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How to Choose a Good Extra Virgin Olive Oil

If you're confused by all the options, here are some tasty oils for dipping or drizzling, and good choices for cooking, too

By Jennifer Cook

December 7, 2023

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Some of the extra virgin olive oils CR tested (left to right): Lucini Italia Premium Select Extra Virgin Olive Oil; Wonder Valley Olive Oil; Specially Selected (Aldi) Sicilian Extra Virgin Olive Oil; Brightland Award-Winning Extra Virgin Olive Oil; California Olive Ranch 100% California Medium Extra Virgin Olive Oil; Graza Sizzle Extra Virgin Olive Oil; and Cobram Estate 100% California Select Extra Virgin Olive Oil

Photo: Ben Goldstein

Ever stand in front of a shelf of olive oils in a grocery store and think, “Why does this have to be so complicated?” So many brands and so many types—extra virgin, light, and just plain olive oil. Which is best for cooking, for layering on a slice of sourdough, for

drizzling on tomatoes and mozzarella? And are they all equally good for you?

Then there's the price. Because of the recent hot, dry weather in Mediterranean countries, where most olive oil is made, prices have jumped. But can you really taste the difference between a \$10 bottle of olive oil and a \$30 one? We tested 26 extra virgin olive oils, the most common type, to find out.

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“Extra virgin oil should taste fresh, with olive fruit flavor, plus some bitterness and pungency—which is a peppery, warm, tingling sensation at the back of your throat,” says Amy Keating, RD, who oversaw CR’s tests. The oils shouldn’t have off-notes, such as being musty (moldy) or stale (meaning they’ve been oxidized), or taste like they were made from

old olives that had fermented or gone bad.

We found 11 oils that met CR's expectations of what an extra virgin olive oil should taste like. Some were from companies you may not know, such as Wonder Valley or Brightland. Several were pricey (up to \$37 for a 12.7 fluid-ounce bottle, or \$2.91 an ounce), but a few were budget-friendly.

The other oils—including those from Bertolli, Colavita, Filippo Berio, Goya, and Trader Joe's—varied in quality, ranging from some we think taste pretty good to others that did not impress our experts.

What's Extra Virgin Olive Oil, Anyway?

There are different grades of olive oil based on its aroma, flavor, and chemical makeup.

Extra virgin olive oil (EVOO), the highest grade, must pass special chemical tests. These oils should have optimum (meaning low) levels of acidity and ultraviolet-light absorption. (High levels suggest poor processing or deterioration, among other things.)

Extra virgin oils should taste great, but they can taste (and smell) different from one another. Some can be fruity and nutty, others grassy and herbal or pleasantly bitter and pungent. Many are a combination of those flavors.

The compounds that give EVOO its bitterness and pungency, called polyphenols, also contribute to making the oil healthy. Those antioxidants fight cell damage that can cause heart disease and other illnesses. EVOOs are also rich in heart-healthy monounsaturated fats.

Turning olives into extra virgin oil requires careful processing from the start. “The olives are picked when they're ripe, but not too ripe,” says Selina Wang, PhD, an olive oil expert in the department of food science and technology at the University of California, Davis.

They're washed and crushed, and the paste is spun in a centrifuge to extract the oil. The process, sometimes called cold pressed, preserves the antioxidants. No heat or chemicals are permitted, so these oils are considered unrefined.

The next grade, virgin, is also made without heat or chemicals. It has some chemical or flavor flaws (though it can still taste good) and may not be as rich in antioxidants. It's also not easy to find. Virgin oils are sold in Europe but rarely in the U.S.

Products labeled just "olive oil" are a blend of heat-refined and extra virgin or virgin oils. They're milder than EVOO or virgin, and lower in antioxidants. "Light" olive oil is mostly refined oil and has an even milder flavor.

Find the best extra virgin olive oils sold at Trader Joe's.

Is It Really Extra Virgin?

In the U.S., making sure that you're actually getting an extra virgin olive oil is more complicated than elsewhere.

Olive oil-producing countries in Europe, the Middle East, and South America follow standards set by the International Olive Council. In the U.S., the Department of Agriculture does have standards based on the IOC's, as does the North American Olive Oil Association—but they're voluntary. And olive oils imported to the U.S. aren't bound by IOC rules.

One exception: California has mandatory standards stricter than the IOC's for companies that make 5,000 gallons or more a year from olives grown in the state.

Some olive oils carry a seal from the North American Olive Oil Association. This organization tests olive oils

made by companies that pay to use its seal, choosing bottles at random from grocery store shelves. But of the 11 oils in our tests with the group's seal, we found products that ranged from some we thought tasted very good to some that tasted fermented or stale. Joseph R. Profaci, executive director of the NAOOA, says it focuses on chemical testing. "Our seal gives consumers confidence that an olive oil is the real deal, then lets them decide for themselves if an olive oil's taste is something that they like and will complement their cooking," he says.

Another seal you may see is from the California Olive Oil Council. Companies that make oil from olives grown in California can have this organization test their products. The seal can be used only for those oils that meet the state's strict standards for extra virgin olive oil. All four of the California olive oils in our tests, even those without the label, were among our top-ranked oils.

The Best and Worst Extra Virgin Olive Oils

We chemically tested three samples of each oil at a lab and had two experts and a trained panel evaluate flavor. Our comparative analysis used USDA criteria as a model, but our tests were not assessments of whether an oil complied with any standard.

Our experts assessed the overall quality of the oil and described the flavor profile of each one using standard industry methods. A good oil should be fresh and fruity with some bitterness and pungency. It should not taste fermented (fusty) from poorly stored olives, or stale, which indicates oxidation. The tasting was blind, with each oil served in special blue glasses so that the color—which is not an indication of quality—didn't influence the experts' evaluation. We also sent samples to a larger trained olive oil tasting panel as a cross-check.

CR gave high marks to 11 oils, recommending seven. Three are CR Smart Buys, with one—Specially Selected (Aldi) Sicilian Extra Virgin Olive Oil—costing just 50

cents an ounce. Results for eight others were less consistent, though “they’re still okay for sautéing or roasting,” Keating says. Seven had off-flavors that even cooking may not hide.

CR contacted the seven companies with the lowest-scoring oils in our tests for their response to our findings.

The maker of Paesanol Unfiltered Extra Virgin Olive Oil said lab tests were a better indicator of quality than taste. The manufacturer of Terra Delyssa Smooth Extra Virgin Olive Oil said that it disagreed with our findings and that two panels it used found no issues. And the maker of the Botticelli Extra Virgin Olive Oil said off-tastes could have come from the product sitting too long on a store shelf or simply be “the ripe taste typical” of a Spanish oil. Other companies did not comment.

The Right Oils for Dipping, Drizzling, and Dressings

These 11 oils met CR's expectations for a high-quality olive oil. The seven recommended ones stood out for their fresh, complex flavors. The other four were good but slightly less fresh. You can use any of them for cooking, but their flavor makes them special, and thus better as a condiment. The oils are listed in rank order.



✓ Lucini Italia Premium Select Extra Virgin Olive Oil

4/5 OVERALL QUALITY

\$27 for 25.4 fl. oz.
\$1.06 per oz.

Robust and grassy with herbal notes. Would pair well with spicy food, beef, lamb, and bold-flavored vegetables like arugula or broccoli.

Buy at: [Amazon](#), [Fresh Direct](#)



✓ Wonder Valley Olive Oil ¹

4/5 OVERALL QUALITY

\$36 for 12.7 fl. oz.
\$2.83 per oz.

A fruity flavor balanced with pepperiness and bitterness. Its strong taste would make it good for drizzling on foods and in salad dressings.

Buy at: Welcometowondervalley.com



💰 Specially Selected (Aldi) Sicilian Extra Virgin Olive Oil ²

4/5 OVERALL QUALITY

\$8.50 for 16.9 fl. oz.
50¢ per oz.

A mild oil with fruity, floral, and nutty notes. Try this with pasta, mild cheeses, and delicate fish. Its low price could

make it a good option for cooking, too.

Buy at: [Aldi.us](https://www.aldi.us)



✔ **Brightland Awake Extra Virgin Olive Oil** ¹

■ 4/5 OVERALL QUALITY

\$37 for 12.7 fl. oz.
\$2.91 per oz.

Very well balanced with grassy and herbal flavors and some pleasant bitterness. Its big flavor would complement bold and spicy foods.

Buy at: [Amazon](https://www.amazon.com), [Brightland.co](https://www.brightland.co), [Bloomingdales.com](https://www.bloomingdales.com)



Ⓢ **California Olive Ranch 100% California Medium Extra Virgin Olive Oil** ¹

■ 4/5 OVERALL QUALITY

\$16.50 for for 25.4 fl. oz.
65¢ per oz.

Both fruity and grassy, with nutty, herbal, and minty flavors. Would work well with bread, poultry, and many other foods.

Buy at: [Amazon](https://www.amazon.com), [Californiaoliveranch.com](https://www.californiaoliveranch.com), [Target](https://www.target.com), [Walmart](https://www.walmart.com)



Ⓢ **Graza Sizzle Extra Virgin Olive Oil**

■ 4/5 OVERALL QUALITY

\$15 for 25.3 fl. oz.
59¢ per oz.

Pungent and bitter, with big, grassy flavor and some fruitiness. Would work well in dressings and on spicy and bold-flavored foods.

Buy at: [Amazon](https://www.amazon.com), [Graza.co](https://www.graza.co), [Target](https://www.target.com)



✔ **Cobram Estate 100% California Select Extra Virgin Olive Oil** ¹

■ 4/5 OVERALL QUALITY

\$24 or 25.4 fl. oz.
94¢ per oz.



74¢ per oz.

Nutty, with both fruit and herbal flavors.
Would be good with pasta, eggs, mild
cheeses, and delicate fish.
Buy at: [Walmart](#)



Kosterina Original Extra Virgin Olive Oil

■ 4/5 OVERALL QUALITY

\$30 or 16.9 fl. oz.
\$1.78 per oz

Fruity, herbal, and grassy flavors come
through, with some pleasant bitterness
and pungent pepperiness.
Buy at: [Amazon](#), [Food52.com](#),
[Kosterina.com](#)



Iliada Organic Extra Virgin Olive Oil ²

■ 4/5 OVERALL QUALITY

\$10 for 16.9 fl. oz.
59¢ per oz.

Grassy with a slight bitterness, and some
ripe fruit, nutty, and herbal notes.
Buy at: [Instacart.com](#)



Partanna Robust Extra Virgin Olive Oil

■ 4/5 OVERALL QUALITY

\$15 for 25.5 fl. oz.
59¢ per oz.

Grassy, herbal flavors with some fruit.
Buy at: [Partanna Foods](#)



Frankies 457 Organic Extra Virgin Olive Oil

■ 4/5 OVERALL QUALITY

\$30 for 33.8 fl. oz.



89¢ per oz.

Hints of fruit with slight buttery, nutty, and herbal notes.

Buy at: [Amazon](#), [Frankies457.com](#)

Fine for Cooking With

These oils, listed in rank order, had flavor problems, typically tasting slightly fermented, stale, or both. But the flaws were small, so you might not notice them, and all are good enough for cooking.



Goya Extra Virgin Olive Oil ²

3/5 OVERALL QUALITY

\$11 for 17 fl. oz.
65¢ per oz.

This oil was good, with fruity, nutty, and buttery notes, with minimal off-flavors.

Buy at: [BJs.com](#), [Walmart](#)



Filippo Berio Extra Virgin Olive Oil ²

3/5 OVERALL QUALITY

\$11.50 for 25.3 fl. oz.
45¢ per oz.

This oil was fruity with some complexity.

Buy at: [Walmart](#)



Kirkland Signature (Costco) Organic Extra Virgin Olive Oil

3/5 OVERALL QUALITY

\$19 for 67.6 fl. oz.
28¢ per oz.

This inexpensive oil had mostly grassy and herbal flavors with a little fruitiness.

Buy at: [Costco](#), [Walmart](#)



La Tourangelle Organic Bright and Peppery Extra Virgin Olive Oil ²

3/5 OVERALL QUALITY

\$22 for 25.4 fl. oz.
87¢ per oz.

This mild oil had some complexity, with fruity and nutty flavors.

Buy at: [Amazon](#), [Latourangelle.com](#), [Walmart](#)



Colavita Premium Selection Extra Virgin Olive Oil ²

3/5 OVERALL QUALITY

\$20.50 for 25.5 fl. oz.
80¢ per oz.

This oil was pungent and fruity, with a nice herbal flavor.

Buy at: [Amazon](#), [Colavitastore.com](#), [Walmart](#)



365 Whole Foods Market Mediterranean Blend Extra Virgin Olive Oil ²

3/5 OVERALL QUALITY

\$9.50 for 33.8 fl. oz.
28¢ per oz.

A bitter and pungent oil with some fruit.

Buy at: [Amazon](#)



Pompeian Smooth Extra Virgin Olive Oil ²

3/5 OVERALL QUALITY

\$12 for 24 fl. oz.
50¢ per oz.

A fruity oil with some nutty and buttery notes.

Buy at: [Amazon](#), [Samsclub.com](#), [Walmart](#)



Bertolli Rich Taste Extra Virgin Olive Oil



3/5 OVERALL QUALITY

\$12.50 for 25.36 fl. oz.
49¢ per oz.

This had some bitterness and pungency, plus fruitiness.

Buy at: [Target](#), [Walmart](#)

Not So Hot

There are better choices than these, which all had more serious flaws, including tasting stale or fermented. They're listed in rank order.



Paesanol Unfiltered Extra Virgin Olive Oil

2/5 OVERALL QUALITY

\$23 for 25 fl. oz.
92¢ per oz.

This oil was slightly fruity but not very complex or balanced. One sample was a little musty.



Botticelli Extra Virgin Olive Oil ²

2/5 OVERALL QUALITY

\$13.50 for 25.3 fl. oz.
53¢ per oz.

This had fairly low fruit flavor with some bitterness.



Zoe Organic Extra Virgin Olive Oil ²

2/5 OVERALL QUALITY

\$16 for 25.5 fl. oz.
63¢ per oz.

One sample was decent, with some fruit flavor and complexity, but the other samples were flawed.



Trader Giotto's (Trader Joe's) Extra Virgin Olive Oil

2/5 OVERALL QUALITY



—
\$9 for 33.8 fl. oz.
27¢ per oz.

This oil had hardly any fruit flavor.



Great Value (Walmart) Extra Virgin Olive Oil

■ 2/5 OVERALL QUALITY

\$7.50 for 25.5 fl. oz.
29¢ per oz.

This had very little fruit flavor.



Terra Delyssa Smooth Extra Virgin Olive Oil ²

■ 2/5 OVERALL QUALITY

\$14 for 34 fl. oz.
41¢ per oz.

Very little fruit, pungency, or bitterness.



Good & Gather (Target) Extra Virgin Olive Oil

■ 2/5 OVERALL QUALITY

\$10.50 for 25.5 fl. oz.
41¢ per oz.

This had hardly any fruit flavor.

1 Made from olives grown in California. **2** Has the North American Olive Oil Association Seal.

Shopping for and Storing Olive Oil

As with many other foods, fresh is best for olive oil. One way to check the age of an oil is to look for a harvest date on the bottle. This is the date when the olives were picked and crushed, and it's the best indicator of how fresh an olive oil is, according to Selina Wang, an olive

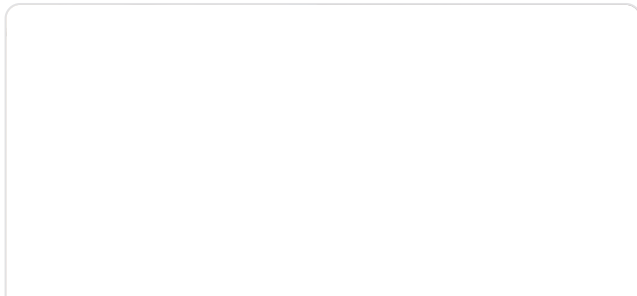
oil expert. “You’ll always want to try to buy the most recent harvest,” she says. If you’re buying an olive oil in January, look for a date from the previous fall for oil produced in the Northern Hemisphere or the previous spring for one produced in the Southern Hemisphere.

If you don’t see a harvest date, check the “best by” date. “Best by” or “best before” dates typically are two years from bottling, Wang says, suggesting that the company expects the olive oil will maintain its extra virgin grade until that date if the bottle isn’t opened. But a good move is to choose one with a “best by” date that’s furthest from the date of purchase.

Light, heat, and oxygen can affect the flavor of olive oil and deplete its antioxidants. Consider buying an oil in amber, black, or green glass, or cans because they’re best for keeping light out. And once extra virgin olive oil is opened, it begins to oxidize, so buy only as much as you’ll use in a few months.

Once you get the olive oil home, proper storage is key. Don’t keep it on a counter or in a cabinet near the dishwasher or stove to protect it from light and heat. And always cap the bottle tightly. This keeps air and oxygen from getting inside the bottle.

Editor’s Note: This article also appeared in the January 2024 issue of Consumer Reports magazine.



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