

IN THE KITCHEN / WHY IT'S WORTH IT

## Liquid Gold

Is your extra virgin olive oil really worth its weight in you know what?

Go to your kitchen, will you? OK, how many of you see your olive oil out on the counter, where it'll be within reach while you're cooking? Chances are you have a big jug of the stuff because the price was right (you savvy shopper, you). But get this: A recent study\* from the University of California, Davis found that 69 percent of all olive oil labeled "extra virgin" found on the shelves in California grocery stores was, in fact, not. Which means there could be issues on the store shelves where you live.

What this might mean is that you're not getting what you think you're paying for in terms of quality, health benefits, and even flavor. Extra virgin olive oil is the highest grade of olive oil, prized for its purity, nuanced flavor, aroma, color, and acidity level. "The U.S. has been a bit of a dumping ground for foreign olive oil that wouldn't qualify to be put on European store shelves," says Dick Neilsen, general manager of McEvoy Ranch ([mcevoyranch.com](http://mcevoyranch.com)) in Petaluma, California. "A liter of oil being sold for \$7.99 probably isn't extra virgin," Neilsen says—no matter what the label may say.

Why should you care? If your oil isn't vetted by the International Olive Council (IOC), the body that sets standards for olive oil for the international community, or the California Olive Oil Council (COOC), the organization that certifies California-

processed oil to similarly rigorous standards, you have no way of knowing what's in your bottle. The acidity level and fatty acids need to be within a certain range (to give you those health benefits you're after), and the oil needs to pass muster with professional tasters to bear the extra virgin stamp of approval. In worst-case scenarios, there can be muddy sediment—literally sediment left from dirty olives—or the oil could have been made from rancid olives.

If you've never done a side-by-side taste test with high quality oil, you might not notice the difference. "People have to start sampling good oil," Neilsen says, who points out that McEvoy oil is so flavorful that just a drizzle can transform something as simple as steamed broccoli. If you've never had a Tuscan variety of olive oil, you might be surprised by the vibrant, peppery, and fruity qualities.

Looking at how the oil at McEvoy is produced is like looking at the COOC standards in action. The 18,000 trees on 80 acres, which were started by founder Nan McEvoy nearly 20 years ago with the help of a Tuscan agronomist, are cared for using organic and sustainable methods. Everyone on staff helps to hand-harvest the olives during the fall. The olives are then processed with on-site milling equipment, usually within about eight hours of being picked. "You



get a lot more [antioxidants like] polyphenols and flavor when you mill olives that are fresh,” Neilsen says.

This on-site mill process is where Neilsen says the art of making olive oil happens. At McEvoy, they have two mills—a newer blade mill that makes a strongly flavored oil, and a traditional stone mill that exposes the olives to air as it grinds them into a lightly flavored oil. Blending the two means that the company is able to create a consistent product from year to year, a luxury Neilsen says many other producers either don’t have, or have to create artificially.

McEvoy, at \$22 a bottle, is an investment, but it will bring a nuanced flavor to a wide variety of recipes. Use it as a finishing oil and as a way to train your palate to know what good oil tastes like. Just don’t store it near your

stove—the enemies of good oil are light and heat. It’s best to keep your oil in a dark cabinet until you’re ready to use it.

Next time you buy oil, look for extra virgin olive oil produced in California with the COOC seal of approval to avoid wasting money on inexpensive oil that claims to be something that it’s not. Better to go with companies that are voluntarily watching out for their own quality control, even if it means paying a little more. **RM**

*\*There is some ongoing debate about the standards used in the study, but we’ll let the researchers battle it out and just go with brands we trust for now.*

👉 Visit [readymade.com](https://www.readymade.com) for a list of other extra virgin olive oils we like and enjoy.