Seven Myths and Truths about Olive Oil

In CTF, we advocate a Mediterranean type diet, and olive oil is a mainstay of that way of eating. This article is from “Seven Myths (and Truths) About Olive Oil” by Nancy Harmon Jenkins, The Wall Street Journal, May 19, 2015. Nancy Jenkins is the author of “Virgin Territory: Exploring the World of Olive Oil”.

So, what do we need to know about olive oil? Jenkins says that extra-virgin olive oil is the only olive oil worthy of consideration. Extra-virgin olive oil should be only the oily juice of the olive, minus the water within the olive. It may have been filtered, but it has not been refined. The aroma and flavor from each bottle will vary from producer to producer. The taste depends on the variety of olives pressed to their state of maturity to the speed and care with which they have been processed. Still the extra-virgin designation does not mean that the olive oil is any good.

Here are Jenkins’ suggestions in using olive oil:

1. **Buy oil in dark glass containers.** Do not buy an olive oil that has been sitting in a sunny window or under bright lights. Olive oil is extremely sensitive to heat and light.
2. **Do judge the oil by its price tag.** Like the best wine, the best extra-virgin is expensive—it is hand harvested, pressed within hours of picking, and milled locally.
3. **Be a label snob.** The label on the bottle should state where the olives were grown. It may also state which varieties were used and where and when the oil was made. It may even give the free oleic acid content of the oil that is a measure of rancidity at the time of pressing. Producers of the best olive oil would never put an oil on the market with a grade of over .3%. DOP, DO, DOC, and PDO identify oil produced according to a “protected denomination of origin”, a certification controlled by the European Union which includes top oil producers in Spain, Greece, Italy, Portugal, France, and most recently Croatia. In our state, the California Olive Oil Council endorses high quality oils produced in California. Organic certification is also a good guarantee that an oil is what it claims to be.
4. **Fetishize freshness.** A harvest date on the label conveys a producer’s pride. Currently the most recent harvest, 2014-2015 in the northern hemisphere, is best of all. And don’t be swayed by a “best by” date that can be 18 months after bottling. Since the oil may already be a year or more old when bottled, you could be buying a three-year old oil without knowing it.
5. **The phrase “first cold pressing’ is meaningless.** This term refers to an outdated way of making olive oil when the cleanest oil did, in fact, come from the first pressing of the olives. Today it is a marketing ploy.
6. **Go ahead and turn up the heat.** Extra virgin olive oil is more stable than other oils, because of its high polyphenolic content. Extra virgin remains stable up to 410 degrees or a bit higher, depending on the extent of filtration (less filtration means lower temperatures). Deep-frying is usually at 350 to 360 degrees, so
extra virgin olive oil is acceptable for this type of cooking. Extra-virgin olive oil can be used in baking too.

7. **Just don’t expect to get your daily allowance of omega-3s.** If an extra-virgin olive oil displays more than a trace of omega-3s on its label, that suggests that another oil such as canola is also contained in that bottle. Extra-virgin olive oil is good for us, because of all of the antioxidants it contains, important in the defense of many chronic diseases—not because of its omega 3 fatty-acid content. You can taste the antioxidant polyphenols in the bitterness and pepperiness of extra-virgin olive oils. Enjoy these interesting flavors as you use various extra-virgin olive oils in your food preparation!