

OLIVE OIL TASTING

The logical place for an olive oil education to start is with tasting. All the reading in the world isn't going to mean a thing unless you can connect it to the **sensory experience—the aroma and taste of olive oil**.

Professional **olive oil tasters** **sip the oil straight from little blue glasses** that look like votive candle-holders from your favorite café. Although ultimately we must remember that olive oil is an ingredient in food, **tasting it straight does have the advantage of giving you a completely undisguised taste of the oil**. Don't be scared. A little sip of olive oil won't hurt you—it's actually very nice once you get used to the idea—and it will help you learn to recognize characteristics without the complication of other flavors.

The aromas of olive oil are a critical part of its flavor. The best way to appreciate them is to **pour a little bit of olive oil (a tablespoon or two) into a small wineglass** (or nifty **blue tasting glass** if you have it). **Cup the glass in one hand and cover it with the other to trap the aromas inside while you warm it up.** Hold it, swirl it, warm it for a minute or two. Then stick your nose into the glass and take a good whiff of the aroma or "nose" of the olive oil. You may notice **the smell of fresh-cut grass, cinnamon, tropical fruits or other aromas of ripe or green olive fruit**. This is a good time to point out that the word "**fruity**" in olive oil can refer to **vegetable notes**, i.e. green olive fruit, as well as to ripe fruit notes. So think of artichokes, grass and herbs as "fruit" when you taste olive oils!

Now take a sip of the oil. Don't be too wimpy about it; if you don't get a decent amount you won't appreciate all the qualities of the oil because it is only getting on the tip of your tongue. You ideally want to get the impressions of the entire mouth and tongue.

Suck air through the oil to coax more aromas out of it, and then—this is important—**close your mouth and breathe out through your nose.** This "**retronasal**" perception will give you a whole bunch of other **flavor notes**. Retronasal perception is possible because your mouth connects to your nose in the back. Now swallow some, or all of the oil.

Pungency is a peppery sensation, detected in the throat, so swallowing some oil is important. Pungency is a positive characteristic of olive oil. It is a chemical irritation, like the hotness of chilies, and equally appealing once you get used to it. Once you start to get into that spicy kick, it is hard to imagine life without it. **Pungency can be very mild—just the tiniest tingle—or it can be intense enough to make you cough.** Olive oil aficionados will sometimes refer to a one, two, or look out, a three-cough oil.

The third of the three positive attributes of olive oil, in addition to fruity and pungent, is bitter. **Bitterness**, like pungency, is also an acquired taste. As anyone who has ever tasted an olive right off the tree can attest, **bitter is a prominent taste in fresh olives**. Curing olives for the table, in fact, has to start with a debittering process. Since olive oil is made from uncured olives, varying degrees of bitterness can be found; oil made from riper fruit will have little to no bitterness, oil made from greener fruit can be distinctly bitter. American taste horizons are broadening; we are exploring bitterness with foods like dark chocolate, bitter salad greens and now, robust olive oils.

The fruity characteristics you may notice in the mouth include nutty, buttery and other ripe flavors, and a fuller spectrum of green fruity notes. Another characteristic that is most pronounced in this retronasal perception, is **rancidity**—we will explore that when we look at the common defects of olive oil in another article. **The traditional palate cleanser between olive oils, is water, plain or sparkling, and slices of Granny Smith apple.**

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Once you have tasted an olive oil plain, **the next step is to taste it in combination with food**. This is where olive oil comes to life, as one of the flavors in a dish. Wine presents a good analogy: a wine that is great with food might not be appropriate as an aperitif. Olive oil is the same: sometimes an olive oil that seems over-the-top pungent and bitter by itself or with bread, is perfection itself when used to top a hearty bean soup.

Pairing olive oils and foods is an entire discussion of its own, but for a great learning experience, try three different olive oils—one delicate, one medium, one robust—with a variety of items. Good choices are warm boiled potatoes, fresh mozzarella, ripe tomatoes, bread, warm cooked white beans, salad greens, seasonal cooked vegetables, grilled steak, poached or grilled chicken; pretty much whatever is for dinner! Cook things simply, without a lot of added seasonings, but be sure you have some sea salt on hand.

Now taste pieces of the same food dipped in each of the oils. Notice how the flavors interact. Is it a harmonious mix? A contrast? Does one flavor overwhelm the other, or do they balance well? This is a fun thing to do with a group of friends: you can taste together and compare impressions. Add a couple of wines—a red and a white—to complete the pairings, and you have yourself a dinner party!

Common Olive Oil Characteristics and Their Descriptors

Negative

Fusty Brined olives, lactic acid.

Musty Mouldy, mould spores, musty room.

Winey Vinegar and/or nail polish remover. Exactly the same as volatile acidity (VA) in wine.

Rancid Off walnuts, stale oil. The most common defect.

Muddy Sediment Stale muddy water, fetid, off stale milk, baby vomit.

Metallic Metal on tooth fillings (light sensation of), epsom salts.

Earthy Earth, wet soil.

Burnt Caramel.

Woody Twiggy.

Positive

Fruity Grassy, spinach, artichoke, green banana, leafy, tomato leaf, bean sprout, green tomato, herbaceous, hay, nutty, almond, pine nut, orange, lemon, floral, spicy, apple, eucalyptus, perfumed, confectionery, buttery. (These are only a sample of all the different characters seen in olive oil)

Bitter grapefruit rind, tonic water.

Pungent pepper heat, chilli heat, throat catching.

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Attributi positivi

Fruttato: insieme delle sensazioni olfattive, dipendenti dalla varietà delle olive, caratteristiche dell'olio ottenuto da frutti sani e freschi, verdi o maturi, percepite per via diretta e/o retronasale.

L'attributo olio fruttato si definisce verde quando le sensazioni olfattive ricordano quelle dei frutti verdi, caratteristiche dell'olio ottenuto da frutti verdi.

L'attributo fruttato si definisce maturo quando le sensazioni olfattive ricordano quelle dei frutti maturi, caratteristiche dell'olio ottenuto da frutti verdi e da frutti maturi.

Amaro: sapore elementare caratteristico dell'olio ottenuto da olive verdi o inviate, percepito dalle papille caliciformi che formano la V linguale.

Piccante: sensazione tattile pungente caratteristica di oli prodotti all'inizio della campagna, principalmente da olive ancora verdi, che può essere percepita in tutta la cavità boccale, in particolare in gola.

Attributi negativi

Morchia: flavor caratteristico dell'olio ottenuto da olive ammurate o conservate in condizioni tali da aver sofferto un avanzato grado di fermentazione anaerobica o dell'olio rimasto in contatto con i fanghi di decantazione, che hanno anch'essi subito un processo di fermentazione anaerobica, in depositi sotterranei e aerei.

Muffa-umidità: flavor caratteristico dell'olio ottenuto da frutti nei quali si sono sviluppati abbondanti funghi e lieviti per essere rimasti ammucchiati per molti giorni e in ambienti umidi.

Avvinato-inacetito / Acido-agro: flavor caratteristico di alcuni oli che ricorda quello del vino o dell'aceto.

Esso è dovuto essenzialmente a un processo di fermentazione aerobica delle olive o dei resti di pasta di olive in fiscoli non lavati correttamente, che porta alla formazione di acido acetico, acetato di etile ed etanolo.

Metallico: flavor che ricorda il metallo. È caratteristico dell'olio mantenuto a lungo in contatto con superfici metalliche durante i procedimenti di macinatura, gramolatura, pressione o stoccaggio.

Rancido: flavor degli oli che hanno subito un processo ossidativo intenso.

Cotto o stracotto: flavor caratteristico dell'olio dovuto ad eccessivo e/o prolungato riscaldamento durante l'ottenimento, specialmente durante la termo-impastatura, se avviene in condizioni termiche inadatte.

Fieno-legno: flavor caratteristico di alcuni oli provenienti da olive secche.

Grossolano: sensazione orale/tattile densa e pastosa prodotta da alcuni oli vecchi. Lubrificanti: flavor dell'olio che ricorda il gasolio, il grasso o l'olio minerale.

Acqua di vegetazione: flavor acquisito dall'olio a causa di un contatto prolungato con le acque di vegetazione che hanno subito un processo di fermentazione.

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Salamoia: flavor dell'olio estratto da olive conservate in salamoia.

Sparto: flavor caratteristico dell'olio ottenuto da olive pressate in fiscoli nuovi di sparto. Esso può essere diverso se il fiscolo è fatto con sparto verde o con sparto secco.

Terra: flavor dell'olio ottenuto da olive raccolte con terra o infangate e non lavate. **Verme:** flavor dell'olio ottenuto da olive fortemente colpite da larve di mosca dell'olivo (*Bactrocera Oleae*).

Cetriolo: flavor caratteristico dell'olio che ha subito un condizionamento ermetico eccessivamente prolungato, particolarmente in lattine, che è attribuito alla formazione di 2-6 nonadienale.

Legno umido: flavor caratteristico dell'olio estratto da olive che hanno subito una gelata sull'albero. 3.3.

Olive Oil Tasting The Recognose Wheel

16 sensory classes
and 72 different terms
used to describe
the complex range
of aromas and tastes
found in virgin olive oils

