

Olive Oil from Beyond Health

by Raymond Francis

Why Beyond Health Olive Oil? For those who have asked this question, the answer lies in Beyond Health's mission: To improve the health of the American people by supplying cutting-edge health education and carefully researched, world class, health-supporting products. Toward this end, Beyond Health searches for the highest-quality products and makes them available to the public—all in one place. This is a unique and valuable service, and selecting healthy olive oil is just one example of that service. The health benefits of olive oil are well established, which is why I recommend it. The challenge is to find *real* olive oil.

The world is awash in phony food products. For example, new genetic tests indicate that 77 percent of the fish sold in the U.S. as red snapper consists of other illegally mislabeled species. The problems with olive oil are *far* worse. *A 1996 study by the FDA found that 96 percent of the extra virgin oils they tested had been adulterated with cheap, inferior oils.* When I wrote *The Olive Oil Scandal* in 1998, I began a quest to find *real* high quality olive oil that would be healthy for Beyond Health's customers. Putting the Beyond Health label on olive oil is a continuation of this quest. Olive oil is a natural product with annual fluctuations in flavor and antioxidant content due to changing weather conditions. By branding its own oil, Beyond Health is free to research each annual harvest for the best combination of flavor and health-giving properties. The best of the best can be supplied without having to switch brands and confuse customers.

Most olive oil is *not* what you think it is, and it is *not* healthy. There is not enough space in this article to describe all the differences between *real* extra virgin olive oil and the adulterated products normally sold in stores. Suffice it to say the difference is substantial, and these oils should be avoided. The problems with olive oil begin with the demand exceeding supply. To meet the demand, the international olive oil market is fraught with fraud. Adulteration is rampant, and *more olive oil is sold than is produced.* This is why finding *real* olive oil is not a job for the average shopper. The good intentions of adding healthy olive oil to your diet can quickly become a bad choice, both for your pocketbook and your health.

Most olive oil today is adulterated with other highly-processed oils. *Such oils are not health supporting and most are toxic.* They often contain toxic trans fats, solvent residues, pesticides, and other contaminants. Highly refined, solvent extracted, hazelnut oil is the most common adulterant because it is cheap, and its presence is extremely difficult to detect even with the best analytical methods. In fact, much of the olive oil on the international market is up to 50 percent hazelnut oil, often containing toxic solvent residues from its manufacture and, of course, lacking the health benefits of real olive oil. Even the portion that is olive oil is not high quality. These blended oils are often made with low-quality olives grown in poor soils or hot climates and are lacking in antioxidants. Low-quality olives include those that are harvested late and are overripe, or those not processed quickly enough after harvesting to prevent damaging fermentation. Low quality olive oil is usually highly processed to improve its apparent quality. Techniques such as steaming, bleaching with peroxide, and adding food coloring are often employed. Adding a small amount of higher-quality oil is a way of adding flavor. Such processed and adulterated oils are manipulated to meet certain technical and taste requirements in order to appear to be higher quality, but they are not healthy. Labeling such oils as "extra virgin" is both fraudulent and commonplace. In fact, the words "extra virgin" and "cold-pressed" on the label are meaningless in today's market.

Consumers are not adequately protected because the laws have not kept pace with the development of the industry. Olive oil was once a cottage industry based on family-owned farms that took pride in their oil. Today it is a giant global industry. This transition is why many of the abuses in this industry are not yet illegal. For example, *there is no law that says extra virgin olive oil has to be 100 percent olive oil*. Even so, the FDA has rejected olive oil shipments from places like Lebanon, Tunisia and Turkey due to egregious adulteration and contamination. Recently in a Whole Foods market, I saw one-liter bottles of Italian, extra virgin, olive oil selling for \$6.99. One can only guess what is in those bottles. In Italy, *just the labor and bottling costs for a liter of high quality, extra-virgin oil can be \$10*. Such oils normally sell for \$50 per liter in the United States. Low price means low quality, but even price is no guarantee of quality. I have seen low-quality oils selling in gourmet specialty shops for premium prices. One distributor who was prosecuted for selling adulterated oil said in his defense: "I'm a crook, but not in a wrongful way. My customers knew from the lower price that I wasn't selling them 100 percent olive oil."

High quality, extra virgin olive oil contains generous amounts of flavonoids, polyphenols and squalene. Researchers have identified these constituents of olive oil as protective against cancer, which is one reason why olive oil is among the healthiest oils you can consume. Flavonoids, polyphenols and squalene are antioxidants that help protect cells from damage by free radicals. Squalene also contributes to the body's detoxification and defense systems. Finding flavorful oil that optimizes these antioxidants is what you want, but *not* what you get with most olive oil.

The exceptional health-giving properties of olive oil have been cited in numerous studies as contributing to the well-known health benefits of the Mediterranean diet. The Mediterranean diet is rich in fresh vegetables, fruits, nuts, and olive oil; people on Mediterranean diets often obtain *one third* of their calories from olive oil. In addition to the health benefits of these good foods, olive oil itself is known to reduce cholesterol, prevent oxidation of LDL cholesterol, lower blood pressure, and prevent cancer as determined by studies in numerous journals including the *American Journal of Cardiology*, the *Archives of Internal Medicine*, the *Journal of Epidemiology and Community Health*, and the *European Journal of Clinical Nutrition*.

Given all the problems, how does Beyond Health go about finding oil that meets my exacting standards for flavor and health-giving properties? The answer is we work at it. Quality in olive oil production is even more variable than wine production. Creating a quality olive oil is an art and is even more expensive than creating a quality wine. Beyond Health looks for a producer who is growing olives in rich soil. The farm must be located in a climate that is not too warm or too wet, which can lead to lower quality oil. Olives grown in colder climates have more antioxidants, while wet climates have more pests requiring the use of insecticides. Olives must be handpicked, not mechanically harvested, because care must be taken to exclude leaves from the harvest and not to injure the olives. Injured olives begin to ferment, and while leaves add desired green color to the oil, the chlorophyll from leaves promotes oxidation, destroying precious antioxidants. The harvested olives must be crushed within hours, not days (as is often the case); olives begin to ferment and turn rancid within three to four hours of harvesting. All this extra care adds to cost.

To produce high-quality oil, traditional production techniques should be employed. A stone wheel should be used to crush the olives. This is slow, time consuming and costly, but results in a better product where, importantly, the oil and water fractions are easily separated. Crushing with faster, less expensive methods such as a high speed hammer mill causes the oil and water to become emulsified. This results in intimate contact between the oil and water that dissolves away precious water-soluble antioxidants. Emulsification makes it more difficult to separate the water from the oil and necessitates that the oil be filtered, because water can be absorbed on the small particles. *The best oils are unfiltered and cloudy because the small particles contain both flavor and antioxidants*. Most commercially produced oil is filtered and looks clear because their high speed production techniques introduce hard-to-separate water. Any water in the oil will cause it to oxidize and deteriorate much faster.

Olive oil should not be packaged in clear-glass containers. Producers do this as a marketing technique to display the oil, and to save money because clear glass costs less. Dark bottles are necessary because light catalyzes reactions in the oil that destroys antioxidants and causes rapid aging. Even light-protected olive oil is best consumed within eighteen months of its bottling date. Oil that is significantly older than two years will begin to turn rancid and lose its health-giving properties. This is why Beyond Health dates all its bottles. Refrigerating the oil will help to prolong its useful life.

In an era when chronic disease is an out-of-control epidemic, it is essential to eat a healthful diet. Remember, the purpose of food is to give your cells what they need for good health, and *real* olive oil does this. We would all do well to emulate the Mediterranean diet. While there is no one Mediterranean diet, the common characteristics include six-to-nine servings of fruits and vegetables per day, as opposed to the two-to-three servings of the average American. Rich in fruits and vegetables, this diet also includes whole grains, nuts, beans, fish and olive oil. The Mediterraneans consume less sugar, red meat and dairy. Eating this diet has proven to reduce inflammation and blood clotting and to prevent heart disease, hypertension and cancer. Consumption of *real* olive oil is an essential part of this healthy diet. To obtain Beyond Health Olive Oil, go to www.beyondhealth.com or call 800-250-3063.

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