

OLIVE OILS

Delicate & Mild

such as Olio Santo & Il Boschetto

Subtle quality. Combine with delicately flavored foods such as tender new lettuces, fresh peas or mild cheese.

Fruity & Fragrant

such as Lungarotti

Oils with “personality.” Can be fruity like apples or fragrant like green leafy vegetables. Good for pasta, salads, and drizzling over fruit or mild meats like chicken.

Olive-y & Peppery

such as Williams-Sonoma House Oil

Olive fruity taste and aroma; can catch your throat with a peppery finish. Pair with breads and whole grains such as barley, use as a vegetable dip, or drizzle over meats and full-flavored pasta sauces.

Leafy Green & Grassy

such as Ravida

Strongest oils, immediately appealing. Often pungent, with a distinct herbal note, green in taste and sometimes color. Use on bruschetta, on its own over pasta, in strong salads like spinach and arugula, or drizzled over bean soups as a garnish.

How Are Olives Harvested?

Fruit is either picked from the trees (by hand or mechanically), or the olives are allowed to fall to the ground. To collect the olives on the ground, mats are spread underneath the trees early in the season.

Once olives are harvested, they are taken to be pressed. There are many different types of presses, including some using centuries'-old techniques of grinding between stones, while other producers use modern centrifugal machines to crush the fruit.

The oil is collected during the pressing. The next steps also vary by producer.

- Some producers filter the oil to remove any sediment and olive particles. This creates a very clear olive oil, but sometimes can lack flavor and complexity.
- Other producers simply bottle the “free-run” juice, including any sediment and olive particles.
- Other producers send their oils to be refined. This can be done either by heating the oil or using a chemical process. Oil that has been refined is not considered extra-virgin olive oil. Often these oils will be labeled as “fine,” “pure” or “pomace.”

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WILLIAMS-SONOMA

Technique Class: Discover Liquid Gold— Olive Oil

Olive oil is the culinary cornerstone of the Mediterranean and an essential and healthful ingredient for cooks around the world. The number of olive oils available to the home cook, coupled with their varied origins, flavors and styles, can be both exhilarating and overwhelming.

Every olive oil has a personality. Olives are grown all over the world, but the major producers are Spain, Italy, Greece and France. California’s production is increasing every year. The oil’s country of origin, olive variety, climate, cultivation, and harvesting and pressing techniques determine the oil’s flavor and color. As with wine grapes, the soil in which the olives are grown also influences the character of the oil.

What Is Extra-Virgin Olive Oil?

There are three grades of olive oil primarily used for human consumption: extra virgin, virgin and olive oil. The best oil is extra virgin, which means it has an acidity of less than 1 percent. The olives are pressed within 24 hours of harvesting. Because these oils are never exposed to heat or chemicals during their pressing, their distinctive colors, flavors and textures come to the fore. Extra-virgin olive oils deserve to be showcased. Their flavors shine in vinaigrettes, sauces and quick sautés.

Early-harvest extra-virgin olive oils are more pungently flavored because they are produced from the fruit of the first days of harvest. By spending just a few more days on the branch, olives ripen to a mellower flavor. Some extra-virgin olive oils are unfiltered and bottled with some solids remaining in the oil. These oils are usually quite flavorful and have a round, full texture.

To be considered an extra-virgin olive oil, the oil must first pass certain tests to be certified extra virgin. There are several boards that certify EVOOs. The two that are predominant as credible resources include the International Olive Oil Council (IOOC) and the California Olive Oil Council (COOC). Other councils also certify oils in Germany and Australia. To receive certification by the IOOC or any of the other boards, the extra-virgin oil is presented and judged by a panel of experts for taste, mouthfeel and aroma.

Williams-Sonoma oils are all certified by either the IOOC or the COOC. In addition, at the end of last year, we began independently testing oils every six months.

Virgin olive oil, with its higher acidity, may have a less distinctive, more bland flavor.

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Cooking with Olive Oil

A cornerstone of Mediterranean cuisine for centuries, olive oil imbues even the simplest dishes with distinctive character. It's ideal for cooking and marinating, and can be drizzled over meats, seafood and vegetables just before serving to impart an extra burst of flavor. Generally speaking, more pungent oils enhance more robust foods, while delicate oils complement mild foods.

The purpose of an extra-virgin olive oil is to enhance the flavor of the food with which it is paired, whether cooked or not. While some of the subtle qualities of an extra-virgin olive may be lost to the heat of cooking, the positive flavor notes and enriching character remain, so drizzle liberally!

Olive oil can also be called pure or pomace and is either chemically refined or refined through heat treating. It may or may not be mixed with extra-virgin or virgin oil. Sometimes this oil is labeled “light,” a designation of insignificant flavor, not of reduced calories.

Courtesy of Williams-Sonoma Food Team

What Do First Pressing and Cold Pressing Mean?

These terms are interchangeable and were used in the past when initial pressure applied by hand-powered presses produced only a limited amount of olive oil from the olive paste. The best olive oils are still cold-pressed, a chemical-free process that requires only pressure to extract the oil. To extract more oil, hot water was applied to the olive paste to improve the flow of oil; that is how the terms cold pressing and first pressing came about.

Today, some producers use these terms on their labeling to reaffirm that extra-virgin olive oil is an unrefined, natural product that has undergone very little processing and will retain its nutritive value.

Blend or Single Variety?

Most olive oils are blends of different varieties of olive oil. Blending creates more interesting flavor profiles and helps to stabilize the oil. Some oils, whether blended or a single variety, are estate bottled, which means the olives are grown, pressed and bottled on a single property.

Buying and Storing Olive Oil

Buying oil in small sizes, or splitting larger bottles with friends, is a practical way to buy expensive oils. If purchasing oil in bulk, always pour it into smaller containers, preferably a can or a dark-colored bottle. Tinted glass, porcelain or stainless steel are the best materials for containers; never store oils in plastic or reactive metals. Stay away from plastic containers, as the oil can absorb PVCs.

Air, heat and light will cause olive oil to turn rancid, the flavor that is imparted in an oil after it has undergone the process of oxidation. Since prolonged contact with oxygen causes oxidation, rancidity is a common defect, so store oil in an airtight container in a cool place, ideally at a temperature of 57°F. If you have a wine cellar, store your olive oils there and keep a small amount in the kitchen. Store olive oil in a container with a tight cap, and always replace the cap after each use.

When oil is chilled or during cold weather, it may turn cloudy and even solidify. The oil will clear again as it warms, so cloudiness doesn't necessarily indicate the oil is past its prime. Olive oil can be refrigerated, although doing so will cause it to congeal and turn cloudy; this should not affect the flavor. The oil will return to its original liquid state when warmed to room temperature.

How to Taste Olive Oil

There are four characteristics to consider when tasting olive oils.

Characteristic	Technique	Common Words Used to Describe These Characteristics
COLOR	Hold the glass up to the light or place a sheet of white paper behind the cup to highlight the color of the oil.	Greenish, golden, pale yellow
AROMA	Swirl the oil and smell the aroma.	Fruity, fresh, apple, flowery, flat
FLAVOR	Take a sip. Roll the olive oil around in your mouth. Suck in air through your teeth so the flavor is distributed.	Olivey, mild, bitter, fruity, grassy, rich, delicate, peppery, green, intense, sweet, spicy
TEXTURE	Coat the roof of your mouth with the oil, then swallow slowly.	Thin, thick, unfiltered, oily Also note the finish: short, long, full, peppery

Fried Artichokes with Lemon

Fill a large bowl three-fourths full with cold water. Cut 1 lemon in half and squeeze the juice of both halves into the water. Working with 1 artichoke at a time, cut off the top ½ to ¾ inch of the leaves with a paring knife to remove the prickly tips. Pull off all the tough, dark green outer leaves until you reach the tender, pale inner leaves. Cut a thin slice off the base of the stem, then peel off the tough, dark outer flesh around the base of the leaves and along the length of the stem, leaving the stem attached. Cut the artichoke in half or quarters lengthwise, and then cut out the fuzzy choke, if any, at the base of the leaves. Drop the wedges into the lemon water. Repeat with the remaining artichokes. Let stand for about 10 minutes.

Drain the artichokes and pat dry on paper towels. In a shallow bowl, beat together the eggs and cheese until blended, and season with salt and pepper. Spread the bread crumbs on a plate. One at a time, dip the artichoke pieces into the egg mixture, and then roll them in the bread crumbs. As the pieces are coated, place them on a wire rack. When all the pieces are coated, let them dry for 15 minutes.

Position a rack in the middle of an oven and preheat to 200°F. Pour the olive oil to a depth of 1 inch into a deep, heavy fry pan and heat to 375°F on a deep-frying thermometer. Line a baking sheet with paper towels and set it next to the stove.

When the oil is ready, add a few artichoke pieces, being careful not to crowd the pan. Fry the pieces, turning them once or twice, until they are golden brown, about 4 minutes. Using a slotted spoon, transfer the artichokes to the prepared baking sheet and place it in the oven to keep warm. Fry the remaining artichoke pieces in the same way, allowing the oil to return to the original frying temperature before adding the next batch.

Cut the remaining lemon into wedges. Arrange the artichokes on a platter, sprinkle with additional salt and pepper and serve immediately with the lemon wedges. Serves 4 to 6.

Adapted from Williams-Sonoma *Essentials of Italian*, by Michele Scicolone (Oxmoor House, 2007).

Ingredients for Fried Artichokes with Lemon

2 lemons

12 baby artichokes with stems

3 eggs

¼ cup grated pecorino romano cheese

Sea salt and freshly ground pepper, to taste

2 cups plain fine dried bread crumbs

Olive oil for frying