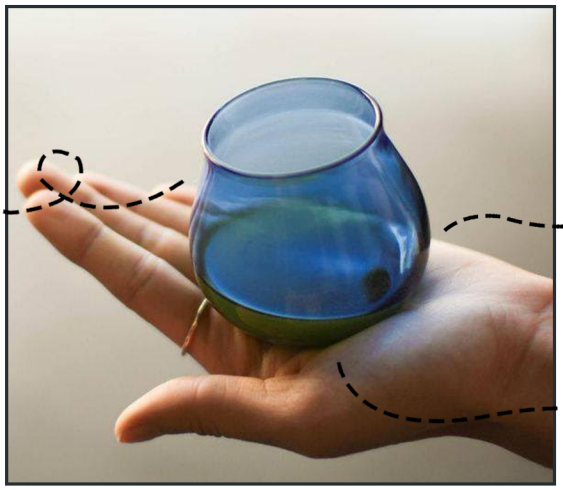
How to Taste Olive Oil

Professional tasters use specially-made blue glasses that are tapered to concentrate the oil's aroma. The glass is covered and the oil is gently warmed to 82°. It is important to evaluate the oil in an odor-free environment.

If tasting a series of oils, be prepared to clean your palate between tastes with a bite of green apple (preferably Granny Smith) followed by either still or sparkling water.

The best way to discover an oil's flavor is to sip it "neat" -meaning on its own without bread or other food. This will allow you to savor the oil's flavor without distraction.



The 4 Ss

Swirl—this releases the oil's aroma molecules. Keep the oil covered until ready to sniff.

Sniff—uncover the oil and quickly inhale from the rim of the glass. Take note of the intensity and the description of the aroma.

Slurp—take a small sip of the oil while also "sipping" some air. This slurping action emulsifies the oil and helps to spread it throughout your mouth. Take note of the retro-nasal aroma as well as the intensity of bitterness.

Swallow—an oil's pungency is judged by a sensation in your throat so you must swallow at least a small amount to thoroughly evaluate it. If the oil makes your throat scratchy or makes you want to cough, it is a pungent oil.

What is Flavor?

When we talk about flavors in food, we are reflecting on perceptions that come from two senses, smell and taste, working together. Our taste buds discern only 5 flavors– salt, sour, bitter, sweet and umami. All other flavor sensations come from retro-nasal aroma, which is the smell of the food while it is in our mouths. In sensory assessment we pay close attention to the retro-nasal aroma as we perceive different information from this action than from "forward" aroma (smelling through the front of our nostrils).

Attributes and Descriptors

The sensory assessment of olive oil uses scientific methodology to evaluate the quality of an oil. Tasters are trained to recognize specific attributes, which are measured and then statistically analyzed to determine if the oil is free of negative attributes (flavor defects), or not. Descriptive language that depicts the oil's aroma and flavor are subjective and therefore not scientific, yet these descriptors are helpful in differentiating extra virgin olive oils from one another. Descriptors play an important role when marketing oils to chefs and consumers.

POSITIVE ATTRIBUTES

Green Fruit
Artichoke
Cinnamon
Eucalyptus
Grass
Green almond
Green apple
Green banana
Green olive
Green tea
Herbaceous
Mint
Pine
Tomato leaf

Ripe Fruit
Buttery
Floral
Nutty
Ripe apple
Ripe banana
Ripe Olive
Stone Fruit
Tropical

Other
Black pepper
Cherry
Citrus
Hay-straw
Walnut shell
Woody

Fruity refers to the aroma of fresh, undamaged olive fruit in the oil, which is perceived through the nostrils as well as retro-nasally while oil is in the mouth.

Bitterness, which is a primary flavor component of fresh olives, is perceived through receptors (taste buds) on the tongue.

Pungency is a biting tactile sensation noticed in one's throat. Sometimes oils are referred to as one or two "coughers" as this is a common response to pungency.

NEGATIVE ATTRIBUTES/FLAVOR DEFECTS

These are aromas and flavors that result from damaged olives and deteriorated oil. Any oil containing negative attributes is not high quality, and does not qualify to be labeled as extra virgin.

Rancidity is the most common defect due to the oxidation process that naturally occurs as oils age.

Fusty is also common as it is the result of the improper handling of olives prior to milling. In scientific terms, this defect is caused by olives that have undergone anaerobic fermentation.

The following defects are less common:

Muddy sediment is also the result of anaerobic fermentation, but this is caused by the fermentation of olive particles that remain in the oil.

Vegetable water is the result of improper centrifugation (separation of oil from water).

Musty-humid-earthy is caused by mold spores that develop when olives have been stored in humid conditions prior to milling, or when olives are milled without removing mud and dirt from them.

Winey-vinegary-acid-sour is the result of aerobic fermentation that occurs during milling, which creates the formation of acetic acid, ethyl acetate and ethanol in the olive mash.

Frozen (frostbitten olives/wet wood) is caused when oil is extracted from olives which have been damaged by frost prior to harvest.

Heated or burnt occurs when the olive mash is exposed to excessive temperatures during processing.

Greasy refers to the flavor of diesel, machine or mineral oil, and is not used to describe the oil's texture or fluidity.

Briney occurs when oil is extracted from olives which were preserved in brine.

Grubby is the result of extracting oil from olives damaged by olive fly infestation.

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