

The Unstoppable Rise of Extra Virgin Olive Oil

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If you're looking to buy some olive oil, it's impossible these days to find anything other than extra virgin. What used to indicate high quality now doesn't seem to indicate anything at all.

Professor Carl Ipsen, an historian at Indiana University, has just finished a new book, tentatively entitled *A True History of Olive Oil*. He took me through the history not only of extra virgin but much more besides.

Carl: In 1960, Italy passed the first law. Well, going back, in 1936, Italy passed a law classifying olive oils that hadn't existed before, which included something called *olio fino*. Virgin olive. But extra virgin came in 1960. It's an odd category, and there's a really interesting history to the law, in part because of international pressure to create a classification scheme that started ... also there was pushing in Spain and in the UN to get this ... Italy, sort of, they'd always were in the vanguard of these developments. And so they passed this law in 1960 that said extra virgin oil is oil that is made only by mechanical processes, that's made under 27°C, and has less than one, at that time, one per cent free fatty acids.

At the time, it was estimated that something like 20% of oil maybe qualified as extra virgin. But it was a small percentage. What was much more common at the time is what in the US we called pure olive oil, was about 80% refined oil and 20% extra virgin. But that was the birth of extra virgin. Then France passed a law. Spain passed a law. Eventually the European Community got involved and it became a European classification that's been modified over the years.

I left out, though, what maybe is the most important part, which is, extra virgin olive oil also has to have no flaws. It can't be stinky, rancid,

musty, mouldy, vinegary, putrid. Many of those terms are actually in the legislation and were in the 1936 law, too, which is unique, I think, for olive oil. So that introduced the idea that, well, somehow or other we're going to have to figure out what that means, because there was in 1936, 1960, there was no way of enforcing those rules. They just said, this is what extra virgin olive oil is. And then, you know, who knows what, actually, you found on the shelf.

Jeremy: But that was, the 1960 law in particular was, a way to say, look, this is what we consider to be high quality oil. So going right back, um, olives have been growing in the region for two, three, 4000 years. Who knows? But going right back, what was the oil like and what was it being used for?

Carl: Most of it was pretty awful from a food point of view, but most of it wasn't food oil. The point that I cite the most often, and I use it as a sort of guideline, in the very end of the 18th century, Giovanni Presta, who was an oil manufacturer and a student of oil in Puglia, published a book, and he estimated that 80% of oil was used for non-food purposes, 20% for food purposes, and that only 1% qualified as olio fino, to use the terminology of the day. So let's say extra virgin 1%. Now, 80% of the oil, the other 80%, was used for lighting. It was used for lubrication. Lubrication oil was — and this is, again, one of the things that people don't know a lot about — is that there was a huge demand for olive oil in Britain in the 18th century for wool manufacture.

Jeremy: How does oil get involved? Olive oil. From Italy. How does that get involved in English wool?

Carl: Yeah, it's a super interesting story. The wool producing process involves stripping out all the stinkiness and all the dirt and all of that and scouring it, and it's bathed in a combination of fresh, clear water and urine, is part of the process. Anyway you end up, I gather, I haven't actually seen anybody do this. I don't know that anybody does anymore, process. Well, that way you end up with a product that's very brittle, and so it needs to be lubricated before it can be processed into wool threads. And the best lubricant for that turned out to be olive oil.

They tried other oils, they tried seed oils, and that worked for low quality wool. But for high quality wool it had to be olive oil. They tried whale oil, which wasn't better than seed oil, but it was relatively

cheap. I guess that was always the problem with olive oil was that it was so expensive, but well, whale oil had the problem that it ignited spontaneously. So a number of wooleries burned to the ground when they left their fabric out, lubricated with whale oil. They came back the next day to no factory at all.

But olive oil was the best and the best oil for it was from Puglia. And the port of Gallipoli in Puglia was the main export port for olive oil. Tens of thousands of litres of oil left that port and went not only to Britain, but primarily because, of course, 18th century, we're talking about the Industrial Revolution. What was the first product of the Industrial Revolution? It was wool cloth before cotton. And so really, the oil of Puglia plays a role in the Industrial Revolution, an important role in the Industrial Revolution. It also went to other places in Northern Europe. It went as far as Russia. Olive oil was used to light, and only olive oil was used to light, orthodox churches in Russia, for example. And that's a use that goes back certainly to the Middle Ages. And Christians, you know, insisting on olive oil to illuminate churches and olive oil again was always very expensive. So those were, you know ... The churches could afford it, but maybe not too many others.

Jeremy: But a side question, which probably ... How did England, it rises to prominence on the wool trade in the 14th, 13th, 14th centuries. What were they doing there? Maybe it just was coarser wool.

Carl: An excellent question. I know that Florence, which was making wool in those same centuries, and Tuscany produces oil, but not very much. Like today. Tuscany accounts for 4% of Italian oil. Everyone knows Tuscan oil, but there's not much of it. Puglia produces 50%. And even in the 15th century, Florence was importing oil from Puglia for the wool trade. What they were doing in Britain, I don't know. My research really does start in the 18th century. I used secondary sources for earlier periods, and that's an interesting question. I should look into that, but I'm not sure how they how they managed before they ... Maybe we're getting ... I mean, there was an oil trade that goes back to ancient times. Of course the oil trade during the Roman Empire was massive. And then we get a decline in the Middle Ages, but it doesn't go away. There's still a trade. And so it may be that a trickle of oil was making its way to Britain even then, but they haven't been able to document that.

Jeremy: Okay. Let's get back on track here. 18th century Gallipoli was producing this enormous amount of oil. How's it doing it? Because it's not industrialised. It is a ... From what I understand, there are olive trees absolutely everywhere. There's practically nothing else. But how is it being produced?

Carl: Yeah, there's a big expansion in olive cultivation and they were already there. But there's a big expansion, we get the sort of monoculture in the 18th century, it was promoted by the king at the time, the Bourbon king. It was produced by thousands of workers. Most of the oil that was made at the time was ground harvested, so that reduces labour a little bit. Rather than picking the olives from the tree, you wait for them to fall to the ground and then just gather them up. So they had thousands of people, often women and children, gathering the olives and then carrying them to the mills. There were thousands of mills.

Italy today has 4000 mills, and those are continuous cycle mills that produce probably ten times the amount of oil that a traditional mill would have. So to produce half as much oil, we would need five times as many. We would need 20,000 mills. I mean, they were everywhere. They were small in Puglia. They were interestingly underground, which had advantages and disadvantages, but it was a huge labour force involved. I make some estimates in the book about how many people might have been involved in producing the amount of oil that was coming out of the kingdom, and the Kingdom of Naples was the centre of oil production in the 18th and 19th century. That changes at the end of the 19th century as Spain emerges as the most important producer, which it is, of course, today, by a long shot. But at the time Naples really was where innovation was taking place and where, you know, big production was.

Jeremy: What kinds of innovations. I mean, having having tens of thousands of women and children picking olives. Yes, it works, but people must have been trying to find better ways of doing things. So what were the kind of innovations that you see.

Carl: The most interesting ones are not necessarily labour saving. It was the push to produce more good quality oils. So again, most of the oil was — in southern Italy, in the Kingdom of Naples — was what we would today call olio lampante. And it was great for industrial purposes. And again, Gallipoli, Gallipoli oil was so much prized in

Britain that it was used as a term rather than olive oil. You see in documents, we used so much Gallipoli oil, it was synonymous with with olive oil. But as demand for food oil starts to increase, we get innovators like Giovanni Presta, whom I mentioned, another guy named Domenico Grimaldi in Calabria, saying, you know, we could make good oil here, but we need to do a few things. We need to harvest olives from the trees, which they did in Tuscany at the time, and Tuscany and Provence and Liguria were known at the time for making the best quality food oils. They said, so we need to harvest olives from the trees, and this is nothing new. The Romans knew this. We have to harvest at the right moment of ripeness to get a good quality oil, and we have to process them quickly. So these growers had these ideas and they were building new presses that were clean.

That was the other thing. Especially those underground presses, they were filthy. Olive oil is a perishable product. It's best when it's first made and it deteriorates from then. If you make it carefully, it will last a long time. If you don't, that won't happen. And you can easily contaminate oil that you're making with residuals from the previous batch. So if you don't clean the fiscoli, the mats that they spread the olive paste on in traditional producing, you're going to produce oil that will go quickly rancid. If you put it in containers that haven't been cleaned, you'll get oil that that goes particularly rancid. We know that was — again, the Romans knew this. And what's the evidence? The evidence is Monte Testaccio, which is a pile of shards of amphorae that, after they'd been used, are, rather than being reused, are discarded because they would contaminate the new oil that you put into them.

And for southern Italy, the big change comes in the early 19th century, when a guy named Pierre Ravanas, a Frenchman from Provence — Provence again being one of the regions that's known for making good quality oils — comes to Bari and says, you know, we could make better oil here. And he starts to make food quality oil. And his innovations eventually spread and Bari becomes one of the most important areas producing good quality food oil from the 19th century on, recognised even by Tuscans and others who start to import lots of oil from Bari to sell as food oil.

Jeremy: In all of this. You've been talking about making better quality oil, and the touchstone seems to be as food oil. Was food oil commanding a higher price than ... Does it matter to industrial uses,

any of any of this productivity, or is it simply that food oil was commanding a higher price?

Carl: Both. Both are true. There's a variety of qualities of oil, even for industrial oil. If you're using it for fuel, you don't want it to smoke. So the crappy oils, the stinky oils, they'll smoke. Bad quality oils are always good for one thing, for making soap. And there were 20 soap factories in Gallipoli at one time. So if you made olio di sansa, pomace oil, that would be used for soap. If you had stinky, low quality oils, those could be used for soap. And as they get better quality, they can be used for lamps and for lubrication and for these other purposes. But indeed, food oil fetched a price, maybe double. Now, only the wealthy could afford it. The poor in southern Italy, those who did consume oil, and not all of them did, it depended where where you lived. If you lived in an oil producing region, they were consuming an oil that today we would never consider as acceptable.

Jeremy: In one of the pieces of yours that I read, you quote somebody saying that the peasants favour stronger oils, and I'm left wondering whether they favoured it or whether it was all they could get.

Carl: Perhaps both. So this was a wonderful study that was undertaken during the French occupation, during the Napoleonic occupation in 1811, I think. It was the Statistica Murattiana. And Murat, who was the king of Naples at the time, had all of his local officials do a survey, sort of enlightenment-style French urge to know the country, and so to collect statistics, which weren't numbers necessarily, in fact, mostly they weren't, but information about the state, and one of the questions on it was about oil and only about food oil. So they went around asking about this. And there's this one quotation you saw. Now it's the analysis of the questioner here. They didn't necessarily say, oh yeah, we like this better. But the poor were accustomed to a really strong, stinky oil. And it's amusing. They say, yeah, we could use less of it to dress the same amount of food.

Now, the Italian diet in southern Italy in the 18th and 19th century was exceedingly poor. They, Italians, southern Italians, ate meat once or twice a year, right? So there was a vegetarian cuisine, very low in fat. And so they ... The one fat, the fats they were able to get was lard and olive oil. And so it was precious. And they needed it for their health. Now in some ways that persists to this day, because if you take

a high, what we consider today a high quality oil and offer it to an older Italian — my age — who's been consuming, like, the standard olive oil, and maybe a southern Italian, all his life, he won't like it. This isn't right. And lots of people in Italy and elsewhere consume rancid oil all the time, and they think that's what oil tastes like. So, you know, it is amusing to read this observation in the early 19th century, but in some ways it's still true today. I mean, one of the the goals of the producers of high quality oil is to educate the public to understand what is a good quality oil and why is this better than the oil that you're used to?

Jeremy: That sort of leads neatly on to how olive oil takes over the world, which is with, with the Ancel Keys study and the Mediterranean diet. And there's always this argument over, you know, is it a diet of choice or is it a diet of necessity? And I don't know where you stand on that, but it seems that olive oil is the only constant in the Mediterranean diet. And people ... I mean, olive oil is lovely stuff, I'm not knocking it, but it has kind of taken over in this way.

Carl: It has. It's a marketing coup. The story of olive oil from the 1960 extra virgin law to the present is one of, as I say, it's a study for business school. There were three things that that came together all at once. One was the definition of the category of extra virgin. The development of new technology that made it possible to produce more extra virgin oil. And this fascination, starting with Elizabeth David in the UK with Italian and then Mediterranean foods. And so we get a big increase in demand for food oil, right? When David was writing in the 1950s, olive oil was sold at the chemists in small quantities for medicinal purposes.

Jeremy: Let's just — before we get into that — let's go back a bit, because part of the reason for the laws was that, along with these innovations to produce higher quality food oil came the opportunity to adulterate the food oil. Now, olive oil fraud is the most widespread food fraud in the world, but olive oil food fraud is not new.

Carl: It's anything but new. Olive oil has always been expensive. One estimate, one medieval estimate that I read said a half a litre of olive oil costs the same as 15 litres of wine. Can you imagine that? I mean, at that time, it was a food that the poor couldn't afford for sure. It was used mostly in monasteries, but it's always been expensive. So

there's always been a temptation to ... for fraud. I've found even industrial oil in Britain that that we talked about before in the wool mills, there were people cutting olive oil with seed oil and selling it as 100% olive oil. So that goes on. That has gone on forever.

And indeed, something that I write about which hasn't, isn't much talked about, is that in the 1950s, another method of making oil — esterification — was developed. It had been invented back around in World War Two, just before World War Two. But in the 1950s, a lot of oil was being esterified, and it was a way to get a little more oil out of the residue, even after you've finished making pomace oil, like the last residues of the olive. And all of the history of olive oil, there's always been measures made to get all the oil you can out, the stinkiest worst stuff because it always had value. Now, historically, that really wasn't food oil. Again, that was soap oil or cloth oil. But in the 1950s there was no more market for soap oil or cloth oil. There was only a market for food oil, so the esterified oil was being sold as food oil. Not only that, but esterification, like refining, which was developed 50 years before that, could be used for other products. So you could esterify soap and get oil out of it. You could esterify animal parts and get oil out of it. You could esterify industrial oils derived from trees, an oil called tall oil and get oil out of it. And it turns out that in Italy, where esterified oil was legal as a food oil, in many countries it was not, all of these oils were being used and sold as olive oil.

So the worst moment of olive oil fraud, food oil fraud, for me in history was the 1950s in Italy. It was terrible. And that's where the olive oil, the extra virgin law, came from. We want to identify good quality oils so that people know what they're getting and we can valorise it and get a better price from it. So the olive oil law comes as much out of concern about fraud as anything else. And the law also includes the outlawing of any esterified oil as food oil. So after 1960, you can't legally sell that oil as food oil in Italy.

Of course, fraud doesn't go away. It's been with us ever since. But I would argue that the problem of olive oil fraud is less serious today than it was 10 or 20 years ago. The big companies had gotten bad press for being, have been accused of fraud. Whether or not they were engaged in fraud, I won't venture to say — but the reaction was that they've become exceedingly careful. Every big label has a sophisticated, well-manned, womaned, laboratory to test the oils, to be sure that what goes out the door is the real thing. Now, of course,

there's still plenty of fraud. We read about it, you know, on a regular basis. It's almost always some small unknown label that says, you know, extra virgin olive oil from Puglia, and it's a seed oil mixed with olive oil. So that that does happen. But again, I would say that the major labels are careful. I would argue, and maybe we want to come back to this, that a bigger problem today than fraud is transportation and storage.

Jeremy: That's interesting because what I wanted to say was that extra virgin no longer signifies much of anything other than perhaps these chemical analyses, and maybe the lack of obvious faults. I can't distinguish one extra virgin from another unless it's a very special oil that I know. So, is there anything people can do when they're buying olive oil at the supermarket, for example?

Carl: Well, okay, so there's a couple of issues here. Some have said we should just get rid of the extra virgin category. It doesn't mean anything anymore. Others have suggested, let's introduce a new category of super oil for the really good oils, because there is a huge distinction between a high quality oil and an average extra virgin. So I would suggest ... The other, since 1991, Europe has added a control on the flavour of oil, sensory analysis of olive oils and created panels that test olive oils. And they're there to detect if there are any flaws in the oil. So is it rancid? Is it musty? Is it winey? And so on. And if they detect any of those characteristics, it's not extra virgin. It's maybe virgin. In the worst case, it's lampante. So we have that control now.

Now, is every oil tested? No it isn't. But even again, even if the oil leaving the facility is extra virgin, meets all the criteria, but it's ... again, people don't talk enough about this ... In my opinion, it's what happens after it leaves that that determines what you get when you come home. So recent studies have shown that an oil preserved in a clear glass bottle exposed to the light, goes rancid in two months. So don't buy any oil in clear glass. There's an exception for new oils, but I don't need to get into that. In dark glass bottles, so that'll protect us, right? Yeah. Four months. So olive oils in supermarkets that are well lit are being exposed to light for how long? How long has that bottle been on the shelf? Has it been there six months? Has it been there 12 months? So that's why the bottle that you take home is not the extra virgin, even the average quality, not distinctive extra virgin that left the the loading dock when it was shipped to the supermarket. And again that, for me, is what we really should be should be thinking about.

So as consumers, what we'd like to know is when was this oil made? Is it the last harvest? So right now it's December. We're in the midst of the of the 2025 harvest. And right now we can get new oils and we should. And for the next year, we should only buy oils from this harvest, not from the 2024 harvest. Or even better, after June or so, let's get some Australian oil that's fresh and new, right?

Jeremy: Even though it's come all this way?

Carl: Even though it's come all this way. So, you know, that's what we want to find out as consumers. Oil is a perishable product. We don't talk about that much. And you want it as fresh as possible. And some of the oil on the shelves has been there for a year or two or three. And that's where I would argue some of the scandal about the quality of supermarket oil has more to do with how long it's been sitting on the shelf than what the big producers actually sent there. Now, that doesn't mean that what the big producers are sending you is equivalent to the fine oils of your friends or my friends, that you pay two or three times as much for, which are amazing. Oils can be made today that have qualities that were unknown in the past, right?

If we want to talk about traditions and foodways, oil is better today than it's ever been. There's no question about it. And, you know, all of the health claims about oil and the Mediterranean diet and all of that, for much of them are linked to the phenols in oil. And the phenols are high in these good quality oils. A standard supermarket oil is going to have relatively low phenols, maybe 50, maybe 100. Good quality oils will be 200 and above up to 1000. And those are spicy and bitter and, you know, really exciting flavours. And that's where you get the oil that may be better, maybe will be better for your health. I would argue that as far as health is concerned, what's more important about our diet is to stop eating the stuff that hurts us than to start eating the superfoods that help us, because olive oil is not going to correct the problems with the Western diet and the consumption of processed foods and sugar and all of that. But that's another rant of mine. I'll save you probably from that.

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