

THE FLAVORS OF THE MEDITERRANEAN

Journey: Extra-Virgin Olive Oil Production

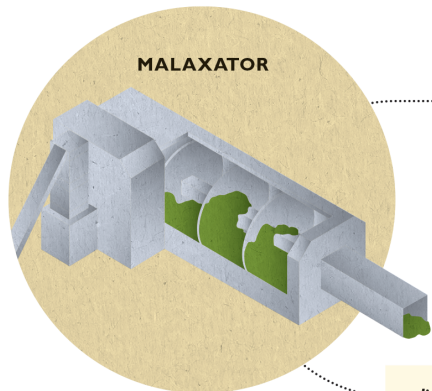
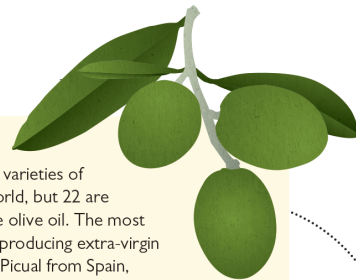
Every stage of the process of making olive oil affects the quality of the oil. Let's take a closer look.

1 START WITH OLIVES

Producers must start with good fruit—that is, ripe olives that have been harvested carefully and aren't bruised or fermented—and get it to the mill as quickly as possible, before spoilage sets in. To produce extra-virgin olive oil the olives are harvested when they are midway between semiblack and completely black. At this stage, both the volatile aroma compounds and oil (23 to 27 percent by weight) are at their highest levels. In Italy the olives must be delivered to the processing facility within 24 hours to ensure freshness.

TYPES OF OLIVES

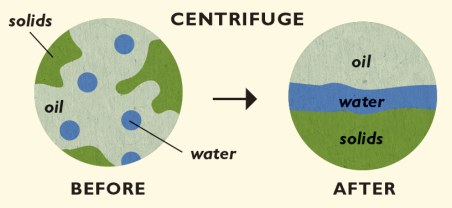
There are several thousand varieties of olives grown around the world, but 22 are most often used to produce olive oil. The most common olive varieties for producing extra-virgin olive oil are Arbequina and Picual from Spain, Koroneiki from Greece, and Coratina from Italy. Arbequina is noted for its ripe fruitiness, low bitterness, and pungency. Coratina is strongly green, herbaceous, bitter, and pungent. Koroneiki is strongly fruity and herbaceous, with mild bitterness, and pungency. Picual is very fruity with medium bitterness and pungency.



MALAXATOR

2 PRESS THEM

Extra-virgin olive oil must be pressed—and spun out by a centrifuge to separate the water from the oil—with clean equipment and without using high heat or chemicals. For this, whole olives are crushed into a paste and pumped into a machine called a malaxator where they are mixed and tumbled for 15 to 30 minutes to agglomerate the droplets of oil. Then the paste moves to a horizontal centrifuge to separate the oil, water, and solids. The crude oil is then pumped to a vertical separator to remove the last water.



3 DO NOT USE HEAT

While heat and chemicals extract more oil from the olives, it's at the cost of losing important aromatics and antioxidants that help keep the oil fresh-tasting.

5 SENSORY TESTING

To meet sensory criteria, an oil must not just taste flawless—or have what experts call “zero defects”—but also possess good fruity flavor.

OTHER TYPES OF OILS

The lower grades of olive oils range in acidity from 1 percent to 2 percent (as opposed to 0.8 percent in extra-virgin) and exhibit a less-distinctive flavor and several identifiable defects. Regular olive oils are blends of chemically refined (neutralized) high-acid oil and higher quality or extra-virgin oils. “Light” olive oil means the amount of extra-virgin oil in the blend is low, rather than light in calories. It's only “light” in flavor.

4 TRANSPORT AND STORE

Producing high-quality oil is only half the challenge. Because olive oil begins to degrade as soon as it's exposed to air, heat, and light, producers must transport and store it carefully to preserve its freshness. In large operations the oil may be allowed to rest in big containers for up to several months before bottling. The oil may be bottled unfiltered or filtered to produce clear, transparent oil. Extra-virgin olive oil is produced by purely mechanical means, with no refining other than optional filtration, and therefore contains all of the natural constituents. Olive oil has a short shelf life—best consumed within 12 months of harvest date. Look for olive oils that are sold in dark-colored bottles. Those sold in clear glass or even plastic bottles expose the oil to more damaging light.

