

# How to make olive oil



IT WAS THE SIGHT OF THE OLIVE TREES all around Sunset that did it: Tall, stately, and loaded with millions of ripening olives.

We needed some sort of cooking fat for our One-Block Feast ([sunset.com/oneblockfeast](http://sunset.com/oneblockfeast)), and had already considered and rejected peanut oil (peanuts won't grow in our Northern California climate) and corn oil (too much technology, too much corn, and we wanted to eat the corn). Our trees held the answer in their branches. Plus, we would be using a heretofore wasted resource—every fall, ripe olives rain down onto the sidewalks and into the bushes around Sunset, feeding only the birds and insects.

Unfortunately, they were feeding insects a little too well. We learned that our olives were thoroughly infested with the maggots of olive fruit flies. (We could press the olives anyway, but the oil would have a characteristic technically known as “grubby”... er, no thanks.)

So we did the next best thing. At an olive farm just down the coast near Santa Cruz, we spent a beautiful day picking a half-dozen varieties of Italian olives; then we loaded them into our cars and drove a short distance south, to an olive-oil producer kind enough to let us use its press (olives must be pressed immediately for best flavor). We do still intend to treat our trees and harvest our own olives, and will update this space and our blog ([http://oneblockdiet.sunset.com/team\\_olive/index.html](http://oneblockdiet.sunset.com/team_olive/index.html)) with new information as we go.

The actual making of olive oil (as opposed to the cultivating of trees) is instantly gratifying. Unlike with wine, there are no months of fermenting and aging; it all happens in a single day. The thick, jewel-green new oil is ready for you to taste immediately, mere hours after it was fruit hanging on a tree. We couldn't believe how good it was, how much it tasted of fresh olives. New oil—what the Italians call *olio nuovo*—is the biggest perk of crushing olives yourself.

The other biggest perk: We have a big stock of our own good oil to give as gifts and use whenever we like.

## WHAT WE MADE Extra-Virgin Olive Oil

20 gallons, pressed from a blend of six Italian olives: Maurino, Leccino, Frantoio, Pendolino, Ascolano, and Taggiasca.

## WHAT WE USED Materials, Prices, and Sources

**Olives** To make 20 gallons of olive oil, you'll need about 800 lbs. of olives. Finding a farm where you can pick your own fruit is difficult, since many growers worry about liability these days. However, you can order olives by mail through the Olive Growers Council of California (559/734-1710 or [adin@goldstate.net](mailto:adin@goldstate.net)) and from The Olive Hut (530/824-5946 or [www.catechnologies.com/olivehut/](http://www.catechnologies.com/olivehut/)); call to place an order starting in early September. Prices vary depending on variety and growing conditions.

**Olive press** A professional press, or mill, can cost upwards of \$200,000. You will also need a separator and a washing system, which boost the bill even higher. The home-

version First Press, available through The Olive Oil Source ([www.oliveoilsource.com](http://www.oliveoilsource.com); 805/688-1014), is a relatively reasonable \$2,650 and includes all the machinery you need. The advantage is that you can run just a few buckets of olives through it and get oil, and do it fresh from your trees. However, it's slow and labor-intensive. With a larger amount, at least a few hundred pounds, you can also go to a communal mill: an olive-oil maker that rents its mill periodically to the public during harvest time (and also takes care of the separating and washing). We took our olives to Pietra Santa Winery (which makes its own superb olive oil) in Hollister, 831/636-1991, [www.pietrasantawinery.com](http://www.pietrasantawinery.com); \$450 minimum fee, per ton or less. For other community presses, see The Olive Oil Source's listing at [www.oliveoilsource.com/scripts/millsearch.asp](http://www.oliveoilsource.com/scripts/millsearch.asp). About \$450 per ton, depending on the mill; for smaller amounts, inquire about “community press” days.

**A cool, dark place** to keep the oil as it settles, and to store it once it's bottled.

Olive oil needs to be kept at temperatures between 60 ° and 70°, in as dark a place as possible. (Heat and light are the top degraders of olive oil, along with oxygen.) We stored our olive oil in a temperature-controlled shed at Sunset.

**Food-grade plastic drums** (5-gallon size) to store the new oil. \$12 each, min. order 10, at the Olive Oil Source, [www.oliveoilsource.com](http://www.oliveoilsource.com); 805/688-1014). Stainless-steel containers are ideal, since they block out all light and oxygen and are beautiful, but they're expensive (from \$515 for a 50-liter tank). Plastic drums admit a small amount of oxidation, but not enough to affect the oil as long as the drums are filled to the top. They do need to be scrupulously washed with a food-grade degreaser for reuse, since even a trace of old oil will contaminate your nice fresh batch.

**Nitrogen** (optional). Some olive-oil makers recommend floating liquid nitrogen over the surface of new olive oil to remove oxygen before sealing the container. This can be a little risky, though, since any

extra nitrogen flows downward onto the ground, sucking up the oxygen there. (One producer warned us to do it in an open area, and to clear it of pets or napping people.) We chose not to do this and our olive oil was fine.

However, if you would like to look into it, order online from [www.airgas.com](http://www.airgas.com); 866/924-7427; they have pickup locations all over the country and will advise you on the gear you need to handle liquid nitrogen (stainless-steel thermos, gloves, and a face shield). \$24.63 per liter if you bring your own thermos.

**Power drill** fitted with a small bit (for making a ventilation hole in plastic containers). From about \$35 at any hardware store.

**Bottles and corks** Dark green or amber glass is best, to block light from spoiling the oil. We chose small (250-ml.) bottles, to give away as gifts and also because we could use up an opened bottle more quickly, with less chance of it oxidizing. Bottles sell out fast during harvest season in fall, so place your order well ahead of time. About \$327 for 300 dark-glass bottles (250-ml.) with corks and gold seals, plus \$50 charge (applied if your order is less than \$500), from California Glass in Oakland, CA, 510/635-7700; [www.calglass-pcc.com](http://www.calglass-pcc.com). The Olive Oil Source also sells bottles in various sizes; the 250-ml with corks is clear glass only, \$11.50 each; minimum order is 90 cases of 12 bottles.

**Funnel** narrow enough to fit securely into your bottles. From \$3.50 online or at a cooking-supply store.

**Towels or rags** for mopping up while bottling.

**Sturdy worktable** on which to set the containers of olive oil for bottling, with spigots hanging over the edge. From \$75 at home improvement centers.

**Plastic tarp** to spread under and around the worktable (you will splatter). About \$40 for a 10-foot by 100-foot tarp at home improvement centers.

**Large aluminum pan** (your old turkey roasting pan works well), placed beneath the spigots to catch drips.

**Mallet or small hammer** to tap corks into bottles. From \$6 at a hardware store.

**Hot soapy water** in a bucket for cleaning slippery hands while bottling.

**Labels** Use a design/graphics program like Adobe Illustrator or contact The Olive Oil Source's label design service (415/924-0690; [susan@oliveoilsource.com](mailto:susan@oliveoilsource.com)). min. 20 sheets of self-adhesive labels; 10-14 per sheet; from \$5/sheet plus \$100 set-up fee. (To learn how we made our labels, see below.)

## HOW WE DID IT A Step-by-Step Guide and Our Timeline

Given that our own landscape-size olive trees were infested with olive fruit fly maggots, we didn't grapple with harvesting them. If you have a backyard tree or several, and are interested in learning how to harvest olives, control the olive fruit fly, or care for your trees, see *Helpful Info*, below.

**NOVEMBER 29** Drove to Valencia Creek Farms in Aptos, CA and **hand-picked olives:** Maurino; Leccino; Frantoio; Pendolino; the giant green Ascolano, from Tuscany; and Taggiasca, from the Ligurian coast.

Immediately drove 30 miles south to Pietra Santa Winery, in Hollister, CA (831/636-1991, [www.pietrasantawinery.com](http://www.pietrasantawinery.com)) to **press the olives.** Our 800 lbs. were mechanically washed and then crushed in an Italian stone press (three enormous rotating stone wheels weighing a total of 7,000 pounds). The mush, looking exactly like chopped chicken liver, was separated, filtered, and poured in a grass green stream into the plastic drums we'd brought with us. We slurped spoonfuls of it and loved its vivid, fresh taste, thick texture (despite filtering, minuscule bits of olive remained).

**NOVEMBER 30 Settling** Sediment in oil makes it spoil faster. To allow the solids to fall to the bottom of the drums, we put the drums in the Sunset prop shed, draped them with black plastic to shut out light, and set the thermostat to 65° to keep them properly cool.

**FEBRUARY 6 Bottling** After about 2 months of quiet resting, each drum had a layer of olive sludge on its bottom (settling usually happens within 30 to 45 days). On a patio outside, we drilled holes into the

drum tops to release pressure and enable flow, set them on a work table, and then opened the spigots to let the oil pour into the bottles. As we worked, we figured out what we should have done ahead of time, and then did it:

- **put tarp on the ground** and on your worktable to keep surfaces from getting oil stains
- **put turkey-roasting pans on the ground** under each spigot to catch drips
- **use funnels** to guide the oil from spigot to bottle, and make sure the funnel neck fits securely into the neck of the bottle
- **divide labor:** have 1 or 2 people filling the bottles, another pushing in the corks, and a fourth wiping the bottles free of oil and putting them in storage boxes (we reused the boxes from California Glass).

We also tasted the oil to make sure it hadn't acquired any of the flaws that can downgrade an extra-virgin olive oil to just plain olive oil: fustiness, mustiness, vinegariness, muddiness, or just plain rancidity. Phew—it was still good...less "green" tasting and peppery than when just pressed, and the color had mellowed to a golden hue, but good.

**APRIL 22 Storing** With temperatures expected in the 80s over the weekend and the shed temperature controls unreliable, we moved our boxes of oil down into the Sunset wine cellar, where it's always cool and dark.

**EARLY JULY Labeling** We designed them and laser-printed them onto white Avery 5265 full-sheet labels ([www.officemax.com](http://www.officemax.com)). Atop a self-healing mat ([www.dickblick.com](http://www.dickblick.com)) we lined up our metal ruler along a label edge and used a craft knife ([www.dickblick.com](http://www.dickblick.com)) to cut out each label. Then it was as easy to peel and stick a label to each bottle. Tip: To get your label on straight, try just barely peeling back one corner of the label and using that sticky spot to help you position the label on your clean bottle surface. Then reach under the label and gently remove the backing with one hand; with the other, smooth down the label as you peel off the backing.

**MID-JULY Tasted oil** in advance of a few dinner parties for which the oil was used. Several bottles, inadvertently left for two weeks in an office during a heat spell, had turned bitter. (We poured their contents into the “moats” around the legs of our beehives to keep out ants—and gave it as a digestive aid to our chickens.) The bottles in the cellar still tasted buttery and delicious on the whole, but a few were beginning to turn as well. Our olive oil’s shelf life is coming to an end—time to polish off the stock!

**Still to come** Dealing with our infested trees. The best organic weapon, a natural pesticide called Spinosad (GF-120), might be toxic to bees—and since our bees are fighting for survival at the moment, we’ve opted not to pursue the pesticide right now. Team Bee trumps Team Olive. Watch our blogs for updates, though, as we learn more.

## Helpful Info

### Organizations

**The Olive Oil Source**, based in Santa Ynez, CA, sells everything from books to mills to bottles and has a comprehensive trove of resources and links on its website, including information on how to grow and harvest olives. 805/688-1014; [www.oliveoilsource.com](http://www.oliveoilsource.com)

The new **Olive Center** at the University of California, Davis has horticultural information about raising olives for oil and for the table ([www.olivecenter.ucdavis.edu](http://www.olivecenter.ucdavis.edu)). Also, the university harvests its own landscape olive trees and makes good oil, which it sells in the campus bookstore.

**The California Olive Oil Council** gives pointers and guidance to anyone interested in growing olives or learning about olive oil. From time to time, they hold informative olive-oil tasting workshops open to the public. They also certify extra-virgin olive oils via an expert tasting panel, following the Italian model; look for the COOC label the next time you buy oil, and you won’t be disappointed. [www.cooc.com](http://www.cooc.com); 888/718-9830.

### Books

*Olive Production Manual* by Louise Ferguson, Louise Ferguson (Editor), G. Steven Sibbett (Editor) (A.N.R. Publications, 1994). A good introduction to olive growing.  
*Olive Oil: From Tree to Table* by Peggy Knickerbocker; photographs by Laurie Smith (Chronicle Books, 1997). A gorgeous overview of olive oil production around the world, with guidance on tasting and usage, plus recipes:

### Festivals

**Sonoma Olive Festival** December through February; [www.olivefestival.com](http://www.olivefestival.com)

**Paso Robles Olive Oil Festival** August 23; [www.pasoroblesdowntown.org](http://www.pasoroblesdowntown.org)

**Cañada College Arts & Olive Festival** October 5; [www.olivefest.com](http://www.olivefest.com)

**Mission San Jose Chamber of Commerce Olive Festival** [www.msjchamber.org/events/olive\\_festival2006.html](http://www.msjchamber.org/events/olive_festival2006.html)

**For a list of olive oil fairs and festivals all over the world** [www.oliveoilsource.com/olive\\_oil\\_fairs\\_and\\_competitions.htm](http://www.oliveoilsource.com/olive_oil_fairs_and_competitions.htm)

### Olive fruit fly control

The olive fruit fly invaded California 10 years ago and has ruined many an olive crop. Here are some resources to help you battle the pest:

- **Sierra Pacific Turf Supply** in Campbell, CA, sells a natural pesticide called Spinosad (aka GF-120). 408/374-4700; \$110/gallon
- **Ernie’s Pest Control** in Orland, CA, specializes in olive fruit fly control. 530/865-9829; [www.sccagriculture.org](http://www.sccagriculture.org) (click on “insect pest ID and management”)
- [www.oliveoilsource.com/olive\\_fly.htm](http://www.oliveoilsource.com/olive_fly.htm) “Controlling the Olive Fruit Fly at Home”
- <http://cesantaclara.ucdavis.edu>; enter “olive fruit fly” in search field