

Liquid gold

WHEN people ask for ladi in Greece, there is only one type of oil they are referring to.

From antiquity to modern times, cleolado - to give olive oil its full name - has been nothing short of a life source in this country.

Greece is the world's third largest producer of olive oil and holds the rank of the world's highest consumer of the oil per capita. A staggering 23.7kg of olive oil are consumed on average per person per year, out-consuming Mediterranean olive rivals Spain by 10kg.

Many Greeks produce their own olives for personal consumption and are therefore unaware of the confusion novices to the country's cuisine face when choosing an olive oil.

How to choose

The first rule is to examine the expiry date on the bottle. Olive oil has a shelf life of approximately two years - but only if the oil has been stored in a cool dark place for that period.

The second rule is to determine if the oil is extra virgin or virgin, classifications certified by the International Olive Oil Council, not mere marketing phrases.

The difference between extra virgin and virgin olive oil is based on its acidity, which is a measure of the oil's content of oleic acid.

Up until 2003, to be classified extra virgin the oil needed acidity of less than 1 per-

cent. This cutoff point dropped to 0.8 percent from consumer pressure for a low-acid made. Virgin olive oil has an acidity level up to 2 percent and is not as full-flavoured as extra virgin oil.

Both these types of oil are processed mechanically, without the use of chemical, thermal or other refining techniques. This guarantees that the oil is a pure product produced from the fruit itself. Both versions can be used for cooking or eaten raw in salads or as dressings. However, extra virgin is always recommended.

A second-grade olive oil is known as pyreneleo, which has an acidity of lower than 1 percent but is refined from the leftover mass of crushed olive flesh and pips. A less expensive alternative to extra virgin olive oil, pyreneleo is classed as olive oil (without the extra virgin) and is not recommended. Olive oils labelled "first press" or "first cold press" indicate they are not pyreneleo.

Simple pleasures

Considered to be the finest extra virgin olive oil, agoureleo has been causing a stir in the Greek market. Produced from unripe olives harvested early in the season, the oil has a rich green colour with strong fruity aromas.

Agoureleo usually has a small production run and a shelf life up to nine months, but is superb in simple salads where dunking bread is an irresistible finish to a meal.

Differences in olive oil colour and flavour are deter-

mined by the olive variety, time of year the olives were picked, the handling of the fruit before pressing, the equipment and method used to press the olives.

Unripe olives will produce a deep-green colour from the chlorophyll still present in the fruit, whereas ripe olives produce oil with a yellowish tone.

The queen of olives is the koroneiki variety, which is found throughout Greece but is native to Messinia. The koroneiki is a small olive, picked green, producing strong-flavoured oil, perfect for eating raw or added at the end of cooking so as not to lose the aroma of the oil.

Recipes Ladera

The tradition of ladera is based on highlighting one vegetable that is in abundance during spring and summer, combined with olive oil to create a simple yet delicious meal. Although the availability of frozen vegetables allows us to make this specialty all year round, the difference with using vegetables as they come in season is phenomenal.

Essential to ladera is to use only the highest-quality extra virgin olive oil and to pick seasonal vegetables at their peak, such as green beans, okra, aubergines and courgettes. One of the most popular ladera dishes throughout Greece is yemista - rice-

stuffed vegetables. Usually comprised of tomatoes, yemista can also include aubergine, courgette, onions, vine or lettuce leaves, a dish based on nature's bounty. Often misconstrued by tourist-trap tavernas as accompaniment dishes or as appetisers, ladera are actually the main meal requiring only a slab of good-quality feta and fresh bread (essential for wiping the plate clean). Served at room temperature, these dishes can be prepared from the morning and served later in the day.

In season from April to June, peas, or araka, are the quintessential springtime vegetable dish. Greek peas are large and bursting with flavour. The following recipe has the added excitement of artichokes, or anginares, which are also in season.

Classic ladera

Fresh peas with artichokes

Ingredients
1kg fresh peas
6 medium-sized artichokes
3/4 cup extra virgin olive oil
1 onion, finely chopped

Small bunch dill, chopped
1 lemon
Salt & pepper
Method

De-pod the peas, wash well in cold water and drain. Peel artichokes and rub well with lemon before setting aside in bowl of salt water with juice from half a lemon.

Sautee the onion in the oil until soft, add the peas and coat well in the oil, turning over for 2-3 minutes. Rinse the artichokes and place on top of the peas with the heart of the artichoke face down. Add the dill and a cup of water to half cover the peas and artichokes (do not add too much water). Cover.

Allow to simmer, without stirring, on a medium heat until the peas and artichoke are cooked, all the water is gone and only the oil remains.



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