

OLIVE OIL

GENERAL INFORMATION

Olive oil is produced throughout Italy. The oil varies depending on the region where it is made. More than 90% of the world's supply comes from the Mediterranean area, with Italy providing about one third of the total. Italians, however, consume the most olive oil - about 12 liters (12 quarts) per person, per year. It is the most versatile of oils; it can be used in cooking, as a dressing or, as a preservative for vegetables and herbs.

HISTORY

Olives were first domesticated around 6000 B.C. when people in the Near East realised that, although olives didn't taste good fresh, they could be cooked or pickled in brine, or pressed for their oil. Not only did olive oil come to be used for cooking, but it was also used as a lubricant, and as a key ingredient in medicines, soaps and cosmetics. Egyptians, Greeks and Romans all placed a high value on the olive and granted it a sacred status. Related to this tradition is the use of "sacred oil" today, particularly in *Tuscany* where holy oil, or "olio santo," is still made from olive oil, whole chili peppers and basil leaves. This oil is used to enhance the flavor of simple broths. The Romans were the first to commercially produce olive oil and they developed techniques to grow olives and extract their oil, which have been employed till modern times. After the fall of the Empire, the Benedictine monks, who used olive oil in religious as well as culinary practices, continued to nurture the cultivation of olives. During the Middle Ages, this practice once again flourished throughout the region, with the Tuscans regarding it as an essential crop. However, it was Florence and Sienna that became the major producers of olive oil. Olives were grown in between fruit and nut trees, a practice which continued until after World War II when new irrigation and planting techniques took hold.

MAKING OLIVE OIL

Making olive oil is a year-round process. There are many kinds of olives; some are grown only for eating while others are used solely for pressing into oil. The climate, soil, and *type of tree* determine this. *Olive trees* live to be about 600 years old and it takes about five to six years before they can bear fruit. Olives are green and turn black in the ripening process.

The best olive oil comes from olives that are *hand picked* in late autumn from the famous olive groves of Florence, Sienna, Pistoia and the surrounding areas. However, in Puglia, an olive-producing region since ancient times, there is a special way of gathering olives. Cloths are wrapped around the olive trees to catch the olives as they fall. Workers shake the trees or beat the trees with sticks so that the olives fall into the cloths. Traditionally, after olives are picked, they are gathered into large sacks and *brought to press*. They are then *ground to a pulp* under large stone wheels and then *layered on mats* and cold *pressed into oil*. In Tuscany, this fresh oil is highly valued. This bright *green*, dense oil that comes fresh from the press has a bit of a bite. It is generally stored in a cool storage area in large clay vessels so the oils will mellow in flavor, color and smell.

GRADES OF OIL

Extra vergine: This is the oil extracted from the first pressing. It is chemical-free and contains less than 1% oleic acid. This is the highest ranked olive oil. As it is cold-pressed, essential vitamins and nutrients are retained. It is easily digested, and being a monosaturated fat, tends to lower "bad" cholesterol and, thereby, decrease the risk of arteriosclerosis.

Olio d'oliva sopraffino vergine: Superfine virgin olive oil which contains acidity up to 1.5 %.

Olio d'oliva fino vergine: Fine virgin olive oil with up to 3% acidity.

Olio d'oliva vergine: Olive oil that contains up to 3.5% acidity.

Olio di oliva puro: This oil is made from a blend of lesser quality oils and is chemically altered and de-acidified to no more than 1.5%. It should be used only for cooking.

Olio d'oliva: A combination of refined residue and virgin oil.

TYPES OF OIL

Except for *Piedmont* and *Val d'Aosta*, olive oil is made in all regions of Italy.

Liguria: The oil produced in this region is pale and delicate and has a somewhat sweet taste.

Tuscany: Although Tuscany does not produce as much olive oil as Apulia, many consider it the best olive oil. In Tuscany, olives are grown on hills so that they get the full benefit of the Italian sun. The taste of the oil is mellow and nut-like.

The South: The olives from the South ripen slowly and have a sweeter flavor. These are durable oils with good balance. Eighty percent of all the olive oil in Italy is produced in the south.

Apulia: The oils produced in this region have an almond-like taste, as do the ones from *Calabria*.

STORING OIL

Oils should never be exposed to light. Keep them in a cool, dark place in a dark bottle. They can be refrigerated for maximum freshness and should only be purchased in small amounts.

COOKING WITH OLIVE OIL

Olive oil can be used like any other cooking oil. However, it has a strong flavor. Sometimes, olive oil is added to food just before serving, so its taste can be enjoyed without it overpowering the dish.