

The Surprise of Olive Oil

I love olive oil...and I will be the first to admit that I'm enamored with the fascinating element of surprise every time I crack open the seal of a new bottle!

My appreciation for olive oil is embedded deep in my DNA. I was born a first-generation Italian-American, and my parents used it in everything from breakfast to dessert. Growing up, I was never made aware of any other substitutes for this versatile oil, and for that reason alone, a time-honored tradition had once again seamlessly passed from generation to generation.

Like fine wine and chocolate

To me, olive oils are like fine wines, decadent chocolates, and gourmet coffees from around the world. They trigger a primal sensory experience that delivers a palette of different tastes, colors, and textures. Olive oil quality, like wine, is also subject to variant conditions of soil, climate, genetics, methods of harvest, and production. But unlike wine, olive oil does *not* get better with age!

Shopping for olive oil

Most of my cooking school students are looking for ways to better appreciate, enjoy, and cook healthier with olive oil. Unfortunately, shopping for olive oil can be very overwhelming, because there are

dozens of olive oils on a grocery store shelf and even more in a specialty store.

Different colors, many-shaped bottles and tins...Greek, Italian, filtered, infused, premium...the choices are downright bewildering! Impulse decisions based on price and fancy labels also don't guarantee taste or quality within. And then, there are those mystery terms like "extra virgin olive oil" and "first cold-pressed." So how do you decide what to buy?

There are a few *general* terms you should know before shopping for an olive oil:

Virgin and extra virgin oils are considered the best and most expensive. They are perfect for a salad dressing or as a core ingredient where their flavor can be showcased.

First cold-pressed extra virgin oil is my favorite because it is the first juice extracted from olives by a mechanical means without excessive heat, chemicals, or refining. Taste can vary from year to year because it is so pure and natural.

Light olive oil is usually low-quality (refined) oil that is marketed in U.S. supermarkets to health-conscious consumers for a premium price. The "light" designation refers to flavor, not caloric content, as all olive oil has the same amount of calories.

Discovering the nuances

An olive oil tasting is a great way to discover the mystique and dynamic nuances of oils before you



PHOTO: THOMAS BALSAMO

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actually invest in one. For that reason, I begin all of my cooking classes with a tasting to get my students working together as a team and focused on flavor.

My students are always amazed to learn how olive oil's color, taste, and regional varieties can range dramatically as they sample selected oils from left to right by dipping a piece of bread into one oil at a time. As my newly transformed critics take notes and debate their favorites, I remind them that oil tasting is akin to the way they would sample wine. To me, there is no right or wrong answer when it comes to personal taste...so discover, buy, and use what you like.

Beyond sampling, I love to help "foodies" showcase their precious oils by teaching them how to pair them with the perfect food – like wine. To learn more about how to host your own tasting, visit www.maryrosecooks.com for step-by-step instructions, or enroll in a class. U

Mary Rose's Best: Pasta Aglio e Olio

(SERVES 6 TO 8)

Try this great-tasting pasta with garlic and olive oil that can be prepared in less than 15 minutes.

- 1 pound dried pasta (100% semolina spaghetti or linguine)
- 1/2 cup cold-pressed extra virgin olive oil
- 2 to 4 peeled and lightly crushed garlic cloves
- 8 quarts of water (reserve 1/2 cup pasta water from cooking process)
- 1/4 cup sea salt
- 1 tablespoon crushed red pepper flakes (optional)

Heat oil over medium/low temperature in a skillet large enough to hold the cooked pasta and other ingredients. Add garlic and cook until garlic is golden brown. Remove skillet from heat and set aside to cool for five minutes. Add optional pepper flakes to cooled oil. Bring water to a rolling boil, add salt and pasta, and cook until *al dente*. Drain pasta in a colander (while reserving 1/2 cup of pasta water) and transfer pasta and water into the skillet with the cooled oil. Carefully toss pasta and oil together, salt to taste, and serve immediately with a green salad and sourdough baguette.

