

OLIVE OILS AT THE COOP: PRESERVING QUALITY AND FAIR PRICES IN THE FACE OF GLOBAL CHALLENGES

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ILLUSTRATION BY ROD MORRISON

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If you suspect that recent increases in olive oil prices are due to climate change, you are correct. But, happily, the Coop carries many interesting, tasty olive oils at fair price points even with a global market that's in the pits.

The Climate Crisis' Effects on the Olive Oil Market

Southern Europe, in particular, has experienced numerous conditions related to climate change that have limited olive oil production: drought, scorching temperatures, wildfires and flooding. Aging olive trees, which typically can't be shaken by the harvesting machines that resemble Edward Scissorhands and need to be hand picked, produce far less fruit and require additional labor costs. Kevin O'Sullivan, a receiving coordinator for 19 years, purchases the non-specialty olive oils at the Coop from natural foods distributors. He notes that prices are currently 30-50% higher and that some buyers might therefore have "sticker shock."



PHOTO BY ROD MORRISON

Chosen Foods Avocado Oil prices have hardly changed. Mintec, a firm that provides commodity price data and analysis, notes online that an “uptick in production estimates for Spain’s 2023/2024 season” and “beneficial rains in March and April” led to declines in olive oil prices on the commodities market relative to the shortages in the previous years. But they also point out that there are “dwindling [olive] oil reserves” which producers use to blend their oils. Greek olive production, meanwhile, has faced additional burdens due to heat and the olive fruit fly pest,

causing production to drop, sometimes dramatically. And Turkey has extended its olive oil export ban, further limiting supply.



Coop's Olive Oil Team: Britt Henriksson, Yuri Weber, Kevin O'Sullivan

California producers' prices have also gone up. O'Sullivan notes that there are two big companies in the state, California Olive Ranch and Cobram. Like many producers, many of the oils from California Olive Ranch are 90% blends from Argentina and North Africa purchased on the commodities market. They also produce another, California Olive Ranch 100% California Olive Oil, that is made exclusively with California olives, and is described on their website as "complex with floral, grass, and fresh herb notes." It's "quite expensive," says O'Sullivan, at \$35 for one liter. Cobram, meanwhile, didn't sell well and was dropped from the Coop's roster.

IT'S LIKELY THAT CHANGES IN THE WORLD MARKET FOR OLIVE OIL ARE LESS OF AN ISSUE AT THE COOP, WHERE SHOPPERS PAY LESS OF A MARKUP.

While Mintec expresses concerns about consumers choosing alternative oils, including sunflower or rapeseed, due to comparatively high olive oil prices, it's likely that changes in the world market for olive oil are less of an issue at the Coop, where shoppers pay less of a markup. Sales of Chosen Foods avocado oil at the Coop, for example, have remained steady. O'Sullivan notes that a Sicilian olive oil that costs \$25 for a 750ml bottle at the Coop retails for \$45 in nearby shops.



Single producer olive oils are on the endcap opposite the chicken Cheese, Bulk, Coffee and Fancy Foods Buyer Yuri Weber, who has worked at the Coop for 23 years, purchases the four or five brands of single producer olive oils located at the back end cap across from the chicken case with colleague Britt Henriksson, also a receiving coordinator and buyer. Weber agrees that “prices are really going up.” But, he adds, “considering what you’re getting, hand pressed, good product for a little ex-

tra money," it's still a very good value.

Specialty Olive Oils at the Coop, Including Mentis Estate, Produced by a Coop Member



PHOTO BY ROD MORRISON

Mentis Estate comes direct from the producer, Anastassios Menti. Spain produces just under half of the world's olives. Historically, olive trees were planted and cultivated by the Romans; later, Muslims brought their irrigation exper-

tise. Millenary olive trees (those over 1,000 years old) in Catalonia have been formally recognized as a world heritage agricultural site. Olives grow in many of the same regions as wine and different microclimates affect their taste. Spanish olive oils are known for being more yellow in color than Italian versions, which tend to be more green. The former tastes fruity and nutty while the latter is said to have a grassy, herbal profile.

According to General Coordinator Joe Holtz, during the 1980s it was very difficult to find extra virgin olive oil (EVOO). When he noticed a truck delivering the product, however, a sourcing relationship was established. Today, as part of their work to ensure that the Coop carries the best olive oils, Weber and Henriksson meet with distributors, taste oils and learn about the products the Coop sells. Henriksson is even scheduled to travel to Portugal at the end of October to visit olive estates.



PHOTO BY ROD MORRISON

California Ranch Olive Oil is 100% domestically produced

Among the Coop's wide selection of olive oils are several notable brands by smaller producers, including Casa Pareja, a certified organic and biodynamic olive oil producer in southern Spain. Their oil is made from a blend of varieties—Weber describes the flavor as “dynamic, peppery, everything you want from cooking to finishing, and reasonably priced.” It is available in a 750ml bottle and a 3-liter tin. Two others are from Portugal, CARM (Casa Agrícola Roboredo Madeira) and Esporão. CARM also produces

wines in the Douro region. Weber describes CARM as a “great olive oil” and Esporão as “full flavored, round, spicy,” produced on a small farm.

Anastassios Mentis, a Coop member since 2016, is a photographer and olive oil producer who emigrated to Astoria in 1996. An eastern Mediterranean olive farm that his great-grandfather founded and planted in the 1870s used to sell “bulk” olive oil. But a photo shoot with a distributor and a desire to help the local economy after the financial crisis led Mentis to obtain permits to import and bottle the green gold from Greece. He now works with his mother—who is 89 years old and manager of the estate—and is able to cut out the middleman by manufacturing and selling directly to stores and consumers. They also produce a locally hand-harvested sea salt.

Mentis Estate grows Atheniola olives: “In mythology, Athena gave olives from this region, formerly known as Sparta, to the city of Athens,” Mentis explains. Estate labels on olive oils signify that all of the olives are sourced from that specific location. Weber describes Mentis Estate olive oil as “warm and buttery.” Marketing materials describe a “subtle aroma of artichoke” and creaminess. This is a pure, unblended olive oil.

“IN MYTHOLOGY, ATHENA GAVE OLIVES FROM THIS REGION, FORMERLY KNOWN AS SPARTA, TO THE CITY OF ATHENS,” MENTIS EXPLAINS.

Weber notes that there are members who look forward to the annual sale of freshly pressed olive oil in November and December. Organic Tonda Iblea Olio Nuovo from Sicily will be available just before Thanksgiving and last year’s harvest was described by distributors as having “green tomato aroma and fruity flavor.” The freshness of these EVOOs may have added health benefits associated with high-polyphenol (or high-phenolic) oil’s peppery tasting, beneficial compounds with antioxidants and other properties.



Member, Patrick Porter, stocking the olive oil shelves

Bad Actors in the Olive Oil Market

In addition to high prices and supply issues, the olive oil market has been the subject of concerns publicized in a *60 Minutes* episode titled “Agromafia” that aired in 2016. The episode described counterfeit olive oil (diluted with sunflower or canola oil and with added chemical flavorings and coloring) and other food frauds that generate \$16 billion in profits per year.

The Coop decided to source olive oil from California, notes Holtz, because of the “recurring news articles about cheating taking place by some European olive oil purveyors.”

According to Weber, however, the Coop works with “smaller, reputable producers.” He pointed out that the product we get from California is unadulterated, free of pumice, rapeseed and other impurities. It is pure EVOO. Holtz adds that Casa Pareja Miti-

ca is imported by Forever Cheese, a “company [that] has deep ties to many Spanish producers.”

The Coop’s well-established relationships with producers, built on trust, make the Coop’s olive oil selection different — and more reliable — even as climate and market forces continue to challenge this centuries-old industry.

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