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How good is your olive oil really?
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It may be extra virgin, but how good is your olive oil really?

Food inflation and a drought in Spain have made premium oils as expensive as fine wine. The experts tell **Giulia Crouch** how they select the best ones

Olive oil prices have hit a record high due to a drought in Spain, the largest producer and exporter in the world. Wholesale prices increased by 11 per cent in April, meaning a kilo (about a litre) of extra virgin olive oil now costs a historic £5.22. But have you ever thought about how much extra virgin olive oil should cost? Or even what exactly “extra virgin” means? How about “cold pressed” and “single estate”? And is “light” olive oil healthier?

I consume olive oil every day and covet it the way some people do wine. So to unravel all the confusion, here’s my complete guide to buying it — what to look for, what to avoid and what it all means.



Francesco Mazzei, chef-patron of the restaurants Sartoria, Fiume and Radici

“That spicy, tingly sensation on the tongue isn’t a defect, it’s a sign of quality”

Extra virgin or bust
Bottles that just say “olive oil” are refined oils that have been heat-treated and sometimes are blends of different oils entirely. “The market is full of fake and low-quality oils sold as olive oil so extra virgin is essential,” says the Italian chef Antonio Alderuccio, owner of the north London restaurant Plant Club.

All extra virgin is by definition “cold pressed”, so if it states that it is on the label, that could just be a marketing ploy. Extra virgin also signifies that the oil is extracted through mechanical methods that do not lead to alterations in it. No chemicals can be used and the acidity of the oil must never exceed 0.8 per cent.

“When tasted, the fruitiness must be clearly recognisable as belonging to the fruit it comes from and, more generally, it must have a ‘green’ sensation,” says Andrea Losi, agronomist and certified olive oil taster at the Tuscan biodynamic farm Fattoria La Vialla. “It must not have sensory defects: it can’t be rancid, fusty or winy.”

Avoid ‘light’ olive oil

Light olive oil is a highly processed product where heat is used to remove flavour and aroma. It results in a pale, neutral-tasting oil. As it contains fewer nutrients and more chemicals, it is definitely not a healthy alternative.

Extra virgin olive oil, on the other hand, is a natural product rich in heart-healthy fats, vitamin E and polyphenols. “It’s a ‘nutraceutical’ product, that’s to say midway between a food and a medicine,” Losi says. “Despite its high lipid content, 98 per cent, it is advised to be used daily in all diets. This is because its lipids are of the best kind: the majority unsaturated and others essential polyunsaturated.”

Buy the very best you can

Extra virgin olive oil is expensive to produce — it takes between 5kg and 7kg of fresh olives (the quantity varies according to the variety and how ripe they are, Losi says) to produce one litre. I picked olives in Tuscany last October, a process that involves drawing a small plastic comb through the branches to release the little fruits without damaging them. It takes a lot of people and a lot of time.

“If you want something cheaper, buy a different type of oil,” says Francesco Mazzei, the Italian chef-patron of the London restaurants Sartoria, Fiume and Radici. “I make a lot of stir-fry at home and for that I use sunflower oil. Extra virgin olive oil is like a medicine. It’s part of the daily diet in Italy, and should be used to dress beautiful salads, finish soups and put on top of steak for a peppery flavour. It’s almost more of a condiment than something to cook with.” He says the minimum price for which you can buy a decent 750ml bottle of the stuff is £12.

Store it properly

Extra virgin olive oil hates being exposed to light or heat as it can cause it to go rancid, so keep it in a cool, dark cupboard. When buying it you should avoid a clear bottle. “Buy your extra virgin olive oil in a can, dark or coated glass bottle, or a bag-in-box,” Losi says. “Clear glass is only acceptable if it’s sold in a box or wrapped in foil. That is why immediately after bottling we put our olive oil bottles in a box and ask our clients to wrap the bottle when they start using it.”

Also, once opened and exposed to air, the oil will begin to oxidise and change in flavour. It doesn’t expire, but it degrades and is best enjoyed within two to three months. Stored properly, you can still use it 24 months after pressing but it is better for cooking rather than using raw to finish dishes. “As the months go by, use it to cook sauces, ragu, meat and, why not, also as an ointment for the skin,” Losi says.

In my opinion, if you’re holding on to olive oil for 24 months, something is going very wrong.

Look for a harvest date and ‘see if it makes you cough’

A quality bottle of extra virgin olive oil will tell you when the oil was harvested on the label. If it doesn’t, this is a red flag. When you can, buy a bottle from the most recent harvest (October to January in the northern hemisphere and April to July in the southern hemisphere). Olive oil can have a shelf life of two years, but it’s a case of the fresher, the better.

If it’s not clear from the label when the oil was harvested, you can use your nose. “A good, fresh and new oil has a smell like freshly cut grass,” Alderuccio says.

To test it, Mazzei likes to put some in the palm of his hands, rub it together to heat it then take a whiff. “There should be peppery, artichoke notes. It should be pungent and bitter.”

As for tasting it, he has a special rule. “If it makes you cough when you

drink it, that means it’s very good. If it just slips down like nothing, it’s bad.”

That spiciness is normally a sign it’s very new, Losi explains. “That spicy, tingly sensation on the tongue isn’t a defect, it’s a sign of quality, which is more evident in oils that have been pressed recently. It doesn’t depend on acidity but on the presence of polyphenols, tocopherols and terpenes — precious elements that are natural antioxidants. They protect the plant and fruit, and at the same time are a panacea for our diet. As the months go by, the bitter and pungent notes progressively diminish.”

At the very least choose a single country of origin but preferably a single estate

Read the label carefully to find the country of origin, often written in abbreviations: IT for Italy, ES for Spain, GR for Greece, PT for Portugal etc. If it’s a blend from various countries, the quality will be less good. “If multiple countries are listed, there is a greater chance that the product is a commodity oil from a brand that is primarily a packer, not an actual olive oil producer,” Losi says. “Read the label carefully so you know what you are buying; many brands are not what they seem. That said, many of the big supermarket brands are working hard to improve quality so it is worth tasting around for products that suit your different needs [such as cooking versus raw use].”

Look to buy from brands that actually make the olive oil. There are some brands you can buy that grow the olives too.

Nice colours are pretty but don’t denote quality
Some people believe that a dark green or deep golden colour is a sign of quality but this is not the case. In fact, when tasting olive oil, testers use a blue glass so they can’t be swayed by a pretty shade. “Olive oil can be a wide range of shades, from acid green to golden yellow, and its colour has

nothing to do with the quality. The colour is determined by many factors: the olive cultivar, how ripe the olives were when pressed, the prevalence of compounds found in plants such as chlorophyll or carotenoids.”

Can you cook with extra virgin olive oil?

In my opinion, yes. I always cook with it except if it’s a dish where the flavour wouldn’t work, in which case I use a cold-pressed rapeseed oil. Equally, you shouldn’t fry on too high a heat with olive oil as the smoke point is 180C. As James Lowe, the head chef of one Michelin-starred Lyle’s in Shoreditch, London, explains: “The solids burn and can taste bitter. But for gentle cooking I use olive oil.”

Experiment with different flavours and try it on ice cream (trust me)

Like wine and chocolate, different olive oils have different flavour profiles. Spanish ones tend to be milder than Italian ones, which can differ significantly depending on which region they’re from. “In Italy we have different areas with different types of olives. Each area has a different microclimate, which makes the oils completely different,” says Olivia Vachon, the marketing and communications manager of the Italian food emporium Eataly.

Vincenzo Zaccarini, who sources Italian ingredients for chefs in the UK, says: “Some chefs go gaga for the subtle olive oils of northern Italy that add a touch of magic to dishes without stealing the show, but others want an olive oil with the strength of a Sicilian heavyweight or Puglian champion. They pack a punch, hitting your taste buds like a flavour tornado. So, my friend, when it comes to olive oil, the choice is yours.”

In terms of flavour, a tip I learnt from Mazzei is to dress vanilla ice cream with a good quality balsamic vinegar and extra virgin olive oil. Honestly, the best thing ever.

Ruth Rogers, owner of the River Café



My top 11 bottles

From £6.50 to £35

1 Extra Virgin Olive Oil 2022 “La Vialla”
£13.85 for 500ml, lavialla.com
This is my favourite olive oil of the moment, and it is divine. The olives are grown, milled and their oil bottled on site at a glorious farm in Tuscany to the highest quality. Bitter and spicy with a fresh, grassy smell and a buttery texture, it’s good on everything. The only bad thing about it is that I’ve nearly run out. You can buy a case of six and gift bottles to your friends. Better than wine.

2 Bio Orto Organic Extra Virgin Olive Oil Monocultivar Ogliarola
£14 for 500ml (down from £21), ocado.com
This is the Italian chef Antonio Alderuccio’s supermarket pick. From Puglia in Italy, a region that usually produces robust olive oil, this one is more mellow and velvety, with a hint of bitterness and spice. A good one to drizzle over mozzarella or burrata.

3 Gaea Planet Extra Virgin Olive Oil
£11.75 for 500ml, waitrose.com
This fruity, fresh olive oil is made from sustainably grown olives obtained directly from selected organic farmers in the region of Laconia, Greece.

4 Nuñez de Prado Organic Extra Virgin Olive Oil DOP
£19.95 for 1 litre, souschef.co.uk
If you like an olive oil that tastes particularly fruity, this is the one for you. With tropical passion fruit and papaya notes, it’s a lively oil with a spicy finish, made from a blend of two types of Spanish olives, which brings the mix of flavours. Grown on the Nuñez de Prado family’s 200-year-old estate in Baena, Andalucía, the olives are pressed within hours of being picked.

5 Xylo Olive Oil
£24 for 750ml xylo-oil.myshopify.com
From local olive trees in Zakynthos, Greece, this extra virgin olive oil even tells you the exact week it was pressed — a huge green (olive-coloured) flag. A very fine choice, and handily available in refillable bottles.

6 Tenute Cristiano Bio Organic Extra Virgin Olive Oil
£26 for 500ml, ocado.com
This single-estate, organic olive oil is from a third generation-run farm in Calabria, southern Italy. The grandfather of the

owner was a doctor who strongly believed in the health benefits of olive oil. This floral oil with bitter notes of chicory has a high polyphenol (antioxidant) content, meaning it’s particularly good for you. Inject it into my veins, please.

7 Elanthy Greek Olive Oil
£23.50 for 3 litres, elanthy.com
I have to admit I’m incredibly biased when it comes to olive oil and tend to buy Italian, but with its smooth texture and aromas of fresh olives, green herbs and apple, this may be delicious enough to make me stray from my Tuscan favourite for a little while.

8 Belazu Early Harvest Arbequina Extra Virgin Olive Oil
£11.15 for 500ml, ocado.com
The brand Belazu is available at Waitrose and from Ocado. The Spanish olives give a milder pepperness on the tongue, which combines wonderfully with a fresh hit of green on the nose, finished off with a pleasant creaminess that runs throughout.

9 Odysea Extra Virgin Olive Oil from Crete PGI Chania
£34 for 3 litres, odysea.com
If you get through a lot of olive oil it may be worth buying this 3 litre tin from the Greek brand Odysea. In the tin it won’t be damaged by UV light (though you should still store it in a cool, dry, dark cupboard). Made from hand-picked olives on the island of Crete, it’s fresh and perfectly peppery.

10 Oliveira Da Serra Virgin Olive Oil
£6.50 for 500ml, sainsburys.co.uk
Any time my Portuguese flatmate sees this in the shop she buys it. Using olives from southern Portugal, it has tasting notes of green apple and olive and an aroma of freshly cut grass. It’s from a region rather than a single estate, which makes it cheaper but still a good choice.

11 The River Café Extra Virgin Olive Oil
£35 for 500ml, gifts.shoptherivercafe.co.uk
You have to be quick if you want a bottle of this, made in the Selvapiana estate near Florence in the Chianti Rufina region. This pressing — the most recent, from November 2022 — is sold out already, but keep your eyes peeled for the next round of this delicious and coveted oil.
Giulia Crouch



Why ‘wet wipes’ are the new shampoo

Hannah Rogers

Washing your hair with a wet wipe may sound like the sort of desperate attempt at hygiene one might save for festival season. So why am I scrubbing my fringe with one on a Tuesday morning at my gym?

It’s not because I’m working from home. I’ve got a day at this newspaper’s fashion desk to contend with. There’s plenty of time to shower too — in fact, I’ve just had a hot one.

So, no: there’s not a practical reason for my methods. And — I promise! — it’s not madness. What you need to understand is that these white, single-use moist towelettes aren’t wipes. Ignore the fact that they look just like them. They are actually fashionable “hair cleanse cloths” — and the style set’s latest haircare must-have. They smell delicious, and



Hairdresser Sam McKnight’s Lazy Girl hair cleanse cloths

claim to be fully compostable and full of “hair-loving ingredients”.

They have come into being thanks to one of the glossy posse’s favourite hairdressers: Sam McKnight created his Lazy Girl tress refreshers to use on models backstage at fashion week and the A-listers he coifs and blow-dries for the red carpet. That’s Kate Moss, Kendall Jenner and Cate Blanchett to name a few.

Well, if it’s good enough for Kate and Cate... Still, these will probably seem an odd proposal to the average Head & Shoulders consumer. And unnecessary: I hear you’re wrong with washing? I hear you — I’m a fairly high-maintenance creature when it comes to my hair, but these wipes do work.

They claim to eliminate grease and make hair soft and frizz-free, and they do. After success that Tuesday, I now scrub my sweaty hairline after a workout and properly soak my fringe with my wipes, then blow-dry the sections I have “washed”. The results give good gloss. Volume too. And no one can tell the difference. Then again, for £17 a packet, you would hope so.

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