

# Traditional Olive Oil

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The recent promotion of olive oil has been based on the fact that olive oil is regarded as healthy, protective against some diseases and a flavour-enhancing ingredient. However, if the consumption of olive oil is to reach higher and sustainable volume, there needs to be a re-evaluation of the promotional tactics.

It is reasonable to suggest that for consumers to reap the health benefits of olive oil they must use it the same way it was used when the relevant studies took place. The most important of these studies was the Seven-Country Study (US, France, Italy, Greece, Yugoslavia, Finland and Japan). It started in the late 1950s and continued for several years.

The main result of this study is that the traditional Mediterranean diet is healthy and protective against disease. The finding that olive oil is beneficial to health was largely based on the fact that the people on the Greek island of Crete had the highest score on major health criteria and the highest consumption of olive oil (in addition to other positive dietary customs).

But the olive oil which the Cretans used was cold pressed and unrefined. In those days olive oil was a natural olive fruit juice and there were no other types other than the lampante olive oil which was inferior and was used mainly for oil burners.

Today's 'olive oil' is a highly processed product deprived not only of the flavour one expects from genuine olive oil but also deprived of important nutritional components. It is unfortunate that in order to get similar quality olive oil one has to look for virgin or extra virgin. This is very confusing not only to newcomers but also to traditional users of olive oil.

Also, because the cold press extraction method has been virtually replaced with the three-phase centrifugation system, the extra virgin oil, although very close to the cold press, is not exactly the same. Another reasonable assumption is that for health benefits and enhanced food flavour to be materialized, the olive oil must be introduced into the daily diet – as the Cretans and other Mediterranean people do. At present, the promotion of olive oil appears to be for the up-market sector – with astronomical prices. Unless one is very wealthy, I cannot envisage an everyday use of olive oil, where the consumer will not be counting the cents it would cost for each mouthful.

While the importance of low acidity is undoubted, too much emphasis has been placed on this at the expense of producing and packaging low cost virgin olive oil for everyday use. Consumers should be made aware that a virgin olive oil with an acidity higher than 1% (but less than 3.3%), is still a much better option than even the best of the 'olive oil' category.

One area to which the olive oil industry could turn its attention – so that lower prices may be achieved - is the packaging of olive oil in larger quantities. For this to be successful, the consumer must be informed how to store olive oil properly. Only then can the consumer reap the benefits of the everyday use of olive oil.

For successful and sustainable promotion of olive oil, the following points need to be considered – by the olive oil industry and food-regulation authorities:

- The virgin olive oil label should state clearly: the extraction process i.e. cold press or centrifugation; the thermal conditions during the extraction process; whether water has been used during the extraction or decantation process; and whether filtration took place.
- For the olive oil category, it should be clearly stated that it is a mixture of refined and virgin olive oil. Also stated should be the percentage of the refined olive oil used. Misleading terms such as 100%, natural and pure should not be allowed.
- The olive-pomace oil should include the percentage of olive-pomace oil used.
- The panel test scoring could be abandoned. It is very subjective, very expensive and without any real benefits to the consumer. As long as the oil is in good condition and it hasn't been adulterated the taste evaluation could be left to the consumer.
- An effective monitoring system should be developed and implemented where random, unannounced inspections of the production and packaging of olive oil industries take place – with penalty provisions for those who do not fulfil the claims they make about their produce.
- Most importantly, replace the existing classifications (virgin, refined, olive oil) with: olive oil, refined olive oil and blended olive oil.

The current International Olive Oil Council (IOOC) classifications are not only confusing but they are also misleading. Take for example the following definition for virgin olive oil:

**'Virgin olive oil** is the olive oil obtained from the fruit of the olive tree solely by mechanical or other physical means under conditions, particularly thermal conditions, that do not lead to alterations in the oil, and which has not undergone any treatment other than *washing*, decantation, centrifugation and *filtration*.' (Italics are mine.)

As washing – occurring for example when the three-phase extraction system is used – and filtration cause the loss of natural antioxidants, the use of these words in this definition is unfortunate. These natural antioxidants are not only beneficial to health but they also extend the oil's shelf life. The omission of pressing, in preference to centrifugation, is also unfortunate.

Following overseas trends, the Australian olive oil industry now seems to be aiming for the 'prize-winning' extra virgin olive oil. In doing so, they are overlooking the fact that it is the 'lower-priced' virgin olive oil that will succeed in creating a broad-based sustainable market. I recently watched a television program where the growers and producers placed great emphasis on the blending of olive oils and on selecting the most appropriate cultivars to produce a 'Tuscany' flavour olive oil.

The production of 'Tuscany' olive oil comes at a high cost. This is because the olives for this type of oil are harvested when they are still largely green and their oil content is lower. It is also doubtful that the strong flavour, associated with this type of oil, would be acceptable to the newcomer and the everyday user.

Australian olive industry people often visit the main olive oil producing countries (Spain, Italy and Greece). But, as with other researchers who are investigating aspects of the Mediterranean diet, they appear to overlook the real experts i.e. the ordinary people who aim to grow whatever olive varieties are best suited for their area and to obtain the best olive oil they can get from these varieties.