

PENNY SAVER NEWS

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Olive Oil – How to Choose

If you've ever stood in the grocery store looking at the shelves of olive oil and wondered how to choose the 'best' one, you are not alone! If you've ever complained that you can't see the 'real' color in those green bottles, you are not alone. Do you find that the same brand seems to taste different with every new bottle? Yes, it might! And if you've ever wondered if the 'good' stuff is really worth the price, you're still not alone. There are some answers, but some are just up to you.

Olive oil is some ways is like wine. It can vary from place to place and year to year. Talk to a real olive oil connoisseur and you will hear a vocabulary very much like wines. The flavor can be fruity or peppery, and the aroma can have as many words as the best wines. But unlike wine, you won't hear them discussing the color.

The color of olive oil is really not considered important. It will vary, but color doesn't affect flavor. Extra virgin olive oil (sometimes shortened to EVOO) is produced by simply pressing the olives. It may be slightly cloudy because of the bits of solids from the olives that are still present. Refining can remove the cloudiness and lighten the oil. But then the oil is no longer extra virgin.

Virgin olive oil is what they get by pressing again the mush that was left after the first pressing. Sometimes that mush (it's really called pumace) is mixed with water or other liquids, heated, then separated again. The oil from these last processes can be refined to improve the flavor and color, and that oil can be used commercially or bottled and sold. Refined oils can be blended to keep the flavor the same from bottle to bottle. They can be pure olive oil, or pumace olive oil, but not virgin or extra virgin.

What can NOT legally be done is mix olive oil with other oils such as soy or canola and sell that as 'olive' oil. USDA now has a testing program, and there are various groups of producers of olive oil who will also certify that what's in a bottle is pure olive oil. Check the label.

Olive oil is graded according to how much acid it contains, how it tastes and how it smells. The acidity is measured chemically and any with too much acid cannot be bottled. The flavor and

aroma are evaluated by teams of trained tasters. Fruitiness is the main good flavor they look for. Anything that tastes musty or sour, rancid or woody is not good.

Surprisingly, peppery is a good flavor. If you put a little bit on your tongue and just suck it back into your mouth, you should notice a peppery flavor on the back of your tongue. You might also notice that it seems to dry out your mouth a little bit. That can be an indication of polyphenols, some of the antioxidant compounds of olives.

One kitchen 'trick' that does not work is trying to tell if it's pure by putting it in the refrigerator. All olive oil is a mixture of saturated and unsaturated fats. All of it will get solid and cloudy if it gets too cold. It will turn clear and liquid when it warms up.

There is no need to refrigerate olive oil at all. The best way to store it is in a dark bottle, in the cupboard. The dark bottle and the dark cupboard will protect it from its main enemy – light. Olive oil that has been exposed to light, as in a clear salad bottle left on the table, will lose its flavor. Over time it can start tasting strong and 'paint-y'. If that happens, just throw it away. You can't fix it, or cover up the flavor.

So, how do you tell which one is best? You need to taste it, and decide if you like it! Some people like a stronger olive flavor while others prefer mild or almost flavorless oil. That's up to you. It's all healthy.

Here's an easy way to dress up some fresh summer zucchini or yellow squash, or a mixture of the two if you prefer. The nuts add some crunch with their own healthy oils. I might add a sliced sweet red pepper for even more color if I wanted to stretch the recipe. Enjoy!

Nutty Zucchini

1 ½ Tbsp olive oil

1 clove garlic

1 Tbsp margarine or butter

½ cup coarsely chopped walnuts

6 zucchini (and/or summer squash)

salt, pepper to taste

Wash zucchini, pat dry and slice in ¼-inch slices. Melt margarine with oil in medium skillet. Add zucchini and sauté until tender but still slightly firm. Shake skillet often. Add garlic and cook for 1 minute. Remove garlic and discard. Stir 1/3 cup of walnuts into zucchini and cook until nuts are hot. Season with salt and pepper if desired. Transfer to serving bowl or plates, and sprinkle with remaining nuts. Serves 6.

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