

Home of
**AMERICA'S
TEST KITCHEN**
As Seen on Public Television!

NUMBER NINETY-THREE

AUGUST 2008

COOK'S

I L L U S T R A T E D



Grilled Chicken
Secrets

No More Flabby, Charred Skin

Summer
Vegetable Gratin

Authentic
Drive-In Burgers
Big Beef Flavor, Crisp Crust

Supermarket Olive
Oil Tasting
Losers Outnumber Winners!

Best Blueberry Pie
Grated Apple for Thickener?

Keeping Produce
Fresher Longer



Enchiladas Verdes
Grilled Sausages with Onions
Cherry Tomato Salads
Foolproof Peach Shortcakes

www.cooksillustrated.com

\$5.95 U.S./\$6.95 CANADA



The Problem with Supermarket Olive Oils

You get what you pay for with most supermarket extra-virgin olive oils: bland, bottom-of-the-barrel, and boring. Is there a brand worth buying?

BY LISA McMANUS

When you set out to buy superior extra-virgin olive oil at the supermarket, good luck. Rows of bottles fill the shelves, with even the most ordinary of grocery stores offering more than a dozen choices. It's a booming business: The United States imported 261,000 metric tons of extra-virgin olive oil last year, up from 163,000 metric tons a decade ago. But given the cost—an average of \$18.99 per liter for the oils in our lineup—should you just grab the cheapest or try for something better from a gourmet shop or online seller?

To find out if there were any extra-virgin olive oils truly worth bringing home from the supermarket, we chose 10 of the top-selling brands and conducted a blind tasting—first plain, and then warmed and tossed with pasta. (Because high heat destroys the distinctive, fruity taste of extra-virgin olive oil, we reserve it for mixing into pasta dishes and vinaigrettes or drizzling on grilled steak and vegetables; for cooking, we turn to cheaper, lower-grade olive oil.)

Here's the not-so-great news: Our highest average scores barely reached 5 out of a possible 10 points. While a few supermarket oils passed muster, most ranged from plain Jane to distinctly unpleasant, even tasting a bit old, though all were purchased only a few days before we tasted them.

Top of the Line

Extra-virgin is the highest grade of olive oil. At its best, it's simply fresh olive juice, extracted from any of hundreds of olive varieties that were picked at the grower's desired level of ripeness and pressed as soon as possible. (In general, an earlier harvest yields greener, more peppery oil; oil from a later harvest is more golden and mild.) To be designated "extra-virgin," the oil should meet certain standards set by the International Olive Council (IOC) in Madrid. It must be pressed—or, more commonly today, spun out using a centrifuge—without using heat or chemicals, which can extract more oil from the olives, but at the cost of flavor and quality. It must have less than 0.8 percent oleic acid, a measure of quality based on the level of free fatty acids, a product of deterioration. Finally, it can have absolutely no chemical or flavor defects, as

determined by both laboratory tests and tasting experts. If an oil doesn't make it as extra-virgin, it can be classified, in descending order, as virgin, pure, or lampante olive oil, the last of which is fit only for industrial use.

While these stringent olive oil standards sound good, it's important to note: They don't apply in the U.S. This country has never adopted the IOC standards, instead holding to unrelated grades of "fancy," "choice," "standard," and "substandard."

Mix and Match

By now it's common knowledge that while the majority of mass-market olive oil manufacturers have Italian-sounding names, most do not sell Italian oils—Italy alone can't supply enough olives to meet demand. Italian companies buy olive oil from all over the Mediterranean, including relatively cheap sources such as Turkey and Tunisia, then ship it in-country for bottling and sell it as a "product of Italy." (All the brands we tasted, however, do specify the countries of origin on the label, a recent development.) At each company, experts blend these various oils to match the brand's characteristic flavor profile.

After our tasting, we had to wonder if the majority of olive oil destined for the American market isn't intentionally blended to be bland. (A number of experts we spoke to said yes, many European producers assume Americans want their olive oil to be as neutral as vegetable oil.) Worse, we wondered whether some of the oils that arrive here labeled "extra-virgin" are even extra-virgin at all.

Standard Oil

Having read reports of the fraudulent adulteration of mass-market olive oils with cheaper oils such as soybean or hazelnut, we sent our samples to an independent laboratory for analysis. All were confirmed to be made only from olives. But in the absence of any regulatory standards in the U.S., that's all we were able to confirm. Companies importing olive oil are free to label their products "extra-virgin"—even if the same oils wouldn't qualify for that appellation in Europe, as many impassioned olive oil advocates believe is the case. Nancy Loseke, editor of *Fresh Press*, a newsletter devoted

to olive oil, put it bluntly: "Americans mostly shop the world's olive oil dregs, the low-rung stuff."

Organizations such as the North American Olive Oil Association (NAOOA), which represents the interest of olive-oil importers (including six out of the 10 we tasted), claim to provide oversight the government does not. According to president Bob Bauer, the NAOOA independently buys and tests the oils of member companies at a European laboratory with IOC certification, and he asserts that NAOOA members meet international standards. But in our own tasting, these assurances meant little. None of the top three oils in our lineup were members. Furthermore, the NAOOA currently performs a chemical analysis but does not test for flavor defects that are an equally important "sensory" part of the IOC standards.

And what about those flavor defects our tasters identified so readily? These included soapy, metallic, or chemical notes; dirty, rotten, or medicinal aspects; even "kitty litter" smells. According to Alexandra Devarenne, a California-based olive oil consultant trained in sensory evaluation of olive oil according to IOC standards, many of these flaws are due to delays between harvesting and pressing olives. In countries where abundant varieties of olives can't be harvested quickly enough before they become overripe, fall off the trees, and begin to rot, such flavor defects are common. Poor sanitary conditions on the processing machinery may also contribute to off-flavors.

In addition, the oil can sometimes be a victim of poor storage. Olive oil has a shelf life of 12 to 18 months, but supermarkets frequently do not rotate their supply of olive oil accordingly. And while high-end oils usually indicate the harvest year, most mass-market brands do not, and lack sell-by dates on their labels; less than half our lineup had them. Oils that are beginning to break down have a "greasy" rather than rich texture—a flaw our tasters noted several times.

Pressing Choice

Despite all we didn't like about most of the olive oils in our tasting, we did find two acceptable products. Perhaps not surprisingly, origin did make a difference—both are made from all-Italian olives (though a third, much cheaper, all-Italian oil did not

TASTING SUPERMARKET EXTRA-VIRGIN OLIVE OIL

Twenty-one *Cook's Illustrated* staffers sampled 10 extra-virgin olive oils, selected from the top-selling supermarket brands in the United States, according to Chicago-based market research firm Information Resources, Inc. The supermarket oils were tasted plain as well as heated and tossed with pasta. We then tasted them plain a second time with our favorite high-end extra-virgin olive oil, Columela, available in better supermarkets. Prices were paid in Boston-area supermarkets, with per-liter price calculated for comparison. Information about the national origin of the oils was provided by the manufacturers. The results of the tastings were averaged, and the oils appear below in order of preference. A source for the winning oil is on page 32.

HIGHLY RECOMMENDED

COLUMELA Extra Virgin Olive Oil

Price: \$17.95 for 17 oz (\$35.90 per liter)

Origin: Spain

Comments: Our favorite premium extra-virgin olive oil from a previous tasting, Columela is composed of a blend of intense Picual, mild Hojiblanca, Ocal, and Arbequina olives. This oil took top honors for its fruity flavor and excellent balance. Tasters praised it as having "big olive aroma, big olive taste" with a "buttery" flavor that is "sweet" and "full," with a "peppery finish." One taster summed it up this way: "It's very green and fresh—like a squeezed olive." Another simply wrote: "Fantastic."



RECOMMENDED

LUCINI ITALIA Premium Select Extra Virgin Olive Oil

Price: \$19.99 for 500 ml (\$39.98 per liter)

Origin: Italy

Comments: Tasters noted this oil's flavor was "much deeper than the other samples," describing it as "fruity, with a slight peppery finish," "buttery undertones," and a "clean, green taste" that was "aromatic, with a good balance." "It has the flavor that some good EVOOs have," said one admiring taster.



COLAVITA Extra Virgin Olive Oil

Price: \$17.99 for 750 ml (\$23.98 per liter)

Origin: Italy

Comments: Virtually tied for second place, this oil was deemed "round and buttery," with a "light body" and flavor that was "briny and fruity," "very fine and smooth," and "almost herbal," with "great balance." "Good olive flavor. I could smell it and taste it," approved one taster. In a word, "pleasant."



RECOMMENDED WITH RESERVATIONS

BERTOLLI Extra Virgin Olive Oil

Price: \$12.49 for 750 ml (\$16.65 per liter)

Origin: Italy, Greece, Spain, and Tunisia

Comments: A clear step down from the top oils, tasters noted "overall mild" flavor and "very little aroma," with only a "hint of green olive" and a "hint of spiciness at the end." In pasta, it was initially "not complex," but gradually "bloomed in your mouth." Overall, it was "worthy of a second bite."



FILIPPO BERIO Extra Virgin Olive Oil

Price: \$10.99 for 750 ml (\$14.65 per liter)

Origin: Italy, Spain, Greece, and Tunisia

Comments: While some tasters found this oil "sweet" and "buttery" with "medium body" and "slight spice at the end," others complained that it had "zero olive flavor" and was "so floral it's almost like eating perfume"; still others noted a "bitter" aftertaste. In pasta, it was "extremely mild" to the point of being "boring."



RECOMMENDED WITH RESERVATIONS (CONTINUED)

GOYA Extra Virgin Olive Oil

Price: \$13.99 for 1 liter

Origin: Spain

Comments: The best comments tasters could muster were "mild" and "neutral." Some liked it on pasta (though one called it "Snoozeville"), but complaints were myriad: "metallic," "soapy," "briny," "hints of dirt." Carped one taster, "I can't imagine what is in here, but they have a nerve calling it EVOO."



POMPEIAN Extra Virgin Olive Oil

Price: \$9.99 for 473 ml (\$21.12 per liter)

Origin: Spain

Comments: While some tasters called this oil "mild" and "smooth," others found it "thin, greasy" and "not very interesting." "I bet the cooking water had more olive flavor," speculated one taster; "could be canola—it is so bland," mused another. A few noted an objectionable aftertaste that was "soapy, chemical" or "menthol—think Vicks VapoRub."



BOTTICELLI Extra Virgin Olive Oil

Price: \$10.99 for 1 liter

Origin: Italy

Comments: While a few tasters liked this "potent" oil, others said they detected "mushroom," "rotten walnuts," "a Band-Aid wrapped in a cherry blossom," and a quality that was "downright medicinal—Triaminic, anyone?" Several deemed it "overpowering" and "musky," with a "rank, off-flavor." "Tastes not like olives but like the armpits of olive laborers," shuddered one.



NOT RECOMMENDED

CARAPPELLI Extra Virgin Olive Oil

Price: \$10.99 for 750 ml (\$14.65 per liter)

Origin: Italy, Greece, Spain, Tunisia, Turkey, Cyprus, Morocco, and Syria

Comments: "Nothing remarkable here—just greasy, no flavor," summarized one taster. "Where did the olive go?" said another. This oil was judged to have a "kind of rancid" aftertaste that was reminiscent of not only "soil," "tree resin," and "ammonia and grass," but even "kitty litter smells" and "a set of sweaty hockey pads."



DAVINCI Extra Virgin Olive Oil

Price: \$17.99 for 1 liter

Origin: Italy, Greece, Spain, Tunisia, and Turkey

Comments: Although this oil won top place in a previous tasting, because olive oil is an agricultural product, it can differ from year to year. This time, tasters found it "washed out and muted," if "nice, in a totally bland and unremarkable way." Tasted plain, objections ranged from "insipid, with no real complexity" to "tastes like EVOO mixed with vegetable oil."



STAR Extra Virgin Olive Oil

Price: \$11.99 for 750 ml (\$15.99 per liter)

Origin: Spain, Italy, Greece, and Tunisia

Comments: "Boring" and "not very complex," this oil came across as "plastic-y and industrial; some hint of olives, but it fades quickly." Tasters identified off-flavors that were "unpleasant, dirty," "like rubber and metal, with a sour aftertaste," or at least "a bit funky," with a "strange taste" that was "spicy, but in a motor oil kind of way." One simply wrote, "Blech."



fare well). Price stood out, too: Our top picks were the two most expensive oils. In fact, our favorite cost almost \$40 per liter, nearly twice the average price of the rest of the lineup, and as much as many high-end olive oils from gourmet stores. This front-runner was Lucini Italia Premium Select Extra Virgin Olive Oil, made (according to the manufacturer) from olives grown on Italian estates, hand-picked, and

pressed within 24 hours. It was closely followed by Colavita Extra Virgin Olive Oil, also described as being made exclusively from olives harvested and pressed in Italy.

But in the end, while these two oils stood out among the supermarket sampling, they were easily bested in a second blind tasting that included our favorite premium extra-virgin olive oil by Columela,

which is made with a blend of Picual, Hojiblanca, Arbequina, and Ocal olives grown in Spain; tasters found it offered exceptionally fruity and well-balanced flavor. At about \$36 per liter, Columela is actually cheaper than Lucini, our top supermarket brand. This raises the question: Is the supermarket the best place to buy your extra-virgin olive oil? Unfortunately, we'd have to say no.