

LIFE • food

Striking Oil

We step into extra virgin territory and ask four pros to rate 14 olive oils in this, our latest taste test

By DAVID GRAHAM
SPECIAL TO THE STAR

Choosing an extra virgin olive oil can be a confusing task.

There is an abundance of affordable and expensive brands in supermarkets and specialty stores. And, as this primo product's reputed health benefits (along with its classy flavour profile) grab headlines, more and more people are reaching past those other vegetable oils to find an olive oil that suits their taste. To sift through the possibilities, we organized a blind taste test of 14 extra virgin olive oils. We assembled a panel of four judges, each with an extensive knowledge of olive oil.

Extra virgin olive oil comes from olives that are simply crushed. The oil is extracted without the use of heat or chemicals. The labels on extra virgin olive oils often read "first cold pressing." The term "extra virgin" is applied to oils with less than 1 per cent acidity. If an extra virgin olive oil has a strong acidic taste, it may have been made with damaged or improperly handled olives.

Also, oil extracted from unripe olives can sometimes be very bitter. In contrast, if olives are left too long on

the trees, "they will over-ripen and oxidize as soon as they are picked, producing unpleasant oil," author Judy Ridgway writes in *The Olive Oil Companion: The Authoritative Connoisseur's Guide* (Elan Press). Lesser grades of oil such as "virgin" or "pure" are extracted using high-power machines and are often treated with heat or chemicals, making them cheaper to produce.

Most olive oils come from either Italy, Greece, Spain, France or Portugal. But even the Californians are getting in on the action, albeit in a small way.

There are about 50 varieties of olives grown around the world. Ridgway writes: "Some olives, such as the Spanish picual, are particularly suited to the production of oil. Others, like the French lucque, make better table olives. Some, like the Italian frantoio, produce a hot, peppery oil, while the Italian taggiasca gives a much softer and sweeter oil."

Extra virgin olive oils offer a variety of flavours and aromas because, like wine, they reflect the soil and climate of the region in which they are produced.

But experts agree these oils should have a fresh "green grass"



MARGARET SWAINE



FRANCO PREVEDELLO



ROBERTO MARTELLA



MICHAEL BONACINI

taste that is somewhat peppery, as well as a greenish colour.

As with any rule, however, there are exceptions.

While good olive oil should taste like fresh olives, many oils have a range of secondary fruit and vegetable flavours associated with them — flavours such as lemon, apple and tomato.

Also, it is interesting to note that

☛ Please see Top, F2

Eat Write

LYNN ROBLIN

Not all fats are created equal

We've been hearing over and over again that eating too much fat is bad for us. Indeed, a high-fat diet is linked to heart disease, some cancers, diabetes and obesity. But a low-fat diet doesn't mean a no-fat diet.

We all need some fat to provide us with energy and essential fatty acids. It also influences the flavour and texture of foods and makes it possible for us to absorb vitamins A, D, E and K.

Fats and oils should be part of a healthy diet, but the kind and amount you eat can make a difference to your health.

Meat, butter and other dairy products, hard margarine and many processed foods that are made with lard or hydrogenated vegetable, palm or coconut oils contain saturated fat. Saturated fats increase blood cholesterol levels.

Corn, safflower, sunflower, soybean, sesame and most nut oils, nuts and seeds and margarine made with these oils are high in polyunsaturated fat. Polyunsaturated fats tend to lower over-all blood cholesterol levels. Sunflower oil, corn oil and soybean oil are also good sources of linoleic acid, an essential fatty acid which our bodies don't produce.

Olive and canola oil and soft margarine made with these oils are high in monounsaturated fats. Monounsaturated fats lower LDL or "bad" cholesterol. They are increasingly being promoted as the preferred choice of oil because they seem to play a role in increasing HDL or "good" cholesterol levels.

As you can see, not all fats are equal when it comes to health. Some, like butter and coconut oil, are highly saturated. Saturated fats should be used in moderation to cut down your total intake of fat. Oils, on the other hand, are highly unsaturated and should be used more often in meal preparation.

SMALL AMOUNTS

Just because oils are more healthful doesn't mean you should eat liberal amounts. Even in small amounts, they can contribute a significant amount of fat and calories to your diet. For example, a tablespoon of vegetable oil provides 14 grams of fat and about 120 calories.

Vegetable oils contain little saturated fat, no cholesterol and good supplies of vitamin E, a powerful antioxidant. Sunflower oil is the richest source of vitamin E, followed by safflower and corn oils. Salad dressings and soft margarine made with these oils also contain vitamin E.

Sunflower, corn and safflower oils are ideal for light salad dressings and for cooking. Specialty oils such as walnut and sesame seed oil have a distinctive flavour and therefore can be used in tiny amounts — about 1 teaspoon in stir-fries, for example.

Of all oils, canola oil contains the lowest amount of saturated fat. It is very high in monounsaturated fat and contains a reasonable amount of polyunsaturated fat. Canola oil has little flavour, but is useful for frying, as it has a high smoke point. It makes an excellent all-purpose oil.

Olive oil is high in monounsaturated fat and is low in saturated and polyunsaturated fat. Olive oil has received a lot of attention recently because of its association with the healthy Mediterranean diet. People who follow a

☛ Please see Low-fat, F2

Ready for an oil change?

Results of our extra virgin olive oil taste test, with judges' comments. Prices are per 100 mL.



OIL STRIKE

Organic Extra Native Olive Oil (Greece), \$3.99: Good solid gold colour. Creamy and a little earthy. Rich to the nose. Well-balanced and integrated. Good firm texture. Herbaceous aromatics.

ESSENTIAL OILS

Lupi (Italy), \$1.19: Full, rounded flavour. Good for salads or drizzling on fish. Smooth texture. Good pepper taste. Artichoke nose. Quite green.

Ouro D'Olive (Portugal), 90 cents: Clean and fresh. Good golden colour. Slight citrus, lemon/lime taste. Mild yet full of tropical fruit taste.

Horio (Greece), 99 cents: Quite nutty. Nice aromatics. Not enough finish. Upright taste. No lingering flavour. Good, rich green colour. A little too fatty in the mouth but reasonably clear.

ORDINARY OILS

Carapelli (Italy), \$1.45: Pleasant green colour. One-dimensional. Soft rounded flavours. Lacks punch. A good all-purpose oil. Lots of straightforward olive character. Creamy. A bit fatty.

Olio (Italy), 99 cents: Aromatic, grassy, nutty, herby nose. Bitterness and pepper in finish. Tart, rich golden green colour. Creamy texture. Short in taste; flavour does not linger. A little greasy. Unbalanced.

Mar Mediterraneo (Spain), 85 cents: Very light golden colour and texture. Very soft. Mild over-all but has a bitter finish.

Morea (Greece), \$4.39: Very peppery. No freshness. Good golden green colour. Thin in taste but has late pepper aftertaste.

Bertelli (Italy), \$1.39: Good golden green colour. Some herbaceous quality. Light. Poor taste. Soft on the nose. Good everyday quality.

CRUDE OILS

Ercolo Olivario (Italy), \$9.99: Fatty. Very acidic with peppery taste. Has a long oily aftertaste. Thick. Dense. Greasy. Fruity nose. Golden colour.

Mastro (Italy), 91 cents: Oily texture. Pale golden green colour. Not much flavour or character. No nose. Pale colour. Very soft in all-round taste and flavour.

Sapori Mediterranei, Master Choice (Italy), \$1.01: Acceptable pale green colour. A little fatty. Uninteresting. Weak. Insipid. Unbalanced.

President's Choice (Italy), 99 cents: Pleasant enough colour — golden with hints of green. Oily texture. Clumsy structure. Very bitter finish. High acidity. Bitter taste. Bitter finish. Thin.

Italico (Italy), 64 cents: Tastes like old oil. Pleasant green colour. Chemical taste. Could be old or badly stored.

CATHERINE FAHNEY/TORONTO STAR



Recipes

Barley Risotto	F6
Falafel	F6
Japanese Soba Noodle Salad	F6
Mississippi Barbecued Pork	F6
Rack of Lamb with Pecan Mustard	
Crust and Mint Pesto	F3
Red Beet Risotto	F3
Thai Noodle Soup	F6
Vietnamese Chicken and Noodle	
Salad	F6

ANN LANDERS: Tactless comments about baby's birthmark bother new mother, F8

Top olive oils are liquid assets

Low-fat diet doesn't mean no-fat diet

Continued from F1

while an extra virgin olive oil should possess a pleasing appearance, colour alone is not an indication of quality.

As Ridgway explains, colour is "a very precarious way in which to judge an oil. Some oils with a strong green colour do indeed have a 'green' and punchy flavour, but others do not, and even if two oils both fall within this category, they may still taste quite different. Equally, pale yellow oils may be sweet and mild, but they can also be very peppery."

So, at some point, judging olive oil becomes subjective.

Chefs are inclined to pair their olive oil to the task at hand. The oil chosen to be drizzled over a tomato and mozzarella salad will be different from the more complex oil used to brush on swordfish before grilling. Generally speaking, strong oils will overpower the flavour of delicate foods, while weaker oils will be lost on strong dishes.

CULINARY EXPERTS

We chose an elite group of culinary experts for our tasting panel:

■ **Franco Prevedello** has had a long history on Toronto's gastronomic scene. Over the years, he has been associated with celebrated eateries such as Centro, Arqua, Splendido and Pronto. The wine importer is currently commencing construction on a five-star, 120-room hotel in downtown Toronto.

"In Europe, they will spend a lot of money on a bottle of good olive oil, which will last them for one month," Prevedello says, adding that this approach to fine olive oils is just beginning to arrive here. "There is still some education needed."

■ **Roberto Martella** owns Grano and the Erusco Café at the Royal Ontario Museum. Martella often holds private olive oil tastings in conjunction with dinner parties. For tastings, he sometimes drizzles the oil over boiled potatoes and offers guests a wedge of apple to clear their palates between samples.

■ **Veteran wine authority Margaret Swaine** is a food, wine and travel consultant for *Toronto Life*, *Chatelaine* and *Winefinders* magazines. She is also a consultant to the hospitality industry. Swaine has participated in numerous olive oil tastings throughout Spain and Italy.

"Tasting olive oil is very much like tasting wine," she says. "You look for certain characteristics: herbaceous, fruity, acidity, viscosity and certain flavour descriptors."

■ **Michael Bonacini** also participated in the judging. He and his partner Peter Oliver own the Toronto restaurants Jump, Canoe and Auberge de Pommier.

Bonacini considers himself a connoisseur of fine olive oils. His restaurants carry a wide selection. But he confesses to a weakness for robust extra virgin olive oil. "Peppery, with a deep earthy olive taste. It should be like a big burgundy. It should have gumption."

OIL ENTRIES

The oils in our taste test were chosen from four olive oil-producing countries: Italy (Lupi, Carapelli, Gallo, Bertoli, Ercole Olivario, Mastro, Master Choice Saporì Mediterraneo, President's Choice and Italcio); Spain (Mar Mediterraneo); Greece (Organic Extra Native Olive Oil, Horio and Morea); and Portugal (Ouro D'Oliva).

We tossed one ultra expensive brand and two fairly pricey brands into the mix to see how they fared against their more affordable cousins. (Read on.)



BOWLED OVER: The judges, from left, Franco Prevedello, Roberto Martella, Michael Bonacini and Margaret Swaine tackle the daunting task of rating 14 brands of extra virgin olive oil.

The brand judged tops, Organic Extra Native Olive Oil, and the most expensive brand, Ercole Olivario, were purchased at Sun Valley Fruit & Grocery on The Danforth. One brand, Lupi, was obtained at Pusateri's Fine Foods on Avenue Rd. Others came from the Dominion Save-A-Centre on College and Crawford Sts. and the Loblaw on Queen's Quay.

For the test, each judge was given 14 white bowls full of olive oil, accompanied by cubes of French bread for dipping and tasting. They were asked to rate each oil out of 10 for appearance, out of 10 for texture and out of 20 for taste — for a possible total of 40 from each judge. In the end, each extra virgin olive oil received a final total mark from all four judges out of 160.

EXTRA, EXTRA!

The one olive oil on our roster that was clearly labelled organic was the clear winner.

All four judges were effusive in their praise of Organic Extra Native Olive Oil, imported from Greece. It received the highest marks in all categories, for best texture, best appearance and best taste. It was the third most expensive on our list.

Lupi from Italy came in second. It received excellent marks in taste and appearance. It had a full flavour. But it wasn't considered to have the superior texture of the Portuguese oil Ouro D'Oliva, which took over-all third-place honours. All judges detected a fresh fruit taste to the Portuguese oil, including bananas, passion fruit and kiwi. One judge suggested the acid level was ideal. Two judges commented that Ouro D'Oliva was unusual tast-

ing, but still felt it was superior — "stylistically very different but tasty."

Horio from Greece came in fourth. Again, the judges were consistent in their marks and remarks, noting it had a nice herbaceous, fresh green olive taste. But three judges felt there was no lingering taste and actually commented that the oil seemed "short."

Carapelli from Italy was fifth. It was felt to have a straightforward olive taste that was pleasantly herbaceous to the nose. One judge considered it to be a good, all-purpose olive oil. Another judge said it was dull and one-dimensional.

The Italian oil Gallo was sixth. According to one judge, it had a flavourful hint of bitterness and a peppery finish. Another commented it was low in acid. But three judges criticized the oil for having a bitter aftertaste.

The Spanish Mar Mediterraneo was seventh. It was light in appearance and texture. The golden colour was considered a little flat.

The Greek product Morea was the second most expensive on our list, but rated eighth. It had a silky texture and a deep golden green colour.

Italy's Bertoli was ninth. It was fairly mild over-all, with a silky texture.

Ercole Olivario from Italy, despite the fact that it is by far the most expensive on our list, came in 10th. It was considered thin and judges detected a higher than average acid taste.

As our list shows, there is a very wide range of prices for extra virgin olive oils. Part of the reason is that some are mass-produced, thus taking advantage of economies of scale, while others come from small estate

producers. The latter tend to have more ideal growing, harvesting and production conditions but higher prices. So, is price a guide to selection? Not always — as our taste test proves.

Italy's Mastro was 11th over-all. Even though the judges were instructed not to confer, it is amazing how consistent their marks were throughout the test. Mastro was, across the board, 11th in texture and appearance, and 12th in taste. It was considered "watery."

PROPER STORAGE

Three other Italian brands, Saporì Mediterraneo (the Master Choice label), President's Choice and Italcio were 12th, 13th and 14th respectively.

The Master Choice brand was considered thin and uninteresting.

The President's Choice brand was considered bitter and thin.

And the Italcio brand was deemed by all four judges to have a stale taste and aroma.

Proper storage is important. Good olive oils are often sold in dark-coloured glass bottles because they are sensitive to light. At home, olive oil should be stored in an airtight container in a dry cupboard away from extremes of heat and light. Stored this way, it will keep for up to two years.

Continued from F1

traditional Mediterranean diet that is low in saturated fat yet high in fat from olive oil tend to have a low incidence of heart disease.

Olive oil contains vitamin E, antioxidants and other substances, which may contribute to its apparent healthfulness. However, olive oil is not the single magic bullet to a healthful diet. The Mediterranean diet includes plenty of whole grains, fresh fruit and vegetables, legumes and only small amounts of meat and dairy products.

Olive oil comes in many flavours and can be used for high heat cooking, as well as for salad dressing, seasoning and drizzling on foods for flavour. Extra virgin olive oil is usually more expensive, but contains more antioxidants and flavour than regular olive oil.

Here are a few tips about oils:

■ Don't add more fat to your diet, but do substitute monounsaturated and polyunsaturated fats for those you now use.

■ Read labels and avoid products containing coconut or palm kernel oils and hydrogenated oils, since hydrogenation makes fats even more saturated.

■ Keep oil in a cool, dark place when you are not using it. Light and heat speed up degeneration. You can keep oil in the fridge, but it will go cloudy. Leaving oil at room temperature for a little while will clear it up.

■ Use oils such as canola oil in recipes that call for melted hard fats such as butter, lard or brick margarine. (Use 3½ tablespoons of oil instead of ½ cup of fat.) Substituting oil does modify texture, usually making food softer and moister.

■ Heat cooking oil before adding food so food won't sit in the oil for too long and absorb more of it.

■ When stir-frying, use only a few teaspoons of oil or less if you have a non-stick pan.

■ Instead of greasing a pan or adding fat to your frying pan, use a vegetable oil spray such as Pam.

■ Make your own salad dressings, using olive, canola, sunflower or safflower oil along with vinegar or lemon juice. Add fresh garlic, dried herbs and a dash of your favourite mustard.

■ Avoid overheating oils and repeated use of oils for frying food.

Lynn Robin is a registered dietitian and nutrition consultant.