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Dip Into the Best Olive Oil

By Debbie DeAngelo
February 2023

Standing in front of the array of olive oil on the grocery store shelf in an attempt to make the best choice can be intimidating ... and make your eyes glaze over. After all, we're aware of how this oil reigns supreme, so we're clamoring to use it.

But do you know how to select a high-quality bottle of this liquid gold?

From dressing a salad to moisturizing skin to greasing a cupboard door hinge, olive oil is very versatile. Extra virgin olive oil (EVOO) can be one of the healthiest fats in your diet if you buy the right kind. Although the most expensive, EVOO contains the highest level of polyphenols, which are one of the main disease fighting substances that confer many of the health benefits.

Nothing compares to the flavor of high quality EVOO. It should smell and taste fresh with some fruity or spicy afternotes. Much of this is determined by the geographical region in which the olives are grown. For example, in northern Italy the oil has a delicate, buttery taste. In central Italy, a peppery flavor, while the southern roots impart a robust, fruity nature.

Choosing a superior product can be confusing. Often the labeling is misleading but there are some fundamental properties that should be scrutinized to ensure you're actually getting what you pay for.

Fresh is best. Unlike wine, EVOO doesn't improve with age. The finest producers will list a harvest date. This isn't the same as the "best by" date, which can be several years from processing. Ideally, you want to purchase a bottle that is as close to the harvest date as possible. This guarantees the strongest, freshest flavor.

If it's too old, it begins to taste rancid and the polyphenol content becomes depleted, so buy a product within 15 months of harvest. When determining the size of the bottle, consider how quickly you use it, so it doesn't sit around long enough to deteriorate.

Although given much debate over the years, consensus now is that there isn't one country whose olive oil is superior. It's more important that the product is from a single source farm to confirm the quality and purity. Often, bottles labeled "olive oil" or "light olive oil" are refined and may be combined with other types of vegetable oil.

Look for oil that was cold-pressed or cold-extracted from the olives. Heat yields more oil from the fruit but it also destroys the polyphenols. It's reassuring to see this on the label but by legal definition, EVOO must originate from the first pressing, without heat extraction. Also, keep in mind that the USDA organic label doesn't speak to the quality of the olive oil. It just guarantees that organic farming practices were followed, and the product is pesticide-free.

Since heat and light are the enemies of this Mediterranean mainstay, buy olive oil in a dark glass or tin container and store it in a cool, dark place. If not, it will rapidly lose its distinctive flavor and aroma.

This leads to the controversial topic of smoke point (the temperature at which an oil begins to smoke). For olive oil, it's supposed to be 374 to 405 degrees Fahrenheit; meaning that you should not cook with it above this temperature. The debate is whether this is relevant because the oxidative stability (resistance of the fat to heat, oxygen, and light) of EVOO is greater than with many other oils. In fact, in Mediterranean countries, this doesn't even seem to be an issue.

No matter how you pour it, using fine olive oil is definitely worth the investment – and the taste. Mangia!

Quick and Chunky Tomato Sauce (Blue Zones Kitchen by Dan Buettner)
Recipe from Sardinia, Italy

10 medium Roma tomatoes or 25 to 35 grape tomatoes, coarsely chopped
1 onion, roughly chopped
1 clove garlic, minced
3-4 basil leaves, chopped
2 tablespoons extra-virgin olive oil
Salt and pepper (optional)

In a skillet, sauté all ingredients (except salt and pepper) in olive oil until onion is not quite transparent, about 8-10 minutes. Sauce will be chunky but not broken

down all the way. Remove from heat and stir in salt and pepper to taste. Use on pasta, flatbread or as a dipping sauce.

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