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## In search of the best extra-virgin olive oil

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*Logging on to the website The Olive Oil Times should be a pleasing and informative experience to learn about olive oil. Instead it reads like a police blotter. The latest crime involved an olive oil fraud ring accused of trying to sell soybean oil mixed with colorants to pass off as extra-virgin olive oil.*

This is nothing new. As far back as 2007, an article in The New Yorker exposed the olive oil business as one of the most corrupt on the face of the earth. Titled “Slippery Business,” the story unmasked an industry awash in adulterated oil in an overt fraud perpetrated on unsuspecting and unknowledgeable consumers who had come to rely on the consumption of olive oil for their health.

The Italian region of Puglia was described as something like an olive oil chop shop, where tanks of substandard oil gush in from Turkey, Tunisia, Greece and Spain to be blended into a lie called “extra-virgin olive oil.”

What’s the big deal about olive oil being extra-virgin?

If you use olive oil for health, only extra-virgin oil has the high polyphenols, flavonoid antioxidants, vitamin E and omega-3 fatty acids shown to benefit heart and brain health.

You might be inspired to buy olive oil labeled “pure” because it’s cheaper. This term indicates the oil is refined, and we’re not talking high-class. Rather, it’s oil that started life badly and has been treated with solvents to mask odors and flavors. If a label confesses that the oil is refined – and some don’t – then you’ll know this is olive oil without a molecule of healthful benefit.

Extra-virgin olive oil must be fresh. There's a window of two to three years before even the most expensive pungent extra-virgin olive oil becomes rancid. When that happens, all those healthful properties you paid dearly for are lost. Besides, rancid olive oil is terrible for you. Rancid oils contain, or form, free radicals associated with diabetes, Alzheimer's disease and cancer. Rancidity can also deplete certain B vitamins, accelerate aging and damage DNA in cells.

In a 2010 study, the UC Davis Olive Center sampled random olive oil products from grocery shelves around the state. Chemical analysis revealed oils were cut with cheaper oils or doctored by refining. All claimed to be extra-virgin. Some were already rancid in the store!

"The problem is a lot of olive oils – and these are mostly imported oils – are labeled extra-virgin, and they're not," says Fran Gage, a member of the UC Davis olive oil tasting panel and author of "The New American Olive Oil: Profiles of Artisan Producers and 75 Recipes."

Gage refers to European Union oils. "Having tasted enough of these oils, 95 percent of them are defective," she says. Which is not to say that Greece, Italy, France and Spain do not have superb products. You just have to know what to look for.

Alexandra Kicenik Devarenne of Petaluma is an international olive oil consultant and a member of several UC system taste panels. She says the biggest red flag for EU oils is the phrase "may contain oils from ..."

If you examine a label of imported oil, you might see oils in descending order from Spain, Tunisia, Greece and Turkey. "This is worrisome," Devarenne says, "because it indicates someone (a packager or bottler) who is just buying on the bulk market, and unfortunately most of those companies are more concerned with price than quality." If the oil ends up in Lucca, the label may well say "packed in Italy." This does not mean there's a drop of Italian oil in the bottle.

What about seals of approval? The California Olive Oil Council in Berkeley strives to certify the state's olive oils as extra-virgin. Producers subject samples of their oil to sensory evaluation and chemical analysis to find defects or rancidity. The producers pay for this. If a sample has zero defects, that producer may affix the COOC seal on the label after bottling.

Devarenne says the COOC method isn't perfect, but that it's the best certification in California for now. "Your odds do improve that you are holding in your hand extra-virgin

olive oil,” Davarenne says of a COOC seal. She’d prefer that the COOC pull samples randomly off retail shelves before testing, rather than accept samples direct from producers.

For shoppers, the goal with olive oil is coming home with a pristine product. It’s up to us, squinting through reading glasses to decipher the microscopic print on the back of the bottle, to figure out what’s truthful and what’s a lie.

At Sacramento’s Corti Brothers, a helpful trend is already in place. Store President Darrell Corti now shelves separately the highest-quality olive oils from all over the world.

Whether your tastes run to delicate, medium-bitterness pungency or to robust and spicy, expect to pay for it. There is no such thing as a \$6 quart of extra-virgin olive oil.