



...Olive oil

Origins

Olive oil has been around for a long time. It is first recorded in writings scratched onto pottery in ancient Crete over 4,500 years ago. The Greeks were the first to recognise the medicinal benefits of olive oil, which we now know include cholesterol-busting qualities, and the Phoenicians added to its wonder-product status by realising that it could be used to provide lighting as a fuel in oil lamps. Records tell us that olive oil was first exported from Greece in 500BC and it makes several appearances in the Bible, still being used today in the Roman Catholic church for baptisms and the last rites – a food for use from cradle to grave.

From chemist to deli

Twenty-five years ago you were more likely to find olive oil in your local pharmacy than a food shop. A few specialist Italian stores may have stocked it, and even the odd high-end wine merchant (who might just have been doing a favour for wine-making chums) but now it's one of the most important product categories in any fine food shop.

What is it?

All olive oil is made by pressing ripe olives. These days most oil is produced not on the farm but in



large mills operated by local farmer-owned co-operatives.

The olives go to the mill for pressing as soon as possible after picking to avoid fermentation and exposure to the air, both of which will be detrimental to quality.

Hot stuff

Most olive oil today is extracted in industrial-scale mechanical systems. The olives are crushed between stainless steel grindstones to make a paste, and then the oil is separated in a centrifuge, in a similar way to making cream. Artisan oils tend to be cold pressed, which means no heat or chemicals are used during pressing. They are sometimes filtered to improve clarity.

Olive oil, virgin, extra virgin...

The designation of different olive oils is highly regulated. All olive oils are graded on their acidity and specifically the amount of oleic acid they contain. Generally the lower the acidity, the better and more expensive the oil. Oil made from the first pressing of fresh olives is known as 'virgin olive oil'. The best oil, with the lowest acidity levels, is classified as 'extra virgin'. Mass-market 'olive oil' is a blend of virgin oil with cheaper refined oil. The EU controls the regulations – see Useful Contacts for more information.

SELECTING THE RANGES

- **Price points** – Cheaper, more commercial olive oil should not be disregarded. Include them in your range as an everyday culinary option. The more expensive, often estate-bottled extra virgin oils are there for dressings, dipping and also the gift market – especially those with premium packaging or labelling. For the more-price conscious shopper, bulk tins and loose oil dispensed from a 'fill-your-own' system can also be attractive.
- **Countries of origin** – There are good and bad oils from most major olive oil producing countries. Consumers seem to believe that Italian oil is best, Greek is for everyday use, Spain somewhere in

between and France is a minority producer. There are, of course, exceptions to all these rules, and you can generate interest and sales by finding oils from unexpected sources that challenge shopper perceptions.

- **Be different** – It's good to stock something unusual. As in wine, the New World is making a challenge. Oils from the southern hemisphere are fresher when they arrive in August-September than those from the northern hemisphere, which appear in the New Year – a point your shoppers may be unaware of. Although olive oil has been made for thousands of years, those from North Africa and the Middle East are relatively new to the UK and some makers are delivering quality oils.
- **Tasting styles** – Your range should

accommodate different tastes. Look for light and delicate, sweet and fruity, and the more robust and spiky. Lean on your supplier to give your tasting notes and get them in to do some sampling – olive oil is an ideal product to have on the counter while customers queue. Suppliers can also provide tutored tastings for you, your staff and ideally your customers too.

- **Watch-outs** – Make sure you are buying fresh oil – understand when the new oils are released from different corners of the globe. Be careful with flavoured oils – strong and artificial flavours are sometimes added to poor quality oil to mask its lesser pedigree. Lemon oil is a classic example; for the genuine article look for fresh lemons pressed with estate grown olives.

USEFUL CONTACTS

The Oil Merchant

www.oilmerchant.co.uk

Olives et al

<http://trade.olivesetal.co.uk>
(Visit the Olive Expert section – good for EU olive oil classification)

Terra Rossa Jordan

www.terra-rossa.com

El Olivo Olive Oil

Company
www.elolivo-olive-oil.com

Silver&Green

www.silverandgreen.com

Odysea

www.odyssea.com

Ferranti Olive Oils

www.ferrantioliveoil.com

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