

The Olive Oil Scandal

by Raymond Francis

Here is a scandal in the olive oil industry, and if you use olive oil, you need to know about it. It's always advisable to substitute healthy olive oil in place of the toxic refined oils typically available in the supermarket. Here is the problem: not all olive oils are created equal. Only real olive oil will provide all the health-promoting benefits of olive oil, and trying to find real olive oil is like looking for a needle in a haystack.

Olive oil has been part of the human diet for more than 5,000 years. Millennia of human experience as well as modern research indicate that olive oil is beneficial to health, and can safely be included in our diet. In fact, olive oil has been singled out as a key contributor to the health of the Greek centenarians. To preserve the same health benefits that these Greeks received, modern oil must be produced in a manner that does not damage the oil's nutrients.

Unfortunately, most commercial olive oil is processed in a manner that damages its nutritional content, and this is only the beginning of the problems with it. Most of the olive oil on the market today does not duplicate what our ancestors were eating, and frequently people are not getting what they think they are buying. Almost all olive oil is processed and diluted in ways that result in the loss of nutrients, which are essential to health. Olive oil is almost unique among the oils, in that it can be consumed in its crude form without refining. Not refining the oil has the benefit of conserving the vitamins, essential fatty acids, antioxidants, and other nutrients. The powerful antioxidants, in real extra virgin olive oil are beneficial to health and protect us from damage caused by free radical oxidation.

Cell membranes contain fatty acids that are highly susceptible to free radical damage. This damage produces lipid peroxides that can kill the cell. Real olive oil contains antioxidants (polyphenols, vitamin E, and other natural antioxidants) that prevent this type of damage. Numerous studies show that olive oil reduces cholesterol, lowers blood pressure, inhibits platelet aggregation, and lowers the incidence of breast cancer. Because it is so rich in antioxidants, olive oil appears to dramatically reduce the oxidation of LDL cholesterol, thereby preventing heart disease. These same natural antioxidants also add to the stability, shelf life, and flavor of the oil.

Historically, high quality olive oil, rich in antioxidants, was easy to obtain, but not any more. Today, high quality oil is almost unobtainable. One has to seek out the small family-owned farms, where the oil is literally produced in ways similar to the Greeks and Romans. On these farms, organic olives are picked by hand so as to not damage the skin or pulp. They are transported in well-aerated containers and milled within 48 hours of harvesting. Before milling, leaves and twigs are removed; the olives are washed, dried, and then crushed. The oil is separated from the olive paste without the use of heat, hot water, or solvents, and it is left unfiltered, as filtering also removes many nutrients. The first pressing produces the best extra virgin oil.

Producing olive oil the old way is more time consuming and expensive. The costs of harvesting by hand, to protect the fruit from damage, are astronomical, but necessary to making good oil. The increasing demand for olive oil has moved production toward automation and mass production. Modern factories extract more oil more cheaply, but their processing methods substantially reduce the nutritional quality of the oil.

To reduce costs, olives are machine harvested along with leaves and twigs. Olives that have dropped on the ground are often mixed with the good ones. They are shipped in all kinds of containers, many of which are poorly ventilated, and heaped in large piles. (Here, olives are stored for too long and often become moldy.) The oil is then extracted in a continuous centrifuge while hot water is used to help separate out the oil. Antioxidant polyphenols are soluble in water and are washed away in this process, thereby lowering the shelf life and the nutritional quality of the oil. Italy alone produces 800,000 cubic meters of waste water per year from this process. Because substantial amounts of antioxidants are washed away, factory produced olive oil has a short shelf life of only months, whereas real olive oil lasts for two to three years.

Most people think that by purchasing extra virgin olive oil, they are guaranteed of getting the best quality oil. Not so! Almost all the "extra virgin" olive oil on the market does not supply the nutritional value and healthful properties that we have a right to expect from olive oil. A major criterion for grading olive oil is its level of acidity. Extra virgin oil should have a free oleic acid acidity of no more than one percent, whereas ordinary virgin olive oil can have an acidity of up to 3.3 percent. Lower quality oils can be diluted or refined to bring the acidity down so they can be labeled as extra virgin. But now the oil has been adulterated, and that's not what you want. The "extra virgin" label is no guarantee of quality. Most of it has been processed in ways that reduce its nutritional value. To complicate matters more, the term "extra virgin" has no official meaning in the United States. The U.S. is not a member of the International Olive Oil Council. So olive oil sold here can be labeled "extra virgin" without meeting the accepted international standards.

Nowhere does it say that "extra virgin" olive oil has to be made 100% from olives. Soaring demand for olive oil has outstripped the available supply. Very simply, more olive oil is sold than is produced. Manufacturers often dilute the olive oil with other oils. This may be the biggest food fraud of the 20th Century. Investigators have gathered evidence indicating that the biggest olive oil brands in Italy, Bertolli, Sasso, and Cirio, have for years been systematically diluting their extra virgin olive oil with cheap, highly-refined hazelnut oil imported from Turkey. Despite the fact that details of this scandal have been published in *Merum*, a Swiss-German magazine, and in Italian journals such as *Agra Trade*, and the newspaper *Gazzetta del Mezzogiorno*, this information has been successfully suppressed and is known to only a handful of people. International arrest warrants have been issued and seized documents indicate that at least 10,000 tons of hazelnut oil is involved. As much as 20% refined hazelnut oil can be added to olive oil and still be undetectable to the consumer.

In 1996, a study by the FDA found that 96% of the olive oils they tested, while being labeled 100% olive oil, had been diluted with other oils. A recent study in Italy found that only 40% of the olive oil brands labeled "extra virgin" actually met those standards. Italy produces 400,000 tons of olive oil for domestic consumption, but 750,000 tons are sold. The difference is made up with highly refined, nut and seed oils. Less strict guidelines make the situation even worse in the United States. Like in Italy, more oil is "produced" in California than there are olives available. The difference is made up with less expensive oils such as corn, soy, and sunflower. The problem is these other oils have been refined. The high temperatures of the refining process change the molecular structure of the oils, making them toxic.

This is scary stuff when you consider how extremely important oil is to human health. Our modern chronic disease problems are the result of, in a short period of time, fundamentally changing our diet. One of the most fundamental changes has been the type and the amount of fats and oils that we consume. The mass-consumption of refined and hydrogenated oils has proved to be a disaster for human health. Hydrogenated oils have been implicated in both our cancer and heart disease epidemics. All modern processed oils are toxic and injurious to human health. To reverse our pandemic of chronic disease, we have to return to eating a more traditional diet, and high quality olive oil can safely be included in that diet. It's not so much the case that olive oil should be added to the diet as it is that healthy, real olive oil should be used to replace the unhealthy, processed oils now being consumed.

How does one ensure that they are eating the most healthful oil? Find an extra virgin olive oil that is cold pressed, unfiltered, and looks cloudy. Factory produced olive oil looks clear. If it's clear, it has been filtered which further reduces the nutritional quality of the oil. Real olive oil is not filtered and looks cloudy. The oil should be packaged in dark glass bottles to protect it from the damaging effects of light. Real olive oil is still produced in small estate bottled settings. The challenge is to find one that does it all right.

After selecting the oil, it has to be stored properly. When properly stored, real extra virgin olive oil can last two to three years. Because of processing, most of the extra virgin oil on the market has a shelf life of only a few months. A good rule of thumb is to purchase oil in small bottles and consume it within a year of purchase; this will also ensure getting the best flavor. Store the oil away from both heat and light. Storing in a dark place is important because exposure to light causes reactions that destroy the oil thousands of times faster than just oxygen alone. During storage, olive oil oxidizes and undergoes a slow, continuous, and irreversible deterioration until it becomes toxic and inedible. Oxidized (rancid) oils should never be consumed.

The bottom line is that modern, factory-produced olive oil has been stripped of its health-enhancing nutrients, and the task of selecting a high-quality oil has been made very difficult. That's why Beyond Health has made the selection process easier for you by providing its own olive oil. We have found a source that meets our strict standards. The oil is produced on a small family farm in the Central Valley of California. Their olives are grown without pesticides. They are hand picked from the trees, carefully washed and dried, and milled with a stone wheel within 12 hours of harvesting. The paste is then pressed in a hydraulic press, and the oil collected in stainless steel vats, decanted, and bottled to our exacting specifications. This first cold pressed oil is the genuine stuff and retains all the natural flavor and goodness.

Beyond Health Olive Oil is available at 800.250.3063 or online at www.beyondhealth.com.

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