

Slippery customers

Olive oils of different grades and styles offer retailers a world of choice. LYNDA SEARBY spoke to delis owners and buyers at top outlets about their sourcing strategies.



Cedric Veilex,
Olive oil buyer, Selfridges

“Personally I prefer oils to be spicy and therefore I have a slight preference for Italian oils. However, a lot of our customers prefer soft oils and would get more pleasure from one of our Spanish or French varieties, so we mainly stock Italian, French, Spanish and Greek oils, which gives customers a choice of distinctive flavours.

Our best selling oil is an Italian called Seggiano. It is a single varietal oil made on the slopes of an extinct Tuscan volcano. It is complex, rich, very green and grassy, with a spicy kick. Another good seller is our most exclusive and expensive oil – the Manni oil. This organic oil was produced in collaboration with the University of Florence to create ‘liquid gold’. It’s a wonderful gift for the gourmet.

The best olive oils are labour-intensive and produced in small batches, which partly justifies the higher cost. Extra virgin is no guarantee that an oil has been extracted traditionally as these days mechanical methods prevail.

In terms of sourcing, growers come to us or we meet them at food shows. We also work with distributors who specialise in sourcing quality oils – they will contact us when something new and interesting is coming to market. Packaging is an important consideration as many customers are shopping for gift ideas.

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Kelly Molloy,
Olive oil buyer, Harvey Nichols

“ We have a selection of robust oils, delicate oils, and a range representing most of the main producing areas of the world – both old world and new.

Our oils vary from the Ferran Adria (of El Bulli) range which we have exclusively, to a range of Harvey Nichols Extra Virgin Olive Oils, and oils such as Santa Tea, Laudemio Frescobaldi, Nunez de Prado, A L'Olivier, Colonna, Kalis Organic, Nolans Road, Bird in Hand, Ravida and Valdueza.

We visit growers where possible, and often also meet them when they pass through London. We are making an effort this year to visit those suppliers we have not yet visited. Previous buyers have even been part of the blending process to

produce something unique.

I take into account the different harvesting seasons in different areas when choosing products. Oil does come with a best-before date on it, which is usually around a year after harvest.

During the course of the year an oil will change its flavours and aromas naturally which can produce surprisingly different tastes at different times of the year. As the oils I buy are usually of an extremely high standard, it isn't really an issue for us. I keep quantities to a minimum when ordering, to ensure I am not holding too much stock and can order fresh when needed. I limit buying certain oils at particular times of the year until the new harvest is produced. ”

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Terry Roberts,
General manager, Chandos Deli, Bristol

“ Iain [Keith-Smith, owner of the Chandos Deli chain] takes busman's holidays. Every time he seems to come back with a different product. His latest find is a single varietal French olive oil, made from Lucques and Picholine olives grown in Bize by Didier. It's what the grower calls his 'second grade' – the first he keeps for himself – and it's amazing.

The more successful we become, the more of a 'sales rep magnet' we become – we get sent loads of samples, which we always try. We get all the staff together and sit round with some bread and olive oil so everyone can voice their opinion – if the staff love a product, they get behind it and find it very easy to sell.

I used to think packaging was important but recently I've

become less concerned with it. There are so many oils that you can get fazed by the packaging. Besides taste, I only choose oil that is produced in small quantities. Seggiano extra virgin olive oil from southern Tuscany, for example, looks mass-produced but it's not. It's a little bit peppery and definitely a dressing oil rather than a cooking oil.

Other oils we stock include a Spanish Nunez de Prado and Greek Kalamata olive oil, which we sell in a one-litre bottle as 'multi-purpose' oil. However, Kalamata had a big fire last year so I expect yields will become small and prices will increase. Prices are rising due to the strength of the euro. One solution could be looking to new world oils, but Iain's holidays haven't taken him there yet. ”

Sam Rosen-Nash,
Olive oil buyer, Fortnum & Mason

“ We have very knowledgeable suppliers who alert us whenever they have a new oil they feel is of the expected level of excellence. We then taste and research it to decide whether we will stock it.

When selecting oil, the most important factor is the quality of aroma, flavour and aftertaste. We research the estate from which the oil comes and the processes by which the product is produced.

It's important that an olive oil is able to stand alone as well as enrich a variety of dishes. I will personally visit the growers of our most prominent oils to ensure high standards and because we believe in being involved in every stage of the process to show our support to our producers.

In terms of origin, we have no specific preference; it is the quality of the olives and their oil that is most important. Whilst we stock a large number of Italian and Spanish oils, we've recently added to our range an oil that is created from olives grown on holy land and cultivated by Orthodox monks in Lebanon. We take great pleasure in the differences in taste and aroma that are a result of the variations in climate, soil type, and growing conditions – very similar to the principle of terroir in the wine industry.

To ensure our customers buy fresh oils, we put the newest harvest on our shelves as soon as possible. Occasionally, an oil will be held back if the flavours are too assertive in order to let it come into balance – freshness does not always ensure the best taste.

Our best seller is the Fortnum & Mason Black Truffle oil. Rather than infusing the oil with a truffle extract, it contains 10 real truffle shavings which makes it extraordinarily high quality. Also selling well is our own label Monte Amiata, Villa Saletta (from the estate of Guy Hands), Fattoria Mose and Mose infused with lemon zest, basil and orange. ”





Sue Berits

Co-founder, Berits & Brown delis

“When we first opened, we requested as many samples as possible, tasted them, took them round to people’s houses and asked them to fill in questionnaires.

At the time, the big winner was Hojiblanca, a Spanish oil from Olives et Al. We’ve since replaced the Hojiblanca with a Herencia Mediterranea, which we sourced through El Olivo in Edinburgh, an importer of nice single estate olive oils. It’s flavour is very light, fruity and fresh-grassy, and people seem to like it for salad dressings.

We have also swapped one which wasn’t so successful but I personally loved – it was called Organic Tuscan Extra Virgin Olive Oil from Seggiano. In general, customers are looking for something that is inoffensive. Probably our biggest seller is Filippo Berio – people buy it because it’s got a high smoke point, it’s very lacking in flavour and if you cook with it, it doesn’t interfere with the flavour of the food.

Nowadays we source most of our oils through trade shows. We don’t visit the growers as unfortunately we don’t make enough money for us to travel around the world tasting oils!

We came across a company called Nudo at a trade fair and were taken by a scheme they run called ‘Adopt an olive tree.’ You buy a gift pack and give it to someone as a present, and throughout the year they are sent fruit from their adopted tree, and soap or oil made from the fruit.

We also sell olive oil in vats so that people can try them, because oils vary so much. It gives us a point of difference from the supermarkets, where people have to make their decisions based on whether they like the label without knowing what the oil tastes like.”

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Sue Berits, Berits & Brown

Kate Livingstone, Marketing manager, The Food Company

“Olive oil tends to go hand in hand with other products we buy. Often the farmers in Italy, France and Spain we’re buying ham from will also have olive groves. They love you to try their olive oils and quite often they are the best ones too.

South Africa and Australia are both producing some fantastic oils now. There is a great Aussie producer called Dandaragan that does three different densities – light, robust and fruity. They are superb and retail at £11.95.

The only problem with new world oils is that it takes a lot longer to ship them over, which doesn’t seem that sensible when we’re lucky enough to have a high quality olive oil producer – Casa De L’oli – just down the road. They don’t produce a massive quantity so it’s right up there. It’s unrefined, so it’s designed to be used on its own for

dipping bread and so on.

I think consumers have been slightly misled about when they need to splash out on a good olive oil. We do a lot of tastings so people can try different oils and see what they are most suited to.

When buying oils, it’s as well to be aware that olive oil doesn’t always carry a best before date, which means if growers have over-produced, they can get away with selling it for a longer period of time and it won’t be as fresh. Once it gets past its best it loses that peppery, grassy flavour.

By law, producers must put a bottling date on the packaging, so that tells you how long it’s been in storage. You can keep and sell olive oil for up to two years after it’s been bottled, but I would make sure it’s less than six months old when buying.”

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Kate Livingstone, The Food Company



product update: speciality oils & reductions



• **Olives Et Al** has launched 'Heaven's Eleven', a selection of 11 oils it believes offers independent retailers a 'balanced group of oils for all occasions and all palates'. The range includes everyday oils, like Psaltiras, a medium-bodied Greek oil with rich lettuce, tomato and salad aromas, and Soler Romero, a Spanish organic oil from Andalucia, as well as more luxurious oils such as Naturvie Frantoio from Extremadura, Spain, and Lupo di Mare, an organic Italian oil with flavours of sweet herbs and hay.

☎ 01258 474300
 www.olivesetal.co.uk

• **Imaginative Cuisine** has developed a range of balsamic glaze reductions for use in meat, chicken or fish dishes, salads and desserts, which can save precious time in the kitchen.

To make the Balsamico Rich Balsamic Glazes, juice from Italian Lambrusco and Trebbiano grapes is



gently reduced and fermented in oak, juniper and cherry barrels before being blended with traditional well-aged balsamic vinegar – a process that ordinarily would take days for a chef.

The glazes are available in 150ml bottles in seven flavours: Original, Garlic, Chilli, Vanilla, Fig, Cherry and White Balsamic.

☎ 01189 862 347
 www.imaginativecuisine.com



• Like its Mediterranean cousin olive oil, avocado oil is rich in monounsaturated fats but it is even lower in saturated fats, contains no cholesterol and is high in vitamin E and beta sitosterol. **Infinity Foods** produces a cold pressed organic avocado oil from South African fruit. The company says the oil is superb used on its own for dressing salads and pasta or for dipping bread, and recommends blending with a dash of white wine vinegar or lemon juice to make a vinaigrette.

☎ 01273 424060
 www.infinityfoods.co.uk

• Grown and produced on the Wiltshire/Hampshire border, **Pratt's** Cold Pressed Extra Virgin Rapeseed Oil is a smooth, nutty and native alternative to imported olive oil.

Its high burn-point makes it great cooking oil, according to Pratt's, with possible uses ranging from roast potatoes and flapjacks to dressings and stir-fries.



According to Pratt's, the oil contains just 6% saturated fat, and is high in omega 3 and vitamin E, making it "one of the most heart-healthy oils available".

☎ 07760 122815
 www.prattsfood.co.uk

• New from Spanish food importer **Delicioso** is a range of flavoured Manzanilla olive oils from Extremadura in Southern Spain.

According to Delicioso, Manzanilla olives are usually too highly sought-after as an eating olive to be used in oil production, however, the new range makes the 'gourmet oil' affordable.

The oil comes in 250ml glass bottles, flavoured with either sliced garlic, chilli, peppercorns, lemons, porcini mushrooms or sweet basil, for adding 'instant flavour' to salads and cooked foods.

The oil is also available unflavoured in a one litre tin.

☎ 01865 340055
 www.delicioso.co.uk

• The La Tourangelle range of nut oils from **International Food** includes an oil for almost every occasion.

With its rich roasted walnut taste, First Pressing Virgin Walnut Oil is said to be ideal for salad dressings, grilled meats and fish, while Infused White or Black Truffle Rapeseed Oil are touted as the perfect partners for pasta, meat and fish dishes.

Other varieties include First Pressing Virgin



Hazelnut, Almond or Sesame Oil, Pistachio Oil, Pecan Oil, First Pressing Virgin Rapeseed Oil and Avocado Oil.

The oils are rich in essential fatty acids omega 3, 6 and 9 and antioxidants.

☎ 020 8688 1018
 www.internationalfood.co.uk



• Glowing health credentials and versatility make rapeseed oil hard to beat as store-cupboard oil, according to **Hillfarm Oils**.

The family-owned business has been producing cold pressed rapeseed oil for nearly four years on its Suffolk farm.

"The oil is incredibly versatile, as it has a higher burn point than olive oil, so you can use it for roasting and frying, while it still has all the oil's healthy characteristics. It has the lowest saturated fat content of any oil, and 11 times the omega 3 of olive oil – great for blood circulation and young brains," says Hillfarm's Sam Fairs.

☎ 01986 798660
 www.hillfarmoils.com

• **Great Ness Oil** claims the difference between its cold pressed rapeseed oil and others on the market lies in the filtering.

"All producers use pretty much the same methods of pressing – it's the filtering methods that can be so different," says the company's David Nunn. "We use a three-stage process specifically designed for oil – not for water, which many use and is much cheaper – which culminates with a polishing filter to achieve that brilliant, bright, shining oil."

Great Ness extra virgin cold pressed rapeseed oil is produced from seed grown on Great Ness farm in Shropshire where the Warner family has farmed for the last 60 years.

☎ 01939 261384
 www.greatnessoil.co.uk

