

# Which Olive Oil is Best? Let Your Palate Decide

Stroll the aisles of most supermarkets and you'll find rows and rows of olive oils, from extra light to extra virgin—and everything in between. So how can you choose which to use for your salad dressing, and which for your stir-fry? Chef Tony Grande of Il Capriccio clears up the mystery—and offers a scrumptious recipe for fire-toasted bread infused with olive oil and herbs.

**Tim Hoey:** Before olive oil became a big deal in this country, I lived in Italy, where the golden liquid quietly ruled. I didn't know a thing about olive oil in those days, except that I craved it. Whatever I learned about oil was earned by tasting, tasting, and more tasting. Recently, I sat down with Chef Tony Grande of Il Capriccio and asked him whether my way of developing my palate for olive oil was the right way to go.

**Tony Grande:** In a sense, yes. To find the best oils, you have to try as many as possible. Your palate will decide. And each person's palate is unique because you bring a different taste level, background, and experience of food into the mix.

**Tim:** Isn't that like going on a trip without a map?

**Tony:** That's why it's important to go to independent, high-quality stores that have a strong selection. Talk to them about their oils. Find out about the oil's character, where it's grown, how it's processed. By the way, good oils start around twenty dollars a bottle.

**Tim:** How much can you tell about an oil by looking at the bottle and reading the label?

**Tony:** Visually, the quality of olive oil is not easy

to determine. In general, it's best not to judge oil by its color or by the label's contents. Olive oil producers are like chefs, in that some are known for the quality of their product. This gives you a sense of direction, but it's not foolproof. That's why you should talk to people who understand the oils they're selling.

**Tim:** Can a home cook use the same type of oil for every occasion?

**Tony:** No. Light-bodied oils are best for frying, pasta dishes, or for fish. Others are medium bodied, while some are complex and full-flavored. By far, the best grade is extra virgin.

**Tim:** Are there some common elements to extra virgin olive oil?

**Tony:** Yes. First, the oil is produced from green and light purplish olives. Second, the olives come from mature trees that, in some groves, can be a century old. Third, olives grown on top of a hill produce fruit with a finer bouquet.

**Tim:** Anything else?

**Tony:** The olives must be picked by hand from the tree. Olives that fall on the ground start to ferment and are unacceptable for extra virgin olive oil. Finally, the olives should be cold-pressed. The process involves picking olives in the morning and crushing them the same evening, in order to prevent fermentation. Also, Italian extra virgin olive oil should have an acidity of less than one percent.

**Tim:** Does acidity refer to a citrus "bite"?

**Tony:** No, not at all. It identifies the level of free fatty acids.

**Tim:** Is there a specific extra virgin olive oil "taste" we should expect?

**Tony:** No. One oil can be fruity, while another has a peppery character—and a third can suggest herbs or artichokes. A simple way to explore one particular oil is to pour some into the palm of your hands, rub them together, and put them to your nose, just as you would for a spice or coffee beans.

**Tim:** Any other advice?

**Tony:** Enjoy oil on something simple—allowing the quality to stand out. For example, fried or fire-toasted bread is a delicious treat. It's easy to do, and harmonizes beautifully with excellent olive oil. Pinzimonio, a raw vegetable appetizer, is another idea that's best in warmer weather.

**Tim:** Thanks, Tony. ▲

## Fresa di Pane Rustico

Four large slices Italian country-style bread

2-4 oz. extra virgin olive oil

1 tsp. fresh oregano

1 clove garlic

1 Tbs. grated Parmesan cheese

Pinch freshly ground black pepper

Preheat oven to 400° F.

Toast slices of bread to desired color in a toaster oven or barbecue. Rub garlic against the warm bread. Then drizzle the bread with the olive oil, along with the oregano and cheese. Sprinkle the pepper onto the slices. Bake in oven at 400° for a few minutes and serve.