

## The Great Extra Virgin Olive Oil Project

### Part II: Stephanie Zonis Hunkers Down With More Than 90 Bottles of Olive Oil

[Click here](#) for Part I: Pressing Matters, an industry overview

There are almost two dozen countries that produce olive oil. For this project, we reviewed oils from the largest producers, including:

- California
- France
- Argentina
- Greece
- Spain
- Portugal
- Italy
- Israel
- Australia
- New Zealand
- Morocco

The overwhelming majority of the world's olive oil comes from Spain, then Italy and France.

We love olive oil. The California Olive Oil Council reports that currently, about 65 million gallons of olive oil are consumed in the U.S.—eight times the volume of 20 years ago.

This review focuses on extra virgin oils—a category, with dozens of species of olives in broad production. The different cultivars and their terroirs yield oils so diverse in flavor that a serious connoisseur could own a dozen different bottles, each with a very distinct flavor profile: peppery, fruity, buttery, nutty, grassy, herbal, floral, woody. Depending on how fine a palate you have, you could select your oil as you select your wine, to complement your specific meal.

One of the many producers to whom I spoke, Joeli Yaguda of Willow Creek (they produce Pasolivo), declared of her oil that, “With the right foods, it’s amazing.” But she added, very wisely, that she didn’t think it should be the sole olive oil in your pantry. As Joeli notes, you wouldn’t drink one wine with everything you eat. The same should hold true for olive oil.

As you read the descriptions, hopefully you’ll be tempted to have a few—if not the complete dozen that we have at THE NIBBLE™—on your own pantry shelf.

#### Choosing The Oils

Given the legions of brands out there, how did I decide which oils to taste? I identified and contacted a large number of organizations about the project, and many sent their oils. In a handful of instances, I bought olive oils myself when I thought a producing region was greatly underrepresented by the number of oils I’d received from its manufacturers.

I wish to state here that I have no sensory training in olive oil. Despite this, and rather to my surprise, I was able to easily detect differences between the oils I tasted, as should you. There is a guide to the aromas and flavors flavors in [Tasting Olive Oil](#) that provides direction on what to look for, as well as a guide on how to taste.

Olive oil is unusual in flavor profile because bitterness, a taste that can be undesirable in other foods, is in fact a positive attribute in olive oil. So is pungency, that peppery catch in the back of your throat; and of course, fruitiness, which is the olive flavor itself. These qualities three should be in good balance, and that balance is determined by your taste buds. As with any other food, the ultimate question here is: do you like it?

I chose not discuss olive oils in wine terminology—e.g. an herbaceous nose, a fruit-forward entry with notes of avocado and a finish of green tomato and pepper—because that’s not how we choose to buy oil. Instead, I assigned each oil to one of four categories that are more reflective of most people’s general tastes:

- **Intense.** Knock-ye-socks-off oils that really make you sit up and take notice. Strongly-flavored, with a peppery punch. Use for your strongest-flavored foods or where you want a definite peppery aftertaste.
- **Robust & Fruity.** Generally more olive-y, more verdant flavors, very often accompanied by a somewhat peppery aftertaste. Use with most pasta dishes or as a finishing drizzle in Nonna’s best minestrone (or other equally robust soups).
- **Smooth & Buttery.** These are the luscious, fruitier oils that still retain a sense of delicacy. Often used for salads, vegetables, and poultry.
- **Subtle & Nuanced.** The most ethereal olive oils, but still with a noteworthy taste. They may be delicate, but still be complex. Use for your lightest dishes, such as grilled white-fleshed fish or fresh mozzarella.

The placements of the oils into the categories are mine, and individual preferences do come into play. Your categorization of an olive oil might not match mine; I’m known for being quite sensitive to strong flavors, so an oil I describe as “Intense” might not be so powerful in your judgment. Similarly, some might prefer a Smooth and Buttery oil over that fresh mozzarella, or an Intense oil in their gazpacho. As with anything else in the food world, it comes down to experimenting, finding the products you like best.

Do I expect anyone to try the ninety-plus oils I did here? Unless you’re writing a book about olive oil, no. See our article about holding a tasting. It can be a nice way to get together friends on a weekend afternoon, or an innovative cocktail hour prior to dinner. At THE NIBBLE™, we recently held one for members of the media, to demonstrate the regional differences in olive oil flavors among Australia, California, France, Italy (Puglia, Tuscany, and Umbria), Sicily, and Spain.

And now, introducing the oils:

#### Italy Intense

- **Cuve Monte**, [www.oliviersandco.com](http://www.oliviersandco.com). Delicate aroma. Very strongly flavored with immediate, lasting intensity and a moderate “hit” of pepper at the end. *Intense*.
- **Galantino**, [www.oliviersandco.com](http://www.oliviersandco.com). Aroma ethereal and fleeting. Very strong, sharp, and bitter flavor that is not for everyone. *Intense*.
- **Marchesi de’ Frescobaldi Laudemio**, [www.farawayfoods.com](http://www.farawayfoods.com), [www.cybercucina.com](http://www.cybercucina.com), [www.convitoitaliano.com](http://www.convitoitaliano.com). Full olive-y aroma. Very bitter and quite peppery. Aftertaste lasts for a long while. *Intense*.
- **Villa Stabbia Organic**, [www.organicoliveoilcompany.com](http://www.organicoliveoilcompany.com). Moderately spicy aroma. Immediate bitter and pepper flavors fill your mouth and last for a long time. A very big oil. *Intense*.



Intense...robust and fruity...smooth and buttery...subtle and nuanced. How do you like your olive oil? We tasted more than 90—and yes, found a few we liked.

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#### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

**STEPHANIE ZONIS** has tasted more brands of olive oil for this article, than most people will knowingly taste in a lifetime.

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