

# JUST DOWN THE ROAD

## FROM OLIVE BRANCH TO BOTTLE— A HAND-CRAFTED PRODUCT

BY ALEXANDRA STAFFORD

Few respectable cooks would deign to whisk a dressing, brush an eggplant or drizzle a fish with anything but extra-virgin olive oil. In recent years, demand for this *crème de la crème* of oils has increased dramatically, thanks to the many health professionals and chefs lauding its benefits. Supply has surged and the price has dropped, affording many people the opportunity to enjoy this erstwhile delicacy on a daily basis.

But if, as Temecula Olive Oil Company (TOOC) owner Nancy Curry notes, “It takes a lot of olives to get just a little extra-virgin olive oil,” how could this precious oil have become ubiquitous on the market at such a low price? Sounds too good to be true.

Like so many mass-produced foods, extra-virgin olive oil has suffered, its quality compromised in the name of quantity. The term extra-virgin, in fact, can and should be grouped into a growing list of modifiers—natural, organic, free-range—that have all but lost meaning. The USDA has yet to define parameters governing olive oil labeling, allowing bottlers worldwide to blend olive oil with other, cheaper vegetable oils, call it “extra-virgin,” charge a premium (though accepted) price on the American market and reap huge profits.

(Twenty-three countries belong to the International Olive Council, an intergovernmental watchdog organization that defines extra-virgin oil as that coming from the cold pressing of olives, containing no more than 0.8 percent acidity. The United States is not a member of the IOC, and the USDA does not recognize classifications such as “extra-virgin.”)

With olive oil priced at \$9 a liter or less at many supermarkets, customers visiting the TOOC’s tasting rooms often ask why the com-

pany’s oils are so expensive. But “they’re asking the wrong question,” says Curry. What they should be asking, she says, is “Why is the other stuff so cheap?”

Indeed. Because if traditional methods—those that preserve the “extra-virgin” nature of the oil—are used when making extra-virgin olive oil, the process is costly, requiring the work of many hands. The families running TOOC have chosen to maintain the centuries-old extraction techniques, hand-picking their olives, hand-pressing their olive paste and hand-bottling their creation. They do not compromise the oil’s flavor with heat or chemicals; they do not dilute its content with canola or safflower oil; they do not enhance its color with chlorophyll. (Color, incidentally, is not an indication of quality.)

Today, “extra-virgin is merely a marketing term,” said TOOC co-owner Catherine Pepe as she reached behind the olive oil tasting bar and pulled out an all-too-familiar bottle of Bertolli extra-virgin olive oil. She pointed to the label streaked with gold letters reading “Imported From Italy,” a phrase, she noted, that refers only to where the oil is bottled. In fine print on the back label, a sentence states the product “may contain oils from Italy, Greece, Spain and Tunisia.” And whether that oil has been mixed with cheap hazelnut oil is anyone’s guess: An August 2007 *New Yorker* article entitled “Slippery Business” details the widespread corruption in the olive oil industry.

“Do the math,” said Thom Curry, the man responsible for making TOOC’s delectable oils and vinegars, adding that the incentives for oil adulteration are profits comparable to drug trafficking, “with the downside being a slap on the wrist.”

But even if supermarket extra-virgin olive oil hasn’t been blended

Photograph: Mary Willis



with inferior oils, its quality has likely been destroyed anyway. “Olive oil’s biggest enemies,” said Nancy Curry, “are heat, light, oxygen and age.” Mass-produced vegetable oils are extracted in refineries using chemical solvents, heat and intense pressure. They are most often bottled in clear vessels (to reveal that expected green color) and then sent to distribution centers, where they may sit for six months to a year before reaching the grocery store. But olive oil, Pepe reminded me, “is not like wine. It tastes best when fresh.” Pepe encourages customers to use the TOOC oils within six to nine months of opening and to open the bottles of oil within a year.



For the Currys and the Pepes, olive oil’s enemies—heat, light, oxygen and age—have shaped their business. To eliminate heat from the extraction process, they built a one-of-a-kind stainless steel press and mill, fashioned after the oxen-turned stone mills used for centuries. In their mill, olives are crushed into a paste within 24 hours of being picked and then hand-pressed through layers of stainless steel mesh. Ultimately, the oil is packaged into tall, thin, dark bottles, which keep out light and minimize the oil’s surface-to-air ratio. And while every bottle of oil is hand dated, TOOC customers need not worry about purchasing fresh oil: The company sells every drop of oil it produces every season.

Just as admirable as the work these families put into their oil production are the strides they take to protect the environment. For one, they’ve chosen to cultivate a fruit that has survived in the desert climate of Southern California since the late 18th century with the establishment of the Mission San Diego de Alcalá. Evidence of the olive’s hardiness and ability to flourish with little water can be found all along Interstate 15 between Lake Elsinore and Temecula, where olive trees grow wild—just as they do in the Mediterranean. Southern California’s climate and soil composition in fact closely resemble the Mediterranean’s, and on 110 acres of land in Aguanga, thanks to TOOC, over 30 different varieties of olives are thriving.

Second, TOOC runs all of its farm equipment on olive oil, and uses solar power for the ranch that houses its mill and press. And finally, it has essentially created a zero-waste operation, using any oil not extracted during the first pressing to make soaps, biscotti and chocolates, all of which are hand crafted by local families. TOOC even saves the water that separates from the olive oil during the final stages of the extraction process—its high alkaline content makes it an effective weed abatement.

Every effort made by these two families is reflected in the TOOC products. Anyone who has yet to visit one of TOOC’s retail shops (in Temecula and San Diego) is in for a treat. At

the tasting bar, visitors can sample various flavored oils, from roasted garlic to fresh basil, each vibrant taste begging to be paired with a perfect match, perhaps sautéed Swiss chard or an heirloom tomato salad. Visitors can also compare a grassy, early-harvest oil with a buttery, creamy late-harvest oil. For many people, these sips of TOOC oil likely will be their first taste of genuine extra-virgin olive oil. I’m certain they were for me.

## HELPFUL RESOURCES

Temecula Olive Oil Company: [www.temeculaoliveoil.com](http://www.temeculaoliveoil.com)

California Olive Oil Council: [www.cooc.com](http://www.cooc.com)

International Olive Council: [www.internationaloliveoil.org](http://www.internationaloliveoil.org)

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