

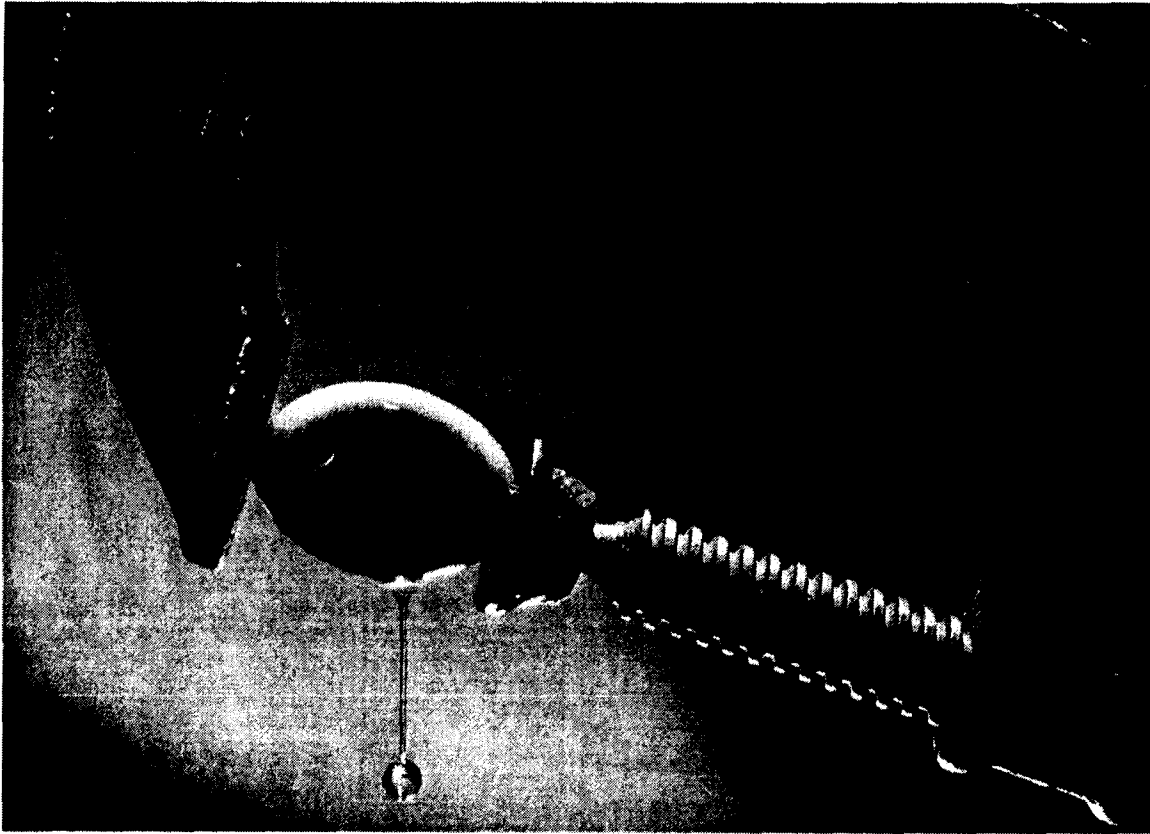


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LIFE AND ARTS

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CUISINE



Many factors determine the flavor of an olive oil: the type of olive and its growing conditions, the harvesting and pressing methods, and the blend.

TREATED LIKE A FINE WINE, THE BEST FROM THE OLIVE MAKES A WORLD OF DIFFERENCE

Impressive oil

BY HSIAO-CHING CHOU
P-I food writer

For many of us, good olive oil is a revelation. That these oils can display a range of viscosity and fruitiness, with a hint of artichoke or almond, and finish with a peppery tingle is a stunning discovery. Collectively, our state of oil sense hovers at the jug-wine stage.

We know to buy "extra virgin" and we know that if it has an Italian name, it's probably good. We're familiar with Bertolli and Colavita because that's what the stores sell and six bucks for a pint of oil — even if it's green gold — is about what we're comfortable spending.

We can do better.

It's time to graduate from the Bertollis and Colavitas — which

aren't even pure Italian. Read the fine print. Less expensive olive oils usually are United Nations blends of products from Italy, Spain, Greece and North Africa.

And stay away from "light" olive oils because there's no such thing. "Light" means it has been blended with a vegetable oil.

Give olive oil the same regard you would for your coffee beans or wine. Generally, the best oils are estate-bottled, which means the olives come from one estate and the producer can maintain a standard of quality.

While Italy produces some exceptional oils, it hasn't cornered the market. Spain, France, Greece, Croatia, Israel and Morocco also produce notable oils.

SEE OIL, D3



INSIDE

A guide to olive oils. SEE D3

Food is a metaphor for France," writer Marc Senibum tells P-I columnist Hsiao-Ching Chou. od is the table, the traditions, the care making meal, the growing, preparing...enjoying, talking out, thinking about doing it again." SEE D4

OIL: Savoring the best in recipes for sea bass, sweets and soup

FROM D1

Some oils may be filtered to improve clarity. These usually are packaged in clear bottles. But purists believe filtering detracts from the flavor, and clear bottles aren't ideal because light and heat are harmful.

Be ready to spend at least \$13 to \$25 for a premium olive oil. Higher-end oils can cost \$40 to \$50.

"I buy good olive oil because it's the simplest condiment," says Jeff Bergman, vice president for product purchasing and education at Chefshop.com in Seattle. "It's something you can take away from the bottle and easily give life and dimension to simple foods."

Bergman, a connoisseur who keeps at least a dozen brands of premium oils in his cupboard, says personal taste is the most important factor in choosing an oil.

The flavor of an oil is determined by the type of olive and its growing conditions, the harvesting and pressing methods, and the blend. The best way to decide which oil to buy is to taste a diverse selection side by side.

The Spanish Antarra olive oil, for example, tastes of wild herbs and green wood, and has a butterlike mouth feel.

"The Castelas (French) oil makes me think of a ripe bowl of fruit," Bergman says. "The French varieties have a lot of complexities. If you want to re-create the flavors of that region you have to use oil from there."

"The Castelas would make a great aioli."

The cooking in Italy changes with the style of oil, Bergman adds. In Tuscany, the oils show green, fruity, peppery, artichoke flavors, so the cooking reflects that. In southern Italy, the oils come from black-purple olives, which means they're more mature and yield a heavier, riper-tasting oil.

Mustapha Haddouch, owner of Haddouch Gourmet Imports in Seattle, presses oil from picholine olives in Morocco. He imports the oil under the Mustafa's Moroccan Olive Oil label.

"I wanted to make an olive oil that would compare with all the estate-bottled oils from Spain and Italy. People don't know we have olive trees in Morocco," Haddouch says.

Similar to European estate producers, Haddouch uses olives that are handpicked, which minimizes the bruising that causes unwanted oxidation and fermentation. The more pristine the fruit, the better the quality of oil.

Haddouch requires that the machine used to press his oil is washed every 12 hours, which also helps guarantee the freshness of the oil.

In the next month, look for the new oils from the 2000 harvest.

"In Morocco, that's when every family buys olive oil for the year," Haddouch says.

OLIVE OIL TASTE TEST

We formed a panel of seven P-I staffers of varying palates to taste nine olive oils. We included a common brand found in grocery stores for perspective.

The three that our panel liked the most were Nunez de Prado, Nicolas Alziari and Mustafa's Moroccan Olive Oil.

Brand	Cost	Size	Flavor profile	Availability
Bertolli	\$6.39	17 oz.	Plasticky, bitter, greasy, not much olive flavor	Most grocery stores
Lucini, estate bottled (Italy)	\$11.99	17 oz.	More refined than Bertolli, grassy, subtle olive flavor	Most grocery stores
Mustafa's Moroccan Olive Oil	\$14	12.75 oz.	Fruity, slightly nutty, sweet grass, good mouthfeel	Better grocery and specialty stores
Olivier & Co. Agrolaguna (Croatia)	\$18	16.8 oz.	Buttery, creamy, ripe, coats mouth	Olivier & Co.; 877-828-6620
Olivier & Co. Monte della Torre (Italy)	\$18	16.8 oz.	Grassy, slow peppery finish	Olivier & Co.; 877-828-6620
Cappezana, estate bottled (Italy)	\$25.95	16.9 oz.	Fruity, grassy, peppery bitter-greens finish	Better grocery and specialty shops
Castelas, estate bottled (France)	\$41.69	17 oz.	Mild, slightly peppery, long finish, ripe fruit	Chefshop.com
Nicolas Alziari, estate bottled (France)	\$40	1 liter	Pleasant olive flavor, creamy, delicious	Chefshop.com (coming soon)
Nunez de Prado, estate bottled (Spain)	\$26.99	17 oz.	Sweet, fruity, creamy, clean olive taste	Chefshop.com