

# OLIVE OIL TASTING 101

BY CHERYL KOEHLER

I first learned how to taste olive oil from Deborah Rogers, a Sonoma olive grower who is the managing partner of The Olive Press, a co-operative pressing and bottling facility that was one of the first in the region to import an Italian centrifuge press.

It's a quiet September afternoon, but as Rogers explains, things are about to get very busy, since throughout the long fall and winter olive harvest, growers from all over Northern California bring in their crop to press at this facility. Those with more than 800 pounds of olives can produce and bottle with their own estate label, while growers with less than 800 pounds take advantage of "community pressing days," when olives are pooled and everyone takes home a quantity of oil equal to the percentage of fruit they contribute to the community load.

The Olive Press also runs a retail shop with a complimentary tasting bar that is open seven days a week, from 10 a.m. to 5:30 p.m. There are usually six to eight oils available for tasting, with selections representing several different olive varieties and olives harvested at various stages of ripeness, which, as I learned, can make a dramatic difference in taste.

When experienced tasters come to the shop, Rogers starts them out with an early harvest oil made from Sevillano olives. "They are dry and produce a very small amount of oil—as little as 11 gallons of oil from a whole ton of fruit."

"Early-harvest oil is going to be very green and pungent," she says, offering a stemless olive oil tasting glass containing a small



*A Pieralesi centrifuge olive press*

draught of the oil under discussion. We both sniff it, then aerate it in our mouths before swallowing, just as professional olive oil tasters will do—and yes, it's much the way one tastes wine. "Fruitiness," she says, "is experienced in the nose, bitterness on the back of the tongue, and pungency in the back of the throat."

Next we try an oil made from the peppery ascolano olives, which Rogers describes as unpredictable in their ripening, presenting a wild card in the production schedule each year. If made from olives picked too late, olive oil can have an unpleasant banana-like flavor.

Mid-harvest is the time for picking mission olives, the variety planted by the Spanish friars as they built their string of missions along the California coast in the 18th century. When picked mid-harvest, mission olives produce a beautifully balanced olive oil with a "fruity, true ripe olive aroma," Rogers explains.

When I ask what happens late-harvest, Rogers points to several clear glass bottles gleaming in gorgeous hues of yellow to orange. These, she explains, are made by press-

ing late-harvest mission olives together with whole organic citrus fruits. The results are enchanting when used in marinades and salad dressings, or baked goods into cakes and brownies. ☘

*The Olive Press*

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