

EXTRA VIRGINITY

Tom Mueller begins *Extra Virginity: The Sublime and Scandalous World of Olive Oil* (238pp., W.W. Norton, 2012) as a skeptic at a professional taste testing. “Hints of artichoke? Fresh-cut grass?” But he quickly becomes adept, and a believer. Then he tries a spitter, and learns it’s the supermarket sample.

He defines extra virgin olive oil as a “fruit juice with the ideal blend of fat for the human body, a fat that slims the arteries and nourishes the mind.” The olives are ground, pits, skins and all, and the oil extracted, nowadays usually in a centrifuge and within 24 hours of picking, if it’s to qualify as genuine. The olives need to be fresh and unblemished, the extraction mechanical only. Pungency and bitterness indicate health-promoting compounds, such as those responsible for low rates of heart disease, dementia and cancer in the “Mediterranean diet.”

In the last 15 years olive oil consumption has doubled in North America, tripled in Europe, and increased six-fold in Asia.

Olive oil has already made many fortunes, from ancient Rome onward; Mueller estimates its worth as greater than bootleg whiskey during Prohibition, and greater than cocaine today.

Since genuine extra virgin oil is expensive to produce, such high value and exploding consumption lure fraudsters, especially where legal constraints are lax or nonexistent. As Mueller comments, “holy oil and snake oil are often difficult to distinguish.”

The IOC (International Olive Council) found that 80% of the “extra virgin” oils sold in supermarkets were adulterated, with oils flavored and colored to taste and look like extra virgin. The Food and Drug Administration, having failed to halt adulteration, in the late 1990’s stopped testing for it, more interested in what could harm consumers than in maintaining quality. And since the public prefers low prices, big companies pass off whatever they can as “extra virgin,” and in the process marginalize small producers trying to market the genuine article.

If you don’t know who grows, processes and bottles your oil, you may well be dribbling mostly peanut, instead of extra virgin olive oil, on your salad.

Olive oil entered its golden age with the ancient Greeks, who used it in many ways, including oiling bodies in sports, baths, and gymnasiums. By Roman times it had become so essential that in its absence athletic contests were cancelled and baths closed. Early Christian churches used oil for lamps – it was colorless, burned bright and clear, seemed to soak up sanctity and become the epitome of holiness. But its pagan associations stuck, and it also became the power unguent of witches.

By the early 1800’s vegetable oil was being mass produced and by century’s end most of the “olive oil” Americans consumed was fake, made from cottonseed or other cheap oils.

So since adulteration has been going on at least since Roman times, Mueller gives some tips for consumers. Buy oil in small dark bottles; it deteriorates rapidly. Don’t trust “use by” dates – buy from a known local source. Don’t pay attention to color (it can vary widely) and don’t be put off

by pungency or bitterness, which characterize the healthiest oils. “Italian,” “first pressed,” or “cold pressed” are likely to be supermarket poetry: most oil isn’t pressed and doesn’t come from Italy. Don’t buy cheap oil. Use mild oils for shallow frying and sautéing, but not for deep frying. And the list goes on.

We’re lucky here because olive oil is produced locally, so we can buy it fresh, and U.C. Davis has an olive oil center which may become a leading advocate for genuine extra virgin.

“Wine is how we would like life to be, but oil is how life is: fruity, pungent, with a hint of complex bitterness – extra virginity’s elusive triad.”