

# Premium Extra-Virgin Olive Oil

High-end extra-virgin olive oils offer a world of flavor beyond grocery-store options. But if you want to trade up, where do you begin?

BY LISA McMANUS

Extra-virgin olive oil, the lush, vibrant product of fresh olives, is premium by definition. At least, it should be. But as we reported in our story about supermarket olive oils (November/December 2015), most of what you'll find doesn't deserve that prestigious label. The oils are either mislabeled as a higher grade; mishandled so that their bright, complex flavor turns rancid; or even fraudulently blended with other, cheaper oils and passed off as the real deal.

Only one of the oils we sampled in that tasting, from California Olive Ranch, was a cut above the rest—"rich" and "fruity," with a "peppery aftertaste." At \$0.59 per ounce, it's one of the pricier supermarket options but costs just a fraction of what you'll spend on a bottle of premium extra-virgin. Which led us to ask: Since the good stuff sells for twice as much as or more than California Olive Ranch does, what are you getting for your money? We decided to find out.

Our supermarket olive oil tasting taught us that freshness is the most important consideration when buying extra-virgin olive oil, since it begins to degrade as soon as it's pressed, and this depreciation

happens even faster when the oil is exposed to air, heat, and light. So we narrowed down the countless number of producers worldwide by first zeroing in on premium oils produced in the Northern Hemisphere; that way, every product we chose would be roughly the same age. Then we carefully purchased oil from only the most recent harvest. The final lineup of 10 included oils priced from \$0.94 to \$2.13 per ounce (plus shipping) from France, Italy, Spain, Greece, Tunisia, Portugal, and the United States. All of the oils are sold online by reliable retailers; some are also available in gourmet shops or select supermarkets.

Our first step was to sample the oils plain, which made it immediately clear that these oils did indeed taste remarkably fresh. As we then tasted them tossed with butter lettuce and a little salt and finally drizzled over a bowl of warm cannellini beans (a typical application in parts of Italy), we marveled at how each oil seemed as distinct as a fingerprint, with flavors we'd never experienced with supermarket oils: "artichoke," "apples," "flowers," "tomato stems," "watercress," and even "dark wood." They didn't just enliven the lettuce and beans; they elevated the vegetables' flavors to something out of the ordinary.



**IN THE DARK**  
If your EVOO comes in a light-colored bottle, wrapping it in foil will help protect it from the oxidizing effects of light.

oils? Mostly, it boils down to the control a producer has over the production process—from the quality of the fruit to how quickly and carefully the olives are pressed to how well the freshness of the oil is preserved during bottling, storage, and transport.

To keep costs low, producers of mass-market extra-virgin olive oils usually purchase cheap bulk oils from all over the world and blend them at a facility thousands of miles from where the olives were grown and pressed. This not only suggests that these producers have little to no control over the handling and freshness of their oils but also explains why supermarket extra-virgin olive oils usually lack the distinct flavors

that premium oils are known for.

Conversely, the premium oils we tasted are produced in smaller, vertically integrated operations, many of which have run on the same site for hundreds of years. This means the olives are grown, picked, and pressed—and the oil bottled and sold—in a single location or within a strictly defined and limited area, and thus these oils are fresh, distinctly flavorful, and carefully monitored for quality.

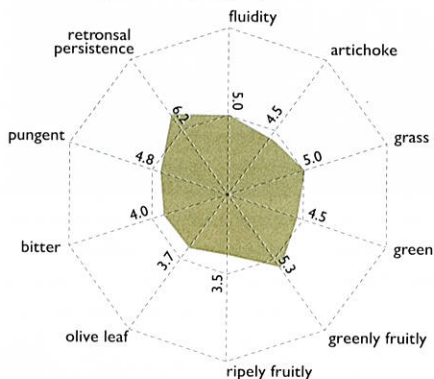
## Bottom Line

We think these premium oils are worth every penny. And while we singled out one particular crowd-pleaser with "ultrasmooth flavor" (a Greek product called Gaea Fresh), in a break from our usual procedure, we didn't rank the oils. Instead, we categorized them by flavor profile, since choosing the "best" bottle is a matter of personal preference. Think of it as comparing different styles of red wine as opposed to comparing a lineup of Pinot Noirs.

Given the prices of these premium oils, we'll still keep a bottle of our supermarket winner, California Olive Ranch, on hand for day-to-day use. But after tasting that product against a "nicely balanced" crowd-pleaser such as Gaea Fresh and a "complex and bold" powerhouse such as McEvoy Ranch, we were convinced that these oils are something special and are worth the splurge when you want to breathe life into salad greens, punch up a piece of grilled fish, or simply dunk bread in a superb oil.

## Hitting All the Right Notes

Olive oil industry experts use spider charts to display flavor nuances in high-quality oils, rating the intensity of 10 flavors on a scale of 0 to 10. Well-balanced oils such as Gaea Fresh (plotted below) hit the full spectrum of flavors in nearly equal measure, confirming our own perceptions of this oil's particular flavors, including nuances of artichoke, grass, and pungency.



## CHARTING BALANCED FLAVOR

The olive oil industry uses spider charts like the one above to plot an oil's flavors.

## By the Numbers

The oils tasted top-notch to us, but to be sure that they truly qualified as "extra-virgin," we subjected them to chemical testing and a sensory screening. Olive oils are rated for quality through a two-part evaluation, according to standards set by the International Olive Council, the industry's worldwide governing body. To pass the sensory test, the oil must not only have what experts call "zero defects" but also possess "some fruity flavor." Among the chemical standards, an oil must not exceed certain levels of free fatty acids, peroxides, and other chemical parameters that would indicate olive deterioration, poor processing or storage, or oxidation.

For a sensory perspective, we sent a randomly coded sample of each oil to a group of trained tasters for their expert opinions. In general, the panelists agreed with our assessments of most of the oils and used an array of descriptive terms for distinct flavors such as "artichoke" and "tropical fruit." As for the chemical tests, the premium oils passed most measurements of freshness and quality with flying colors, whereas in our testing of supermarket oils, most of the products barely squeaked by.

So what actually accounts for the dramatic differences in quality between premium and supermarket

# TASTING PREMIUM EXTRA-VIRGIN OLIVE OIL

We tasted 10 premium extra-virgin olive oils selected from the most recent harvest from a broad selection of countries in the Northern Hemisphere, sampling them plain, tossed with lettuce, and drizzled over warm cannellini beans. We also had the oils tested for quality and freshness at an independent laboratory (an independent group of trained olive oil tasters conducted a separate double-blind tasting of the oils). We obtained information about source, olive varieties, picking and pressing, and filtering from manufacturers. We purchased the oils online and in local stores, where available, and the prices listed are what we paid, not including shipping. We singled out a crowd-pleaser that appealed to all our tasters, but otherwise we didn't rank these oils. Instead, we categorized them by their flavor profiles (from mild to robust) based on our tasters' comments.



## RECOMMENDED MEDIUM-ROBUST

### GIANFRANCO BECCHINA Olio Verde Extra Virgin Olive Oil

PRICE: \$34.95 for 16.9 fl oz (\$2.07 per fl oz)

ORIGIN: Italy OLIVE: Nocellara del Belice

WHERE TO BUY: olio2go.com

TASTERS' COMMENTS: "Smells like fresh-cut green grass" or "artichokes," with a taste of "butter on the front, pepper on the back." "Lively heat sneaks up on you," particularly on a bowl of warm beans.

### CASTILLO DE CANENA Family Reserve Picual Extra Virgin Olive Oil

PRICE: \$27.95 for 16.8 fl oz (\$1.66 per fl oz)

ORIGIN: Spain OLIVE: Picual

WHERE TO BUY: oliveoillovers.com

TASTERS' COMMENTS: "Intensely fragrant" and "garden-y," like a "bouquet of fresh flowers" or even a "hay loft" with a "spicy and savory" scent. "Rich and complex, with a bite at the end." "Balanced," "bright," and "grassy and green with just enough bitterness."

### SCIABICA'S ARBOSANA Fall Harvest California Extra Virgin Olive Oil

PRICE: \$16.00 for 16.9 fl oz (\$0.95 per fl oz)

ORIGIN: USA (California) OLIVE: Arbosana (with up to 15% Manzanillo or Mission)

WHERE TO BUY: sunshineinabottle.com

TASTERS' COMMENTS: "Lush," "rich and gently bitter," "ripe," "vegetal," and "robustly spicy" with a "lingering" "peppery" aftertaste.

## RECOMMENDED MILD

### MOULIN CASTELAS CASTELINES Classic Extra Virgin Olive Oil

PRICE: \$29.95 for 16.9 fl oz (\$1.77 per fl oz)

ORIGIN: France OLIVES: Salonenque, Aglandau, Grossane, and Verdale

WHERE TO BUY: oliveoillovers.com

TASTERS' COMMENTS: "Ultrasmooth," "mellow," "summery," and "subtle," with "just a hint" of pepper and "afterburn." Scent of "fresh grass cuttings." "Full-bodied," "rounded," and "buttery."

### CASA DE SANTO AMARO Selection Extra Virgin Olive Oil

PRICE: \$21.95 for 16.9 fl oz (\$1.30 per fl oz)

ORIGIN: Portugal OLIVES: Cobrançosa, Verdeal Transmontana, and Madural

WHERE TO BUY: oliveoillovers.com

TASTERS' COMMENTS: "Green, fresh scent" and "well-balanced," "buttery and silky" flavor. "Good fruit intensity without too much bitterness and pungency." "Love this mild, buttery, sunny-tasting oil. Assertive but not aggressive."

## RECOMMENDED MEDIUM

### GAEA FRESH Extra Virgin Olive Oil

PRICE: \$18.99 for 17 fl oz (\$1.12 per fl oz)

ORIGIN: Greece OLIVE: Koroneiki

WHERE TO BUY: yolenis.com/en-us/, some supermarkets

TASTERS' COMMENTS: "Buttery," "smooth," "lemony and clean," with "sweet" olive fruitiness, aroma like "tomato stems," and a lightly "peppery" aftertaste. "Nicely balanced." Received a thumbs-up from all tasters.

### COLUMELA Original Blend Extra Virgin Olive Oil

PRICE: \$19.99 for 17 fl oz (\$1.18 per fl oz)

ORIGIN: Spain OLIVES: Picual, Hojiblanca, Ocal, and Arbequina

WHERE TO BUY: Supermarkets

TASTERS' COMMENTS: "Fruity and sweet"-smelling, with notes of "apricot and peach" but also reminiscent of "dark wood" with "bitter and peppery flavors" such as "watercress" or "arugula" that "build." "Really plays well with beans."



## RECOMMENDED ROBUST

### FRESCOBALDI LAUDEMIO Extra Virgin Olive Oil

PRICE: \$35.95 for 16.9 fl oz (\$2.13 per fl oz)

ORIGIN: Italy OLIVES: Frantoio, Moraiolo, and Leccino

WHERE TO BUY: olio2go.com

TASTERS' COMMENTS: "Superpeppery" with a "clean finish." "Nasal," "wasabi-like heat" is "so bold as to be rough around the edges." "Mouth-coating body—the EVOO equivalent of fatty butter." "Wow! Who knew beans plus good olive oil could be fabulous together?"

### MCEVOY RANCH Certified Organic Traditional Blend Extra Virgin Olive Oil

PRICE: \$27.00 for 12.7 fl oz (\$2.13 per fl oz)

ORIGIN: USA (California) OLIVES: Frantoio, Moraiolo, Leccino, Pendolino, Maurino, Leccio del Corno, and Coratina

WHERE TO BUY: mcevoyranch.com, some supermarkets

TASTERS' COMMENTS: "Aroma" that's "deceptively innocuous." "Complex and bold." Remarkable for its "bracing bitterness" and "peppery wallop." "Slow burner" that "goes all the way up my nose."

### LES MOULINS MAHJOUB Organic Extra Virgin Olive Oil

PRICE: \$33.00 for 33.8 fl oz (\$0.98 per fl oz)

ORIGIN: Tunisia OLIVE: Chetoui

WHERE TO BUY: zingermans.com

TASTERS' COMMENTS: A powerhouse: "Front notes are fresh and butter-like, but the finish is pungent." "Bold but bitter" and "gives a good kick at the end."

## How Do You Take Your EVOO?

Identifying other flavors you like can help you pick a premium extra-virgin olive oil that suits your taste.

IF YOU LIKE	CONSIDER	IF YOU LIKE	CONSIDER
Chardonnay	Mild to medium EVOO	Black espresso	Medium-robust to robust EVOO
Lager		Bitter IPAs	
Mild salad greens		Hot chiles	