

California Olive Oil

By
Nancy Ash

A recipe for hosting
an olive oil tasting
at home.

Arriving at your friend's home, you notice the regal appearance of the dining room, yet something is amiss. Although the table is elegantly arranged with several wine glasses at each place, there is no wine in sight. There are also no dinner plates, utensils or even appetizers on the table, just small plates with apple slices. No – this isn't the latest diet fad. Welcome to an olive oil tasting.

Although wine tasting parties have been fashionable for years, olive oil tastings are still far from an everyday experience. Many consider olive oil as just a commodity, nothing more than a minor ingredient in recipes. Although this may be true of the lesser grade oils such as pomace, pure, and extra light, you may be surprised by the range of flavors found in extra virgin olive oils.

When selecting an olive oil, consumers are faced with so many choices. One retailer in northern California offers over 100 extra virgin olive oils, all claiming to be first, cold press and of the highest quality. An olive oil tasting party can be both a fun and affordable way to taste and compare oils, and you don't have to be an expert in order to host the occasion. The following guidelines are a "recipe" for a successful event for friends and family.

Olive oil and wine share some similarities. Both are liquids obtained by pressing fresh fruit. Grapes and olives are cultivated on every continent except Antarctica, and thrive in similar climates. There are hundreds of varieties of both grapes and olives: varietal and region of origin are just two of the many factors that affect the flavors of both wine and olive oil.

The International Olive Oil Council (now part of the International Olive Council (IOC)) promotes a scientific method of tasting oils to ascertain the quality of an oil, and based on the detection of positive and negative attributes assigns the grades of extra virgin, virgin, ordinary and



“lampante” (literally translated as “lamp oil”) to olive oils. To become palatable, ordinary and lampante oils are refined and then used as a flavorless and odorless base for pure and extra light oils. On the other hand, extra virgin and virgin oils are sold without further processing, with extra virgin being defined as free of defects (negative attributes) and therefore of the best quality. But this scientific tasting method (known as sensory assessment) does not allow for the exploration of specific aromas and flavors in the oil, the very characteristics that distinguish one extra virgin oil from another. And isn't this precisely the information that consumers seek when selecting an oil to purchase?

A few producers and stores attempt to provide some guidance. Perhaps there are descriptions and suggested uses on a bottle's label or a store's shelf. Some stores offer sampling by dipping bread into oils. Although this can be helpful, one cannot adequately assess aroma and flavor from a cube of bread soaked in oil.

Comparative tastings allow you the opportunity to further examine the aromas and flavors in olive oil. As the host, your first consideration is how many people can

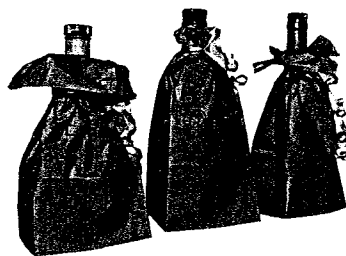
comfortably sit at your table. Each person will need a place setting including a placemat (preferably a sheet of white paper), a glass for each oil (wine glasses are best because plastic interferes with aromas and oil will seep through paper), a “spit” cup (disposable cup lined with a paper napkin), a water glass, apple slices, napkin, and a pen or pencil to jot down notes.

To avoid oil spills, do not crowd your guests too closely together. Be sure to protect your tabletop from the inevitable spill; use a white or neutral color tablecloth with no designs so you don't inadvertently overwhelm your guests' senses.

Taste only extra virgin olive oils. You can select a random assortment of oils, or compare oils made from the same olive varieties, from the same region, or even the same price range.

The number of oils to serve depends upon the number of guests you have, the tasting experience of those guests, and the amount of time available. For beginners, provide a minimum of three and a maximum of eight oils; allow about 10 minutes per oil for tasting and additional time for discussion afterwards.

Louie Gonzalez, an IOC-certified taste panel leader and member of the California Olive Oil Council's tasting





panel, has each of his guests bring a favorite extra virgin olive oil. "It's always interesting to see if a guest can recognize his oil in a blind tasting, and sharing the responsibility for the selections ensures a lively discussion afterwards," states Gonzalez.

It is not necessary to conduct the tasting blindly, however it does add an element of fun and surprise. To organize a blind tasting, place the bottles inside paper bags (secure the top of the bag to the bottle with a rubber band or tape), and mark them with a code (letters are better than numbers) before pouring the samples. Or make it a "double blind" tasting by having one person bag the bottles and a second person write the code on the bags. Blind tastings prevent preconceptions to affect the results; the guest who thinks he prefers Italian oils may be surprised to learn that his favorite in a blind tasting was from California or Australia instead!

After pouring the samples, cover each glass with a small piece of paper so aromas won't escape. Keep glasses covered throughout the tasting, except of course when you are assessing that particular sample. Evaluate one oil at a time; if you smell all of them before you taste them, you will confuse your senses.

There are four steps to evaluating an oil, nicknamed the four Ss of tasting: Swirl, Sniff, Slurp and Swallow. First gently swirl the oil in the glass to release the oil's aromas. Do this by holding the bowl of the glass in one hand while the other hand holds the cover on top. After swirling, uncover the glass and quickly take a deep sniff of the oil. Consider if the aroma was pleasant or unpleasant, faint or strong, and write down your impressions, including if the aroma reminds you of anything else. Some common descriptors are fresh-cut grass, tomato leaf, flowers, fruit such as apples, spices such as cinnamon, and herbs such as mint, but don't feel limited by this terminology.

Next, taste the oil by slurping a small amount into your mouth while also "sipping" a bit of air. This step might take some practice, but don't be embarrassed by any noises you make while slurping. By mixing the oil with air as you slurp, you help to distribute it all over your tongue and the roof of your mouth, which allows you to sense more of the flavors in the oil. Lastly, swallow the oil (really - it's only a small

amount), although some people might choose to use their spit cup instead.

Write down further impressions of the oil. Think about how bitter the oil seemed and if it seemed spicy or pungent as you swallowed it. Considering both the aroma and flavor, think about if the oil was balanced or if one element overpowered another. Remember that contrary to popular belief, the oil's color is not an indicator of its flavor or quality, so don't use this factor in your assessment.

In between oils, tasters need to cleanse their palates. At wine tastings one uses water to clear the tastebuds, however

oil is not water soluble which makes it more difficult to refresh your palate. Bread and other foods can interfere with your senses and even mask some flavors. It is best to use tart green apples to refresh the palate, followed by either still or sparkling water. If you must have bread with the oils, use plain, sweet baguette with no seeds.

When your guests have finished sampling all the oils, have them compare notes with each other. If desired, re-taste the oils as others

describe their impressions, especially if their opinion differs from your own. Rank the oils from most to least favorite and compare favorites.

If there is time, extend the tasting by serving food prepared with the different oils. This can be as simple as serving bread or bruschetta (grilled bread), cheeses, and salads. Guests then drizzle their favorite oils onto the foods and observe if pairing oils with certain foods changes their perception of them. Or you can serve a more elaborate meal, incorporating the oils from the tasting into each course, including dessert. (See recipes following article.) An alternative favored by Gonzalez is a "pot luck" dinner where each guest provides a favorite olive oil dish to share.

There are currently unprecedented numbers of excellent quality extra virgin olive oils available to consumers, both in stores and on the internet, and the choices can be overwhelming. Comparative tastings will help you find your favorite oils, as well as build your flavor memory and descriptive vocabulary. Learn to appreciate the wide range of flavors in extra virgin olive oil from throughout the world, and these oils will become the "stars" in your cooking. **C**

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