



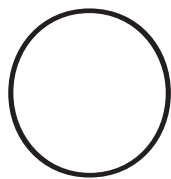
Oils are a staple of the Mediterranean diet, and our fry-ups wouldn't be the same without them. Paul Collins, who has over 20 years of experience as a chef, tells us why they're worth savouring.

THE EXPERT: OILS

THEY'RE ESSENTIAL FOR COOKING AND EXCELLENT FOR DRIZZLING. CHEF PAUL COLLINS ENCOURAGES US TO THINK SEASONALLY AND MAKE THE MOST OF OILS

Words: **LORENZA BACINO** Photography: **TORY MCERNAN**





ils are the workhorses of the kitchen. Often overshadowed by the pantry's showier inhabitants, they're always at the heart of a home cook's repertoire, coating our roasties, sizzling our stir fries and peppering up our salads. No

store cupboard would be complete without them.

Oil production these days is big business, and our choice of what to pour, drizzle or splash onto our food knows no bounds. Avocado or pumpkin oils titillate our taste buds along with more familiar types such as sesame and groundnut. The whole process of making oil has become as sophisticated as wine-making, and it takes a seasoned palate to detect the subtle nuances in texture, flavour and aroma.

Chef Paul Collins is the owner of just such as palate. He lives in Little Milton in Oxfordshire and enjoys tasting and buying oils from his local deli. "I love it when I see handwritten labels on the bottles, because that means there's a person behind this product, and it's probably been produced in the way they used to do it, which is good in my opinion," he says. Paul is a big fan of strong-tasting extra virgin olive oils: "They have a robustness about them, which is what I like on a salad or drizzled on my broad beans or asparagus. I'd be prepared to spend a bit extra to make a real difference."

But if you're going to splash out you need to know what you're buying, so we asked Paul to tell us more about choosing the right oils for the right purpose.

What oils should we have to hand?

Most good, non-commercially produced oils are seasonally harvested, so what you have in your larder should reflect these variants. In summer, I'd go for pumpkin and avocado oils as they're good as condiments for salads – you don't want to be heating them up for cooking or anything. As a store cupboard base, a good extra virgin olive oil for finishing off pasta dishes and soups. Nut oils, like hazelnut and walnut, are good for dressings as well as for cooking, and I'd use sesame oil for stir-frying vegetables, noodles and chicken if I want to give a Chinese influence to a dish. I'd stock a bottle of hemp oil as a condiment, but also as a health supplement. It contains 94% of your daily recommended dose of omega 3, so that's important for vegetarians.

How should they be stored and for how long?

A lot of people's kitchens are quite warm nowadays, if they have an aga, for instance, and that isn't a good temperature for storing oil. So if you have somewhere cool and dark, like a larder, away from direct sunlight, use that. A cool environment is best for oil. Time-wise, olive oil tends to lose its flavour after about 12 months. And the nutrients and vitamins will go too – so you're getting no benefits from it if you keep it too long.

What should you bear in mind when buying oils?

Firstly, I'd say buy organic. I think the production needs to be pesticide-free. When choosing olive oil, it's like choosing a wine, so provenance is all-important. People



want single estate, they want to know the area it comes from, as those factors influence the finished product. Look for PGI or DOP on the label, as this indicates it's from a region and therefore produced traditionally.

If you talk to chefs about cheese, for example, their palate can recognise when the cows are grazing in April and May and therefore the cheese they produce has a grassier flavour. From my experience, the important thing to bear in mind with oil is when it's harvested, because as I mentioned before, all the flavours and the nutrients like vitamin E diminish over time, and that means it loses its health benefits too. Within three or four months of it being harvested is when it's at its best, so it isn't like a wine in that it doesn't improve with age.

Is it worth buying an expensive olive oil?

Yes, it's worth spending a bit of money on buying a good olive oil. So shopping from your local deli is a good idea because you can find single estate small bottles of olive oil and they're the best. That's because the owner has been out and sourced everything. They can tell you about the farm, the terrain – and you have a dialogue »

No vinaigrette recipe necessary: finish off crisp, fresh salads with a drizzle of oil straight from the bottle. Go for pumpkin and avocado when they're in season.

with your local deli owner, which means you'll get the full benefit from a tasting session. At my local deli, I taste the oils first and decide there and then – and it also very much depends on what you want it for. If you taste them side-by-side, that's really beneficial.'

What are some of the different ways of using oils?

I'd definitely say never apply any heat to extra virgin olive oil, ever. Some dishes require you to drizzle extra

groundnut and I cover my rib of beef or my steak – I seal it in a groundnut or sunflower oil, preferably an organic one. For vegetables, I normally blanch mine and dress them in olive oil at the end – the same if I'm roasting them; I drizzle an extra virgin olive oil over them as a condiment.'

Can you share some of your favourite uses?

I absolutely love having olive oil on my minestrone soup, like the Italian grandmamas do. That's a cultural tradition there that we don't tend to do over here. But I love that shiny layer of olive oil on the surface of my soup.

If I'm serving salad, I prefer to have a bottle of oil on the table, so people can serve themselves. Any soft herbs during summer are nice to add, so basil, chervil, a tarragon. Again, it adds another dimension to the taste of the oil – you're just wanting to enhance the flavour, not alter it so it takes over your dish. Adding the soft herbs infuses the oil with their flavour. So with a sauce vierge for example, which is olive oil, herbs and tomatoes, you could slightly warm that through to take on the flavour of the herbs and the tomatoes, but not to a temperature where it's going to alter the taste.

The other useful thing you can do is add something to the oil to enhance the flavour for yourself. By that I mean adding the juice of a lemon or some lemon zest, chilli, basil or mint. So if I've flavoured oil with mint, I may use that over a lamb dish when I'm finishing it off.

Is there anything you really shouldn't do?

Never cook with extra virgin olive oil, as I say. It's got quite a lot of sediment in it and once you start heating it up, the sediment starts to burn, which isn't what you want. So extra virgin olive oil should be left well alone.

Also you often see celebrity chefs on TV using things like curry oils or chocolate oils. Those things are really made for aesthetic reasons rather than anything else and I'd be hard-pressed to have those sorts of things anywhere near my kitchen!

What about unusual or unexpected uses of oils?

I came across a great recipe for chocolate mousse using olive oil. It's dairy free, but utterly delicious and good for people with a dairy intolerance. I make it all the time now. You need 150g of chocolate, 140ml of olive oil, four eggs separated and 125g of caster sugar.

You melt the chocolate and the olive oil together and make a sabayon with the egg yolks and half the sugar. Make a meringue with the egg whites and the remaining sugar. You then need to fold the chocolate into the sabayon, then fold in the meringue and allow it to set overnight. I took that to my local NCT group when my little one was born and it was a big hit. **S**

PAUL COLLINS has been a chef for over 20 years, was executive head chef of Daylesford Organic and set up private dining company Chef Paul Collins in 2011. www.chefpaulcollins.co.uk

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virgin over them, so I'm in that camp and have a tendency to drizzle. Avocado and pumpkin oils are quite vibrant, quite dense and heavy, so you don't need a lot of them. You just use them as a condiment to finish a dish.

Hazelnut and walnut oils are also great for finishing dishes, so are more condiments than for cooking. If it's autumn, and it's game, then hazelnut oil is good: it's the cobnut season, so those oils naturally lend themselves to the seasonal dishes. It's all out there growing at the same time and that just accentuates the flavours.

If I'm cooking a fish dish, then I use olive oil and a squeeze of lemon. And for meat I keep a little bottle of

For great flavours look for organic oil from a single estate and use within 12 months.

