

HOW TO CHOOSE THE HEALTHIEST OLIVE OIL

Nutrition | 26 comments



IS YOUR OLIVE OIL FAKE?

Olive oil is rich in polyphenols and healthy fats, but you need to know how to choose the healthiest olive oil to avoid paying more for olive oil that's been cut with other potentially unhealthy vegetable oils.

An April 2011 study by UC Davis found that **73 percent of the five best-selling imported brands** of olive oil failed to meet the standards established by European regulators, meaning it could be adulterated or blended with other vegetable oils such as soy, corn, cottonseed, or canola oil. (source) Vegetable oils are deodorized and flavorless so they don't impart a taste to the olive oil. This is bad not only from a consumer standpoint, but also from a health perspective: Vegetable oils are highly processed and inflammatory. So not only could your olive oil not be pure olive oil, it could contain undesirable, inflammatory impostors.

Olive oil has been lauded for its many health benefits, and many Americans rely on extra virgin olive oil as their main cooking and dressing oil.* Olive oil is a monounsaturated fat and high in polyphenols— antioxidants that reduce inflammation—making it cardio-protective and a powerful cancer fighter. Topically it's great for skin and an excellent moisturizer for hair.

**I do not recommend olive oil for higher heat sautéing or searing. It has a fairly low smoke point, and high heat damages the phenols. Monounsaturated fats do not hold up to high temperatures and can oxidize when exposed to high heat (over 400 degrees F). I recommend saturated fats such as coconut oil for use over 350 degrees or for pan-frying/sauteing/searing. Avocado oil also has a high smoke point.*

TYPES OF OLIVE OIL



olive oil pressing at MvEvoy Ranch
(photo courtesy of McEvoy Ranch)

- **Extra virgin** is produced by pressing or a low heat process, but it does not use chemicals or deodorants used in vegetable oil refining. Extra virgin should also be unfiltered. You may also see “**cold-pressed**” on labels, which refers to a chemical-free process using only pressure. Cold pressing produces a higher quality olive oil which is naturally lower in acidity.
- **Virgin olive oil** is pressed in a similar manner but comes from riper olives or a second pressing.
- **Pure olive oil** is typically a **blend of virgin olive oil and refined olive oil** (heat and/or chemicals are used in the process of extracting oil and removing flaws from the fruit). It's a lower quality oil.

EXTRA VIRGIN OLIVE OIL

I always use and recommend only cold pressed, unfiltered extra virgin olive oil.

We hear the most about extra virgin olive oil, which is the first pressed oil from freshly picked olives. To be a true extra virgin olive oil, the oil must be mechanically pressed or crushed, with no added heat or chemicals.

Extra virgin olive oil is considered an unrefined oil since it's not treated with chemicals or altered by temperature. There are very specific standards oil has to meet to receive the label extra virgin. Because of the way extra virgin olive oil is made, it retains more true olive taste and contains more of the natural vitamins and minerals found in olives. It contains **no more than 1% oleic acid** and typically has a golden-green color, with a distinct flavor and a light peppery finish. While you can cook with extra virgin olive oil, it does have a lower smoke point than many other oils, which means it burns at a lower temperature.

HOW TO AVOID BUYING FAKE OLIVE OILS

Smell it! You can tell a lot by the smell of olive oil. The fake brands often have a chemical or dull odor. It make not be possible to smell before you buy, but you'll soon learn the difference between good quality olive oils and the crap brands. Once you find the good stuff, stick to a trusted brand. Read labels. They can be misleading, implying the oil was produced in Italy when, in fact, it was only bottled there. See below for more tips on what to look for in a label.

THE FOLLOWING OLIVE OILS WERE FOUND TO HAVE BEEN FRAUDULENTLY LABELED AS EXTRA VIRGIN:

Whole Foods
Rachel Ray
Safeway
Newman's Own
Colavita
Bertolli
Filippo Berio
Pompeian
Star
Carapelli
Mezzetta
Mazzola

I've sampled many of the above oils and could tell immediately by the chemical smell that they weren't 100 percent pure.

HOW TO CHOOSE THE HEALTHIEST AND BEST QUALITY OLIVE OIL

High quality extra virgin olive oil can range from delicate and buttery to fragrant and fruity to grassy and peppery. Though you can't really tell quality from the color because of so much variation, it can range from deep green to golden. I personally prefer the grassy, deep green olive oils and believe those offer the greatest polyphenol benefit.



I prefer the deep green grassy olive oils.

- Look for a harvesting date or description on the label. I look for a harvest date and expiration date.
- Buy local if possible, or drop in on olive oil tastings. Here in Northern California, many shops and wineries with olive groves offer olive oil tastings so you can sample locally produced oils.

- Buy certified organic.
- Anything labeled as “light” or “pure” olive oil likely has been processed and is not virgin quality.
- Opt for California-produced oil. It’s less likely to be adulterated. Look for the estate name on the label.
- If you’re able to smell the oil before you buy, do so. It should smell fresh, fruity and grassy and not of chemical solvents.
- Shop for oil in dark bottles. Dark glass protects the oil from sunlight, which can turn it rancid and affect the quality and flavor.

THE FOLLOWING OLIVE OILS WERE FOUND TO HAVE BE ACCURATELY LABELED AS PURE EXTRA VIRGIN:

Kirkland Organic
Corto Olive
California Olive Ranch
McEvoy Ranch Organic

I most often buy McEvoy Ranch and California olive ranch brands. If I’m lucky enough to be up in wine country, I’ll go olive oil tasting and buy the most grassy olive oil I can find and use it for roasting veggies and dressing salads. McEvoy Ranch also has some awesome olive oil-based bodycare products.