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[Back to previous page](#)

Beyond extra virgin: New standard aims to guarantee quality in olive oil

By Jane Black, Published: October 18

Paolo Pasquali does not like to be called a crusader for good olive oil. But when I visited his oleoteca, the tasting room he built at [Villa Campestri](#), his “olive oil resort” in the hills north of Florence, it was impossible for him to talk of anything else. At lunch, dinner and breakfast the next morning, Pasquali rhapsodized about the storied history of the olive and fumed about consumers’ feckless embrace of cheap oil. And, for most of the time, his pitch sounded like that of any number of upstart chocolate, coffee or cured-meat producers: *Like wine, my product deserves more respect.*

That is, until Pasquali reached into an imposing antique sideboard and pulled out a silver tray holding several small, brown apothecary bottles. “Smell this,” he said, waving one labeled “rancid” under my nose.

It didn’t smell bright or floral, like Pasquali’s oil. But it did smell familiar. The rancid oil smelled like most olive oils I had had at restaurants and cooked with at home.

It has been about 30 years since many Americans began giving up their lard and Crisco for more-healthy extra-virgin oil. But that extra-virgin label has proved a poor guide to choosing the highest-quality oils. According to a recent study by the [UC Davis Olive Center](#), 73 percent of the top five brands of imported extra-virgin olive oil failed to meet accepted international standards for extra-virgin. Moreover, a separate report revealed that 44 percent of consumers actually preferred rancid or fusty oil, a possible result of the prevalence of substandard extra-virgins available to American consumers.

Now, a new movement is afoot to redefine extra-virgin, teaching consumers — and the marketplace — what makes high-quality olive oil. Last year, Pasquali helped build an olive oil tasting program at the Culinary Institute of America in California’s Napa Valley. An international organization, 3E, has created a “super-premium” category for extra-virgin oils that meet exacting standards of production, milling and storage. At the “Beyond Extra Virgin” conference this summer in Cordoba, Spain, the executive director of the International Olive Council, the guardian of the current extra-virgin standard, acknowledged that better label information should be a “priority for the sector.”



New students of olive oil often believe the product was better before the sector industrialized. But extra-virgin oil is, in fact, a 20th-century invention. New technology allowed for faster picking and pressing and, therefore, fresher oil. Modern storage techniques eliminated exposure to heat and light, two factors that lead to rancidity. Indeed, the European Parliament invented the term “extra-virgin” only in 1960. Many Americans believe it refers to the first pressing of the olives, but in fact it’s a baseline standard that embraces any oil made by solely mechanical means, instead of chemical treatment, and with less than 0.8 percent of free acidity, a laboratory measurement of rancidity. (Formerly, the limit was 1 percent.) Extra-virgin oils also are forbidden to have “disgusting odors such as rancidity, putridity, smoke, mold and olive fly.”

“Extra-virgin just means it’s free of defects,” said Greg Drescher, executive director of strategic initiatives at the Napa CIA. “Can you imagine a stamp of approval in the wine industry that says it’s good enough because it’s not defective?”

The popularity of the Mediterranean diet in the 1990s was a boon to the olive oil industry. But olive oil fraud was also on the rise, according to a forthcoming book, “[Extra Virginity](#),” by Tom Mueller (Norton, 2011). Generous government subsidies encouraged farmers and corporations to overstate their production figures and to make up the difference with inferior olive oil or even seed oils. Americans aren’t the only consumers who are cheated. “There is no difference between Tuscany and the United States,” said Pasquali, who takes his own olive oil with him to local restaurants. “We’re all in the same boat.”

Rampant fraud makes it difficult for high-quality producers to compete. But critics say the extra-virgin standard fails even the market of legitimate oils. The minimum sensory and chemical requirements admit a huge range of oils. Some are perfectly fine. Others are extraordinary. “But as a consumer, it’s impossible to look at a shelf of bottles and be able to guess which is which,” said Drescher.

3E (pronounced “tray ay” because it’s Italian), an international organization, is trying to change that with the debut of its “super-premium” category. The group gives that stamp of approval to 21 producers, including Pasquali’s Villa Campestri and [McEvoy Ranch](#), in Marin County, Calif. To receive the 3E certification, oil must pass rigorous chemical and sensory analyses. (Where extra-virgin allows oils with 0.8 percent free acidity, for example, 3E allows just 0.3 percent.)

Producers also must submit documentation about cultivation, milling and storage practices and on-site inspections. The aim is to certify the oil in a particular bottle and not — as is done for, say, Burgundy and Bordeaux wines — the estate. So a producer’s oil might make the cut one year but not the next. Super-premium olive oils cost far more than the supermarket stuff. Half-liter bottles run between \$30 and \$55.

The new category offers particular opportunities for small California olive oil producers, which have difficulty competing with the scale and reach of their European competitors. California producers provide about 1 percent of the olive oil consumed in the United States; over time, they aim to grow that to 10 percent. “We see this as an opportunity to set our oil apart,” said Jeff Creque, McEvoy’s mill supervisor.

McEvoy’s 3E oil is available at the [Flavor Bar](#) at the CIA in Napa. Guests pay \$15 to watch a video presentation that explains how super-premium olive oil differs from plain old extra-virgin. Then they taste: chickpeas, shredded cabbage and chocolate custard with marmalade, each paired with a super-premium oil.

As at Villa Campestri, the CIA also offers an olive oil menu in its restaurant, which employs Pasquali's patented olive oil dispenser called OliveToLive. The shiny copper console keeps three oils under a layer of nitrogen gas — safe from heat and light — until the moment they are poured into small glass flasks and served.

The contraption, says Bill Briwa, a CIA chef-instructor, allows consumers to taste the variety of flavors in an extra-virgin oil that's as fresh as if it had just been pressed. Since the CIA's olive oil tasting program launched in February 2010, 3,500 visitors have sampled olive oils at the Flavor Bar or in its restaurant.

Educating consumers about peppery, grassy or fruity notes is fun. But freshness is the simplest and most compelling way to illustrate the difference between excellent and run-of-the-mill extra-virgin olive oils, says Luanne O'Loughlin, manager of [Olio2Go](#), an online olive oil market based in Fairfax that sells about 75 varieties (including a spicy, fruity, 3E-approved Tuscan estate oil, La Poderina Toscana).

“Without tasting a good and a mediocre oil side by side, it is very hard to convince someone. Freshness is a concept they can grasp,” O'Loughlin said. It is also essential, she added, for reaping the health benefits of olive oil. Older, rancid oils lack not only vitality and flavor but also antioxidants, which are believed to protect against some cancers, heart disease and other chronic ailments.

Ultra-fresh oil is what brought the CIA's Briwa to his olive oil “aha” moment. It happened about 10 years ago, when the culinary academy was given an olive press by a local producer. The oil straight from the press tasted “pure, unsullied, like sunlight,” he remembers. It was completely different from the oil served with bread he had tasted at Napa restaurants.

Still, even Briwa, an avid crusader, knows it will be difficult to reeducate the American public. “There are some consumers who get it. They've had their epiphany here or somewhere in Tuscany,” he said. But for the rest, it's a challenge. “The question is: How do you make someone have an epiphany?”

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