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Seven Courses, Seven Extra Virgin Olive Oils

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By Anna Abatzoglou

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Olive oil is one of life's essentials. Growing up in a Greek household, my dad would put olive oil over everything, no matter what we were having for dinner and no matter if there was already a sauce/dressing on whatever it was. He would simply shower the entire plate in olive oil, then proceed to do the same thing to my plate as well as my brothers' plates. Friends would come over for dinner for something random my mom would cook up like taco flavored hamburger helper and I'd see their eyes widen in horror as my dad went around the table baptizing everyone's plates with olive oil. My favorite memory of olive oil would be coming home after a high school basketball game and eating the leftover dinner, which meant the remains of the salad bobbing in a pool of olive oil. I would sop up every last drop with some bread and be the happiest teenager in Cupertino.



My love for olive oil increased ten fold when I spent a year in Greece. Living with my relatives and their use of olive oil made my dad look like one of those "use sparingly" top-o-the-food-pyramid guys. We got fresh oil in barrels from the villages in Southern Greece and kept them under the sink. Everything from smoked trout to boiled zucchini would bob around in bowls of the liquid gold. And I loved it.

And I've loved it ever since. "Extra virgin" olive oil is from the first press of the olives after harvest, containing no more than 0.8% acidity, but the USDA loose standards on EVOO have not been changed since 1948 and some oils labeled extra virgin have been found to be mixed with cruder version of olive oil and other oils – even peanut oils! Thankfully the USDA has recently revised their standards that define extra virgin olive oil, effective October 2010. Inspired by the future of higher standards of extra virgin olive oil and my undying love for the liquid gold, I prepared a seven course meal involving different extra virgin olive oils from around the world. Olive oil notes can range from mellow tropical fruit to hard core grass and pepper, creating a challenge to pair each course with each oil's underlying character.



I hosted this dinner at a beautiful house overlooking the Columbia River (which separates Oregon and Washington) in Camas, Washington. I just moved back to Portland after seven years, so it was very symbolic reuniting with old friends as well as new ones, for seven courses of olive oil. There is nothing better than late summers in the Pacific Northwest; the trees glimmer, the sky sparkles, the air is super fresh and no one takes the good weather for granted. So we gathered at five on a beautiful Saturday afternoon to enjoy the meal.



With each course, I offered a tasting of the pure oil (with bread) so my guests could familiarize themselves with the pure form as well as how it was incorporated into each dish.

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Homemade Tunisian Olives & Extra Dirty Tunisian Olive Martini
Les Moulin Mahjoub Organic Extra Virgin Olive Oil (Tunisia)

A first time for all of us trying an olive oil from Tunisia. It was smooth and buttery with a mild aftertaste of pepper.

I marinated a mix of Mediterranean style olives in cumin, lemon, fresh parsley, fresh coriander, garlic, dried red chilies and the olive oil for several days for the flavors to meld. The result was a burst of flavor mellowed with the buttery-ness of the oil.

The martinis, with Effen vodka, were made extra dirty with the excess herbs and brine juices. Not all of my guests are dirty martini fans like myself, so they were a little shocked by the initial drink, but enjoyed the exposure therapy none the less. I especially enjoyed the exotic cumin flecked olives in my martini over the standard martini olives.



Heirloom Tomato Salad & Fresh Ricotta & Goat Cheese Crostini
Geras Organic Extra Virgin Olive Oil (Lesvos, Greece)

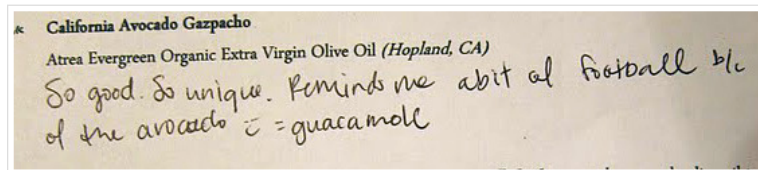
The Geras oil holds a special place in my heart because it is from one of my friend's family's orchard. It's produced in small batches using very old school processes. This oil is from ancient trees and is one of my favorite oils. I didn't want to ruin the "surprise" for my guests so I allowed them to comment before expressing my inclination. All of them liked it more than the previous oil, Nicolette of Sweet Little Sasquatch pointed out it's grassyness, while the group agreed this oil to be more flavorful than the previous oil. I wanted this oil to shine on its own so I paired it with a farmers market fresh heirloom tomato salad with basil and a little salt. I topped it with two crostinis: one with a fresh ricotta and one with a sharp goat cheese from a local farm in Washington. The cheeses played with



the flavor of the oil: the ricotta played up the fruity notes while the oil cut the slight tangy harshness of the goat cheese.

California Avocado Gazpacho
Atrea Evergreen Organic Extra Virgin Olive Oil (Hopland, CA)

The Atrea olive oil was picked up during my ride up to Portland. I tasted it briefly, offered as a bi-product at a local winery, and knew I couldn't leave without a bottle. It's made in small batches from the local olives growing about 100 miles north of San Francisco. Some olive oils can taste super tropical fruity, and this one, pointed out by my friend/guest Heather, tasted like "bananas." Per this observation, everyone at the table had an "ah ha" moment. It was furthered by "tasting like green banana peel" by one guest. Being Californian, I had to prepare it with a Californian avocado gazpacho which I made by blending avocados, fresh bread crumbs, lemon juice, and garlic with this olive oil together topped with cilantro, green onion and tomatoes, provoking unique comments, such as football comparisons (?).



Greek "Tost" – Manchego (Kefalograviera) and Quince Paste Grilled Cheese on homemade olive oil Tsoureki
Terra Medi Organic Extra Virgin Olive Oil (Peloponnese, Greece)

After the rush and thrill of the previous Greek olive oil (Geras), this one was like a bump in the ground; with non descript mild and slight floral undertones. If I had served it in it's raw form, it would have been barely detected, so I decided to use it on my take of the classic Greek "tost," a common snack in Greece served throughout the day, i.e. for breakfast, lunch or a light dinner: sliced white bread pressed together with mild white cheese and one slice of ham. I made the "tost" super Greek using Tsoureki bread using the olive oil instead of the traditional butter. Theoretically I would have used my favorite Kefalograviera cheese, but my Greek cheese sources are limited in Portland so I used a manchego cheese (still representing the nutty and sharpness of the Kefalograviera) pressed with quince paste imported from Greece (sent by my dear Aunt Mary). The grilled cheese was pressed together with brushings of the Terra Medi as well. This is now one of my favorite grilled cheeses!



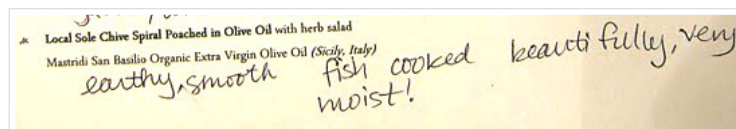
Egg & Local Spinach "Benedict" with White Truffle Oil and Black Truffle Salt
La Buona Tavola Extra Virgin Olive Oil flavored with white truffles (Italy)

I had been searching for an excellent white truffle olive oil for some time now and I came across this one on a recent trip to Seattle. The olive oil is made in-house, cold infused with chunks of white truffles. I had the opportunity to taste some prior to purchase so I knew I wasn't getting some sham wow shroom moonshine. This oil is extremely powerful with earthy and garlicky notes. I paired it with a simple poached egg topped by a bed of wilted spinach. The protein and mellow flavors of the egg helped to show off the olive oil's true colors while the wilted spinach served as a mop to lap up all the excess juices.

Local Sole Chive Spiral Poached in Olive Oil with herb salad
Mastridi San Basilio Organic Extra Virgin Olive Oil (Sicily, Italy)

Italy has an almost confusing selection of olive oil. I selected a Sicilian version, for its ultra Mediterranean character. "Earthy, peppery, with a long finish" were some of the words my guests used to describe this olive oil. Knowing this oil was more on the strong side, I paired it with delicate sole rolled up with minced chives. The herb salad purposely had nasturtiums which are known for their peppery hues, to play up the oil's character. It was astonishing how olive oil, a few herbs and heat could turn a simple fish like sole into. I was flattered by some of the guests comments on my preparation of the fish. A few guests even confessed to me that they didn't like fish or sole, but loved this version of it. I was truly flattered.





Blood Orange Olive Oil Brownies Ala Mode with blood orange olive oil strawberry ice cream
We Olive Blood Orange Extra Virgin Olive Oil (Paso Robles, CA)

The smell more than anything was the first aspect noticed about this oil: refreshing and bright. I decided to pair it with something a little unconventional: a double chocolate brownie. I prepared the brownie batter with blood orange olive oil instead of the standard canola oil. I also made a strawberry blood orange olive oil ice cream to go along with the brownie. The perky flavors of the citrus and strawberries, combined with the rich oil and cream, proved to be a winning combination from the looks of the scraped bowls and "orgasmic" and "Mmmmmm" comments. It was a perfect seventh heaven finishing to the olive oil tasting.

The meal went on for nearly four hours and everyone took diligent notes on each oil and course. The group helped bus/wash dishes/prepare/serve (often times I had to tell people to get out of the kitchen, sit down and relax), especially my friend Heather who totes my car-less self around from one grocery store to the next for supplies. It was a fantastic meal with a great group of people and everyone left having that much more appreciation for Extra Virgin Olive Oil and its uses.



Ms. Abatzoglou's [Banana Wonder](#) blog post was sponsored by Foodbuzz and Electrolux. Electrolux has committed \$750,000 to the Ovarian Cancer Research Fund, and Foodbuzz is getting involved not only by sponsoring all the 24x24 posts, but also by donating a matching amount to the OCRF.

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