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Olive oil makes a fabulous gift for hosts

Plus the truth about 'EVOO'

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Heading to a party and lacking a hostess gift? Surprise them with a bottle that isn't wine -- try olive oil.

Gourmet cooks love sautéing with it; eaters love dipping their bread in it.

But don't believe everything you hear on TV about "EVOO" -- extra-virgin olive oil.

"You get these people that say cook with extra-virgin," says Chef Jack Garrison, who teaches cooking to adults and children in private classes, as well as to students at Keiser University in Melbourne.

"You pay more money for extra-virgin olive oil than you do olive oil. Your rule of thumb is, the greener it is, the more fruity it is," he says. "If you cook with extra-virgin olive oil, the heat destroys the fruitiness, which is the very thing you're paying extra for."

Garrison suggests cooking with olive oil, but not the extra-virgin variety. He uses extra-virgin olive oil for baking sometimes, especially in bread. And for high-temperature applications, he suggests another oil altogether. "If I'm frying, I use peanut oil," he says.

Still, some cooks want extra-virgin olive oil, and for be beat. But which should one choose?

Try before you buy at From Olives and Grapes in Cocoa Village, where dipping, it can't large stainless steel fustis -- shiny cans -- hold a variety of oils and balsamic vinegars, each with a spout. As you taste, if you find one you like, owner Stan Pengelly will bottle it for you. They cost about \$12 to \$16 per bottle.

Tasting olive oil is similar to tasting wine, but "unlike wine, you're tasting with the back of the tongue, and it's really hard to get people to actually pull it back into the back," Pengelly says.

"What they're looking for is pepperiness and bitterness in the oil; of course, the mouthfeel. But the first thing, of course, they notice is the aroma, the fruitiness of the olive oil."

From Olives and Grapes has four types of pure, unflavored olive oil, from Italy, Spain, Greece and Tunisia. A variety of flavored oils are available for tasting, too.

The Tuscan herb oil, for instance, is bursting with flavors, though its clarity gives no hint of the taste to come. The garlic-flavored oil is one of Pengelly's favorites.

These good oils have a bright, golden color, unlike the nearly clear "Extra Light Tasting" oil found bottled at the supermarket. Pengelly points out the differences.

"The reason why it's 'extra light tasting' is because it has no taste, but they turn that defect into something positive by calling it 'EXTRA LIGHT tasting,' and they put it in large characters," he says,

"and it looks like it would be like Diet Pepsi, but it's not. It still has the same amount of calories as extra-virgin olive oil."

The label might say "imported from Italy," but a close reading shows the oils could come from a variety of countries.

Garrison has sometimes used an olive oil blend for cooking. "Commercially, for a long time, there's been an oil that is 75 percent canola oil, 25 percent olive oil," he says. "This has actually now filtered down to consumers."

Freshly picked olives pressed at room temperature, or cold-pressed, produce oil that is dubbed "virgin" if its acidity -- a marker of rancidity -- tests between 0.8 and 2 percent, Pengelly says. If the acidity is less than 0.8 percent, the oil is dubbed "extra-virgin."

Youth is prized in olive oils, whereas older balsamic vinegars have better, more complex flavors and more value.

"Never refrigerate olive oil . . . it tries to crystallize and makes kind of a sludge," Pengelly says. Don't refrigerate balsamic vinegar, either, he adds.

Olive oil sealed in the bottle and stored away from sunlight will be good for about a year, then several months once opened, he says. Balsamic vinegar is good for four or five years in the cupboard, and a year or more once opened.

"We find that people like it so much that that time span isn't a big problem," Pengelly says. "They use it up much quicker than that."
