

Essential Guide to Oil

Just because supermarket shelves are crammed with dozens of different oils doesn't mean you need them all. For most of our cooking needs, we rely on just three.

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1 Vegetable Oil Blend

Vegetable oil should have a neutral taste that highlights (rather than masks) the flavors of other ingredients. Some varieties, such as corn and canola, take on subtle but distinct flavors in certain applications, so we make a point of avoiding them and go for a blend instead; that way, no one flavor will dominate.

FAVORITE:

Crisco Natural Blend Oil (\$6.89 for 48 oz) A mix of canola, sunflower, and soybean oils, this oil tastes "very clean" even in high-heat applications.

2 Everyday Extra-Virgin Olive Oil

In recent tests we've found that the flavors of extra-virgin olive oil (or EVOO) are driven off more thoroughly—and rapidly—by heat than we ever knew. So for cooking Mediterranean dishes like tomato sauce, moussaka, and paella in which olive oil is traditional, we stock the cheapest bottle we can find.

3 Premium Extra-Virgin Olive Oil

The hallmark of a truly superior-quality EVOO is a pronounced flavor profile that can range from richly fruity, to grassy, to peppery and sharp. We reserve this good stuff for cold applications like dressings and for drizzling on food after cooking.

FAVORITES:

Columela Extra Virgin Olive Oil (\$15.90 for 17 oz)
California Olive Ranch Arbequina (\$16.69 for 500 ml)



SHOPPING TIPS:

If you can't buy one of our recommended products, prioritize freshness. Look for a harvest date on the label; try to buy oils from only this year's crop. Alternatively, look for a "best by" date as far away as possible. (Unopened olive oil is good for up to 18 months from the time it was bottled.)

UNDERSTUDY OILS

These two oils are also worth keeping on hand.

TOASTED SESAME OIL We drizzle this nutty-tasting Asian oil over everything from dumplings to stir-fries to noodles and soups.

PEANUT OIL Though not a must, this neutral-flavored oil has a high smoke point, which means that it's able to withstand prolonged heating without breaking down. Its high smoke point makes it an excellent choice for deep frying.

➤STORING OIL

Store all oils in a cool, dark place. Store nut and seed oils in the refrigerator to help stave off rancidity, but avoid refrigerating olive oil. According to olive oil experts, repeatedly chilling olive oil and rewarming it to room temperature can create condensation in the bottle that degrades the flavor.

➤CHECKING FOR FRESHNESS

Properly stored, vegetable oil should last six months once opened and EVOO at least three months. If you're unsure whether an oil is past its prime, heat a few tablespoons in a skillet. If vegetable oil smells anything other than neutral—and if olive oil smells musty rather than fruity—discard it.

Does It Pay to Cook with Extra-Virgin Olive Oil?

In Mediterranean countries, good olive oil has historically been plentiful and cheap and so used for almost everything. The health benefits of cooking with extra-virgin olive oil are well documented, but how much flavor does it add to a dish once it has been heated? And does high-end EVOO keep more of its flavor than cheaper EVOO?

TASTE TESTS We had 10 of our top tasters sample three oils straight out of the bottle: Crisco Natural Blend Oil, our favorite premium EVOO from Columela, and a much more affordable EVOO from Filippo Berio. We then had these same tasters try the oils again after we'd heated them to 350 degrees (the temperature typically reached by oil during frying) and held them there for 10 minutes. Finally, we had tasters sample tomato sauces made with the oils and potatoes tossed in the oils and then roasted.

RESULTS Tasters were easily able to distinguish the bold fruity and grassy flavors of both EVOOs compared with vegetable oil in the raw tasting. These differences lessened once the oils were heated. Some tasters were able to detect a faint grassiness and peppery finish in the EVOOs but little else. The three oils were indistinguishable from one another when cooked with tomato sauce and roasted potatoes.

BOTTOM LINE Cooking with EVOO may be healthy, but don't expect even a premium EVOO to add much flavor once it's heated.