

LOCAL FLAVOR

A guide to California olive oil

BY JENNY ROUGH



A dusty tree-lined path enveloped by a canopy of gnarled branches with silvery leaves and dangling green fruit may evoke poetic settings of a rustic Tuscan olive grove—or it could easily be a scene in Paso Robles, Temecula, or Ojai.

Cultivation of olive trees in California first took place in the mid-1700s at the Mission San Diego de Alcalá, where they thrived in the area's soil conditions and moderate climate. Today, more than 500 olive growers in the state—including about 30 in the Southland—account for 99 percent of olive oils produced in the U.S., according to the California Olive Oil Council (COOC), a trade group that implements strict standards for olive oil testing and certification (look for its label when purchasing olive oil).

There is essentially no difference between California- and Mediterranean-grown olives (many of our local varieties trace their roots to the Mediterranean basin). So whether you buy imported or local, here's what to look for in your next bottle of liquid gold.

PURITY Think the olive oil sitting in your cupboard is actually olive oil? There's a good chance it isn't. A study from the University of California, Davis, showed that 73 percent of the five top-selling imported brands of olive oil had been mislabeled or adulterated. Much was a mixture of olive and safflower oil, or olive and refined peanut oil. According to the COOC, true olive oil must be undiluted, and to be considered extra virgin, the oils must have no sensory defects (such as rancidity), offer some fruity flavor and aroma, and meet specific chemistry-based criteria. "If you open a bottle, and it doesn't smell fresh or it smells sour, you'll know it's an inferior product," says Laurent Halasz, founder of Fig & Olive, a New York City restaurant with locations nationwide, including in L.A. and Newport Beach.

TASTE "Olive oil is wonderful in the mouth," Halasz says. Olive oil might taste light and sweet; it might taste peppery; it might taste grassy. "Never be intimidated or impressed that olive oil comes from an old estate in Italy or an amazing estate in California," he says. Trust your own palate. "Olives are a fruit, so there needs to be some body to it—it should not be flat, bland, or rancid." The more bitter the taste, the more likely the olive oil is high in polyphenols, antioxidant-rich compounds that may help reduce cholesterol levels.

FRESHNESS Olive oil spoils quickly, even if the bottle hasn't been opened. Look for a harvest date on the bottle. Olive oil should be consumed within 18 months to two years of when the olives were milled. Store olive oil in a cool, dark place, such as a pantry, away from heat and light. It keeps best at a stable room temperature, so avoid storing it in the refrigerator. Ideally, olive oil should be contained in dark glass bottles or a fustis (stainless steel container) to prevent rapid deterioration.

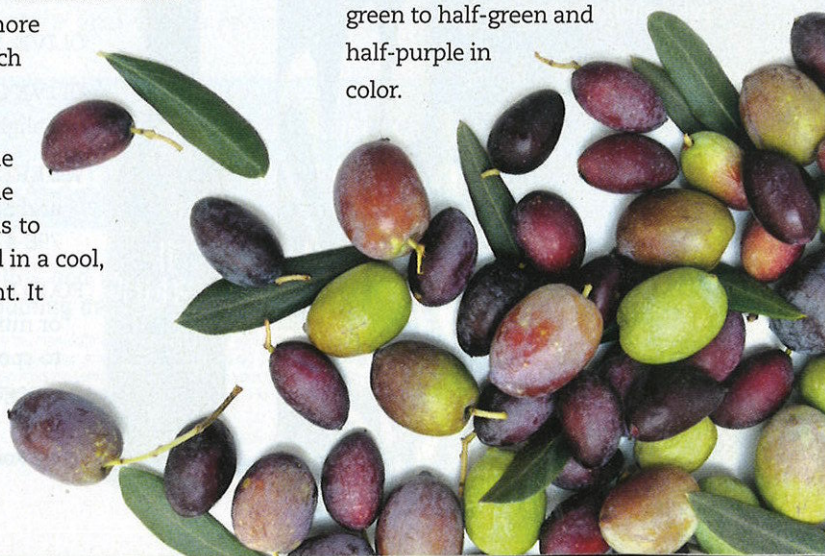
WHAT'S THE DIFFERENCE?

EXTRA-VIRGIN OLIVE OIL: The purest form of olive oil derived from the first pressing of the olives. These cold-pressed olives contain less than 1 percent acid.

VIRGIN OLIVE OIL: A lower grade of oil that's cold-pressed from slightly more mature olives with higher acidity (between 1 and 3 percent).

COLOR CODE

There is no such thing as "green" and "black" olives per se. Rather, all olives start out **GREEN**, and then turn **RED**, then **PURPLE**, then eventually **BLACK-PURPLE** if left on the tree. Olives for oil are almost always picked early- to mid-maturity while they are still green to half-green and half-purple in color.



EVENTS

Los Olivos Jazz & Olive Festival, Los Olivos

June 6—Listen to live jazz, sip wines from local vintners, watch cooking demonstrations, and sample olive-themed dishes prepared by 30 local chefs at this popular festival in the Santa Ynez Valley. (805) 325-9280; jazzandolivefestival.org.

Paso Robles Olive Festival, Paso Robles

August 15—Olive oil and olive product sampling, olive oil tasting, olive cooking contest, food booths, wine and beer tasting, and free olive oil ice cream. Downtown City Park. (805) 238-4103; pasoolivefestival.com.

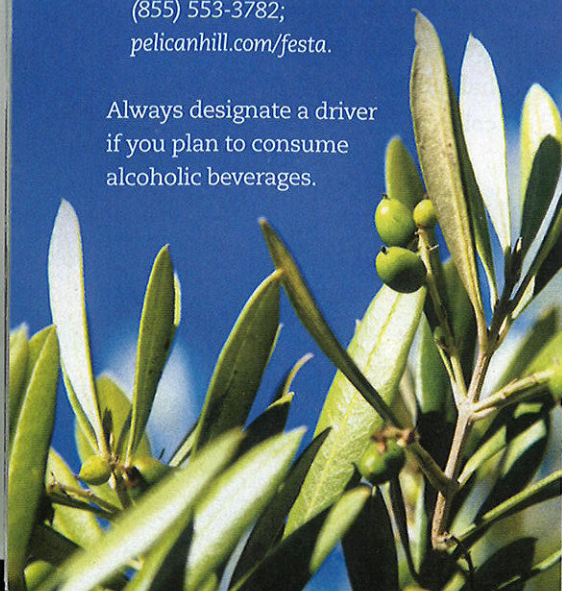
Los Angeles County Fair, Pomona

September 4-27—At the L.A. County Fair, attendees can taste and purchase gold medal winners of the biannual Los Angeles International Extra Virgin Olive Oil Competition. lacountyfair.com.

Festa dell'Autunno, Newport Beach

October 2015—Each year, The Resort at Pelican Hill hosts a three-day harvest celebration with cooking demonstrations, live entertainment, wine tasting, an Italian street festival, and a children's carnival. (855) 553-3782; pelicanhill.com/festa.

Always designate a driver if you plan to consume alcoholic beverages.



TYPES OF OLIVES

More than 50 varieties of the olive trees in Southern California originally came from the Mediterranean basin. Here's a sampling of what's readily available in SoCal.



GREECE: KORONEIKI

OLIVE: Small, oval-shaped with a distinct pointed end; sensitive to cold climates.

OLIVE OIL: Macedonian fruit and apple notes with a peppery zing; high in polyphenols.

WHERE TO BUY: San Felipe Olive Company in Yucaipa, (909) 260-2288; sanfelipeoliveco.com. The Temecula-based California Olive carries a Koroneiki/Arbequina olive oil blend, available at various retail stores and farmers markets, (951) 795-5493; thecaliforniaolive.com.

FOOD PAIRINGS: Drizzle over a salad of wild rocket (arugula) and ripe tomatoes.

PUGLIA REGION OF ITALY: CORATINA

OLIVE: Medium-size, egg-shaped; ripens faster than olives from Tuscan region.

OLIVE OIL: Fruity and mildly grassy with a peppery aftertaste.

WHERE TO BUY: Alta Cresta Olive Orchard in Paso Robles, (805) 227-4751; altacresta.com. Available for purchase at numerous retail stores and farmers markets, including J&R Natural Meat and Sausage, 1121 Rossi Road, Templeton, (805) 434-5050; the Morro Bay Saturday Market in Morro Bay; and the Paso Robles Tuesday Farmers Market in Paso Robles.

FOOD PAIRINGS: Drizzle on boiled shrimp, on corn on the cob, or on bruschetta with garlic and tomatoes.



SPAIN: ARBEQUINA

OLIVE: Small, symmetrical shape; ripens early.

OLIVE OIL: Buttery, fruity aroma, and very mild in flavor with a slight peppery finish.

WHERE TO BUY: Il Fustino in Santa Barbara, 3401 State Street; and Santa Barbara Public Market, 38 W. Victoria Street; (888) 798-4740; ilfustino.com. Available for online purchase.

FOOD PAIRINGS: Use in mashed potatoes instead of butter, or mix with garlic, capers, anchovies, salt, pepper, and basil to spoon onto French bread. Or simply mix with balsamic vinegar and dip your favorite bread in it.

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Jenny Rough is a freelance writer based in Alexandria, Virginia.