



## Extra-virgin olive oil

tasting panel

At the peak of summer, eating light takes on a whole new meaning. Crisp salads with vibrant vinaigrettes, lightly dressed fresh pastas, and grilled lean meats and vegetables dominate the dinner table. Extra-virgin olive oil is ideal for preparing and garnishing these summery dishes, but which oil to buy? The vast array available at the supermarket can be overwhelming.

We thought we'd help by exploring the world of supermarket extra-virgin olive oils. In general, they should have a balance of bitterness, fruitiness (a distinct olive flavor), and pungency (in olive oil terminology, the peppery bite in the back of your throat). But because extra-virgin olive oils are blended and processed differently around the world, each oil is unique in aroma and flavor (appearance has no bearing on the quality of an oil). They run the gamut from mild and delicate to peppery and robust, depending on the production region, the harvest season, the olive varieties included in the finished oil, the acidity level, and many other factors.

There's really only one way to figure out which olive oils you like, and that's to taste and taste again. We sampled 23 readily available extra-virgin olive oils from across the globe (see It's All About the Taste, opposite, for an explanation of our tasting process). The oils listed here were our favorites.

### The ideal oil for:

- **Cooking:** Colavita
- **Vinaigrettes:** Ollo: Mild & Mellow
- **All-purpose:** Filippo Berio
- **Dipping crusty bread:** Tassos
- **A finishing touch:** McEvoy Ranch



### Peppery & ripe

Robust and complex, with a spicy kick and earthy olive flavor

**McEvoy Ranch** (\$20 for 375 ml), an extra-virgin olive oil from California's Napa Valley, was one of the most complex and deeply flavored oils of the lot. We loved its ripe, olivy fragrance, intensely floral and fruity flavors, and pungent, peppery finish. We wouldn't cook with it because heat would diminish its nuances. It's perfect for garnishing a cheese plate or a platter of grilled meat and vegetables.

### What does extra-virgin really mean?

According to the International Olive Oil Council (IOOC), olive oil qualifies as extra-virgin if it has been mechanically extracted from the olives (no chemicals or heat can be used in the process), has no more than 0.8% acidity, and has no defects in flavor or aroma. The United States is not a member of the IOOC, but oils from California are regulated by the California Olive Oil Council, whose standards are even stricter: It allows no more than 0.5% acidity.

### It's all about the taste

Tasting extra-virgin olive oil, like tasting wines or even chocolate, is a science unto itself, but our methodology was relatively simple. We conducted three separate tastings of seven or eight olive oils each so that we wouldn't get palate-weary. At professional olive-oil tastings, oils are served in blue or green glasses so the tasters will not be influenced by the oil's color, but for simplicity's sake, we poured ours into small white plastic cups.

We smelled each oil, sipped the oil straight, and then tasted it with very thin slices of white bread. Tart green apples served as palate cleansers (water and oil don't mix, so drinking water is ineffective). Our goal was to categorize each olive oil into one of the four flavor categories at left and to recommend culinary uses, whether for cooking or as a finishing touch.

### Speaking the language

As with wine tasting, there is a vocabulary for tasting extra-virgin olive oils. To help our tasters pin down the flavors they were experiencing, we referenced the following list of terms: almond, apple, artichoke, astringent, banana, bitter, briny, burnt, coarse, earthy, flat, fresh, fruity, grassy, greasy, green, harmonious, hay-like, herbal, lemony, melony, metallic, musky, nutty, old, peppery, perfumy, pungent, rancid, rough, suave, sweet, winy. ♦