

## *Liquid Gold -- The Mediterranean Lifestyle*

It is impossible to talk about the Mediterranean Diet without acknowledging the critical role that flavorful and healthy Extra Virgin Olive Oil (EVOO) plays in this lifestyle. It is the main source of fat and the foundation of the Mediterranean Diet.

Extra Virgin Olive Oil is basically the juice extracted from the olive fruit, no different than orange juice is to an orange. The more quickly it is pressed after the fruit is picked, and the more carefully it is picked (less bruising) the better the quality of the olive oil. And science has shown that just 2-3 tablespoons of this natural and nutritious oil can provide unique and powerful health benefits.<sup>i</sup>

The biggest challenge, however, is that for most people, it is hard to determine if you are purchasing the right type of olive oil that would impart the health benefits it is known for. Many studies have been done<sup>ii</sup> that demonstrate that most of the EVOO sold around the world is tainted in some way. Walking into a high-end grocery store and buying even a brand name EVOO doesn't always guarantee that the oil in the bottle meets the definition and legal parameters of a true EVOO. "60 Minutes" TV News magazine did an exposé in 2016 revealing the doctoring of oils (agro-mafia) where olive oils are cut with other seed oils or even chemically treated, stripping them of their health benefits. Then, a little EVOO is added to provide some taste and these inferior products are now labeled EVOO but come without any of the enormous health benefits of a true extra virgin oil.

Like all agricultural products, the quality of an oil starts with how well the trees are taken care of, how carefully the fruit is picked, the weather and overall environment. Today, climate change has made drought and other weather variations more common resulting in unpredictable annual yields and quality of oils from even the same farms.

A true EVOO must come from the temperature controlled first extraction of the olive that results in a fruity, aromatic oil with a spicy finish that is free from additives and chemical filtration. Following the press, the acidity of each oil is analyzed and it must be lower than 0.8% for the oil to qualify as an EVOO. The lower that acidity level, typically also increases the polyphenol/antioxidant count, or health benefit of the oil. And, the lower the acidity, the higher the smoke point of the EVOO too.

So how do I find the good stuff? Some things to look for include

- Buying a single estate oil – one that has had no opportunity to be cut with other oils without clear traceability since it is picked, pressed and bottled all on the same estate. Most oils you find in grocery stores will show a beautiful Italian farm with the comment "Packed in Italy." However, when you look at the bottle closer, it will often state that the oil is from several countries, increasing the potential for fraud.
- Ask for the crush date - while an oil can be good for 18-24 months from purchase, oils from the closest harvest (Oct – Jan in the northern hemisphere and April – July for oils from the southern hemisphere) are fresh and at their flavor and nutritional best;
- Inquire about acidity levels or the polyphenol counts – Acidity should be lower than 0.8% and usually the lower the better. Polyphenol counts should be at a minimum of 250 and can go as high 900-1000. Here, the higher the better.

- Last but not least, taste it – there is an art to tasting olive oil - - visit me at our store, and I will show you how to taste olive oil like a sommelier and taste a few different varieties with you. And soon, I'll post a video here too!

When you enter an olive oil mill during harvest season or open a fresh bottle of true EVOO, you will be hit by this extraordinary, rich aroma of an authentic extra virgin olive oil that is intoxicating. Taste it, and you will have a new appreciation for why the Romans called it liquid gold! Consume it regularly, and you will reap all the health benefits of it that have made it a cornerstone of the Mediterranean Lifestyle.

*Chef Veera*

---

<sup>i</sup> Source: The Olive Oil Diet by Dr. Simon Poole and Judy Ridgway, 2016

<sup>ii</sup> Source Extra Virginity: The Sublime and Scandalous World of Olive Oil by Tom Mueller, 2011