



# Frequently Asked Questions about Extra Virgin Olive Oil - Highlights

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## **Does the term extra virgin necessarily imply that it is an outstanding oil?**

You may find this surprising but the answer is no. Throughout the world, the term extra virgin implies that the oil is 100% made from olives, is free of unpleasant flavours and has some degree of fruitiness. That is, the label 'extra virgin' is simply a reasonable guarantee that the oils will add something positive to your food. Obviously within this broad specification there exist rather bland extra virgin oils right through to very complex oils with outstanding aroma and flavour.

## **Should I only buy 'first cold pressed' oil?**

The question is not particularly relevant in light of the way extra virgin olive oil is made today. The vast majority of extra virgin olive oil produced throughout the world is done so without using a traditional olive oil press. Nearly all extra virgin olive oil is made using high speed centrifuges which spin the lighter olive oil away from the other heavier components of the olive such as water and pulp. As such, the term as it was first coined has little relevance **Are**

## **olive oils made using the traditional method of mat pressing better than those made using the modern continuous (centrifuge) process?**

Absolutely not. Here is one case where the use of traditional methods do not guarantee the highest quality. Most olive oil experts would agree that the modern continuous system favoured by most of the world's commercial olive producers result in more consistent defect free oils with as good or better aroma and flavour than what would be achieved by pressing with a mat press. The reason is simple. By their nature, the mats used in traditional presses are absorbent and therefore retain oil after being used. As cleaning the mats to a near new 'spotless' standard is impractical in most larger scale commercial environments, most mats

will eventually contain oil that is either rancid or has a fermented taste character. All subsequent oil produced from those same will also display these undesirable taste defects. Having said that some traditional mat producers do maintain impeccable standards, and as such the oils that they produce have pristine flavours. This is usually the case when a producer is using mat press to exclusively process their own olives. Furthermore, the modern centrifugal methods expose the olive paste and oil to less oxygen.

## **But the label says "cold pressed". Surely this means that the oil has been made with a press?**

Despite what the label says, it probably hasn't. Most of the world's commercial oils are made with a centrifuge... the EV olive oil you purchase is likely to have been made with a centrifuge. While centrifugation is the best way to make high quality healthy olive oil, the widespread acceptance of the term "cold pressed" by the olive oil buying public means that most producers are very reluctant to discard the term in fear of losing sales.

## **Aren't extra virgin olive oils supposed to be good for my health?**

Most extra virgin olive oils naturally contain higher levels of monounsaturated fats and antioxidants such as polyphenols and tocopherol. They also naturally contain plant sterols which are thought to lower cholesterol levels. All these attributes are sought after by the health conscious.

## **Extra virgin olive oil contains less omega three fats than say flaxseed oil. Is this true?**

Yes it is, but..... omega three fatty acids are in the family of polyunsaturated fats. These fats are very prone to oxidation, so oils high in these fats tend to have very short shelf lives unless they are protected with artificial preservatives such as BHA and BHT. Also being refined seed oils they completely lack the aroma, flavour or health giving properties that arise

from the polyphenols that are naturally found in extra virgin olive oil.

### **Does centrifugation produce oils that are less beneficial to your health?**

No. Quite the contrary. The process of centrifugation is by nature, a rapid and enclosed process which protects the oil from oxygen during the separation process. This means that the naturally occurring antioxidants in the oil are conserved and end up in the olive oil bottle. No rocket science here. If you expose the health giving antioxidants in olive oil to oxygen before they are bottled, i.e. during their making, then they by definition are used up. Better to have them in the bottle so they can help you stay healthy.

### **Some labels make a point of saying that the olive oil was made within a short period of time after harvesting. What is the significance of this claim?**

One of the most critical factors in making high quality olive oil is the time that elapses between harvesting the olive and extracting its oil. The greater the elapsed time, the higher the probability that the resultant oil will have an off flavour. The defects that can arise from delays in harvesting are called fusty, musty, and winey. Ideally, olives should be processed into oil within 24 hours after harvesting.

### **Some olive oils are cloudy. Are these better for me?**

The cloudiness arises from small particles of olive that remain after processing. These particles do not convey any additional health benefits. Cloudy olive oils on the other hand generally have shorter shelf lives and if the cloudiness settles into the base of the bottle, the resultant sediment can cause off characters to be formed. Incidentally, most clear oils get that way not by being filtered but simply by the producer allowing the oil to settle naturally in tank under the force of gravity. The clear oil is removed from the sediment at the bottom of the tank and bottled.

### **What is the difference between early and late harvest oils?**

They are simply different styles of olive oil. As their name suggests, early harvest oils are made from olives picked earlier in the season. As they are made from greener olives, early harvest styles are usually more grassy/herbaceous in aroma and flavour and have higher levels of bitterness and pepperyness. Late harvest styles are usually milder oils and display riper fruit flavours. Due to their different taste properties the two styles of oil are used in different ways in the kitchen.

### **What does Free Fatty Acidity (Acidity Level) mean? Is it good or bad?**

Free fatty acidity is chemical parameter of the oil which is a very broad indicator of its quality, or at

least how sound the olives were and how carefully the olives were processed. For extra virgin olive oils, it ranges from 0 to 0.8%, with the **lower the percentage the better**. Oils with high free fatty acidity also tend to go rancid more rapidly. However, whatever the acidity of the oil, it can't be tasted. From a practical point of view, oils with lower FFA's begin to smoke at a higher temperature when heated. This property makes them a little more versatile in the kitchen.

### **Where is the best place to store the extra virgin olive oil?**

A general principle applies here. Both light and heat are the enemies of olive oil. As such, olive oils should be stored in a cool dark place. Most also refrigerate well. On the other side of the coin, the worst place to store olive oil is on top of the refrigerator or next to the oven where they may become heated, or even worse on a window sill. Olive oils will rapidly become rancid if stored in a warm, well lit environment. Exposure to light also hastens the loss of the health giving vitamin E like compound tocopherol.

### **How long can I expect an extra virgin olive oil to last?**

Extra virgin olive oils are best consumed young as it is at this time when their fresh olive like aromas and flavours, and the health giving polyphenols are at their peak. Unlike wine, olive oils do not mature with age, so the closer to their release date that you purchase and use them, the better. However, the higher levels of natural antioxidants and the higher proportion of monounsaturated fats generally found in extra virgin olive oil mean that they generally remain fresher longer than other edible oils. But as a guide, provided they are stored properly, the majority of current season extra virgin olive oils will retain good flavour, aroma, freshness for at least 12 months.

### **Can I use extra virgin olive oils for frying?**

Extra virgin olive oils are a far better alternative when shallow frying. If you purchase high quality oil with an FFA less than 0.2%, then it will start to smoke at a temperature around 20C higher than your average supermarket EV

### **Do trans fats form in olive oil when it is heated?**

No they don't. Trans fats form when any oil is subjected to an industrial process called hydrogenation designed to turn liquid oil into an edible fat that is solid at room temperature. The hydrogenation process involves heating up an oil under extreme pressure and then bubbling hydrogen gas through it in the presence of a Palladium metal catalyst. For trans fats to form all of these conditions must be in place – heat and pressure and hydrogen gas and an appropriate catalyst. It just can't happen in your kitchen.