before discussing the different stages of olive oil tasting, that is the same for all extra virgin olive oils, a few words about Italian extra virgin oils and their characteristics. Italian extra virgin olive oils are classified into **DOP** and **IGP**, with only one IGP, the IGP Tuscany, and 41 DOP extra virgin olive oils. The DOP status not only guarantees that the extra virgin olive oil is obtained from Italian olives specifying the varieties allowed, but also that the olives are pressed in a mill in the same area.

Due to European legislation, it is possible to find “Made in Italy” extra virgin olive oils made with a blend of European oils or olives, in this case, the “made in Italy” refers to the bottling plant, not the actual provenance of the olives or oils, and these tend to be the cheap extra virgin olive oils found in supermarkets shelves, but they have written on their label, normally on the back, the provenance of the olives or oils. Italian extra virgin olive oil “100% Italian”, on the other side, means that the olive are all grown in Italy. For a good, properly made extra virgin Italian oil we don't want to pay less than £10 per litre, a bit more for DOP and IGT

Italian extra virgin oil's characteristics and flavours vary from region to region and olive variety, but can be broadly grouped in 3 main groups: northern, central and southern extra virgin olive oils. The northern oils are mild, delicate, very good with fish dishes. Oils from the central regions tend to be stronger, with grassy notes whilst oils from the southern regions, have a drier, more herbal flavour, still intense.

Olive oil is rich in antioxidants, especially vitamin E, and among plant oils, it is the highest in monounsaturated fat, the good fat, and it is low in polyunsaturated fat, the bad one and it also contains other healthy fats, such Omega 3 and Omega 6. Extra virgin olive oil is also rich in polyphenols, chemical compounds that possess antioxidant and anti-inflammatory properties, and polyphenols give to the olive oils the bitter flavour that many don't like, a good extra virgin olive oil must have a certain bitter taste, leaving a slight pungency in the throat. Extra virgin olive oils that don't have the bitter taste, lack polyphenols and therefore don't do any good to our health.

A couple of final tips before we learn how to taste olive oil: good extra virgin olive oil always comes in dark bottles, the light damages the olive oil, and never in a plastic bottle.

We are now ready to start, let's get a small glass, olive oil is tasted by drinking it, and a green apple, possibly the Granny Smith variety that due to its acidity, is perfect to clean our palate between olive oils.

Visual Analysis

The visual aspect in the evaluation of an extra virgin olive oil is not important, the colour is irrelevant except for the identification of the type of olives used. The different shades of colour (from green to yellow) are mainly due to the ripeness of the olives and the cultivar, olive variety used and extraction method.

Olfactory Analysis

Pour a small amount of oil (about 20 ml) in the glass and with one hand cover and the other warm the glass for a minute or two whilst swirling. When the oil reaches our hand temperature, stick the nose in the glass and take a deep sniff. The “nose” will tell us its qualities and defects. Extra virgin olive oils are divided into light, medium and intense fruity and the word “fruity” in olive oil can refer to vegetable as well as fruit notes, including artichokes, grass and green tomatoes!

Gustative Analysis

Take a sip, don't be shy, you need enough olive oil to be able to appreciate all its qualities. Suck air through, this allows the oxygenation of the oil and capture its aromas, making sure the oil touches all areas of your palate, then swallow some or all.

The peppery sensation, called pungency detected in the throat, is very important and is a positive characteristic, and these are the polyphenols, the chemical compounds that provide stability and have antioxidant and anti-inflammatory effects. The pungency goes from very mild to intense.

Finally, have fun and discover great extra virgin olive oils and learn how and when to use them. Below some of the terms used in describing extra virgin olive oils, positives and negatives.

Positives (Qualities)

Bitter: characteristic flavour of oil obtained from greens olives, which must not be overly accentuated.

Harmonic: it is said of an oil whose fragrance, taste and fluidity components are in perfect balance.

Artichoke: flavour that recalls the taste of the tenderest part of the artichoke.

Sweet: in the case of delicate oils, the flavour tend to be sweet Flowers: Delicate flavour of white or yellow flowers, gives a delicate taste to the oil.

Fruity: an aroma of oil that reminds the scent and taste of a healthy, fresh and perfectly ripe fruit. Fruity can cover a range that extends from a lightly to a very intense (more pungent) degree.

Almond: typical almond flavour, fresh or dry. It is appreciated as a retro-olfactory sensation and is typically associated with sweet oils.

Ripe: characteristic flavour of ripe olives, often found in yellow oils with a round taste, tending to sweet.

Spicy: peppery sensation characteristic of oils produced at the beginning of the harvest, mainly from not fully ripe olives. It is also a characteristic of Sicilian olive oils.

Round: an attribute suitable for oil that has a full and balanced taste. Spices or vegetables or apple: when the dominant notes evoke these flavours and fragrances.

Green grass: when the oil has a taste that reminds the smell of freshly mowed grass; a positive attribute if the oil is smooth.

Negative (Defects)

Winy or vinegary: flavour recalling that of wine or vinegar, characterised by oils that have undergone a fermentative degeneration and the resulting formation of acetic acid, ethyl acetate and ethanol.

Cooked or overcooked: the oil odour of when has been exposed to high temperatures during the making process.

Hay or woody: characteristic odour of oils extracted from dried olives. Metallic: reminding of metal due to a pervasive or prolonged contact of olives with machinery during the making process

Sludgy: a defect in oils not properly filtered that through with sludge, results in unpleasant smells.

Mouldy: flavour found in oils extracted from olives harvested from the ground and stored for long in damp environments.

Rancid: flavour found in oxidised oils, that have been exposed to air and heat, it is accentuated with ageing.

Soily: flavour of oil obtained from olives harvested from the ground and not washed properly.

Now that you know the theory, it is time to practice. Order your Italian [olives variety map](#) and our [extra virgin olive oils](#) and learn the differences and different uses. Olive oil will never be the same again.