

Olive Oil Oscars

Now in its 19th year, the Italian olive oil awards are a national celebration of premium oils. After attending the event, Louise Miles reports on how this annual competition can actually increase oil sales in the UK



The national award known as 'Erocole Olivario' aims to discover the best olive oils produced in Italy, and reward them with the mark of approval which is widely recognised throughout the industry. The event is often referred to as the 'Oscars' as it holds an incredible amount of importance and prestige for Italian importers, retailers and customers. It also helps to spread the quality and versatility of Italian olive oil to international deli owners looking to improve their current range, or customers who are trying to diversify the use of premium olive oils.

The process

The event is free for producers to enter and attracts over 350 applications from 17 oil-producing regions. The project is funded by the Italian Trade Commission who insist that the producer must press at least 2,000 litres of oil before they can participate. Once all the paperwork is checked, the entries are broken firstly into two categories: PDO certified and extra virgin olive oil, and, then within these sections are three classifications: light fruity, medium fruity and intense fruity.

After undergoing a stringent testing system, this influx of entries are then whittled down to 92 different varieties which are individually assessed by a panel of 16 tasting experts. Most of the judges work directly with food production,



Competitions like this educate UK consumers and make them feel confident about what they are buying

however some experienced tasters can work for example in the public sector. The condition of the panel is that there is an expert from each region of Italy – this is to ensure that their tasting palate is not accustomed to one particular type.

The judging is tough and exciting and takes the experienced panel one week to access the different entries. Every taster has exactly the same table layout which includes a bottle of water, an apple to refresh the palate, a heater to warm the oils and three glasses of oil which cover the three categories: light fruity, medium fruity and intense fruity. The glasses used must always be transparent to ensure that the assessor is not swayed by the colour of the oil. Giulio Seattolini, the main olive oil expert in charge of the competition believes that the oils need to be evaluated on taste and not colour, as this is not necessary, a key factor in olive oil tasting. He says, "Many men know how to eat and drink, but few understand how to taste."

The tasting procedure follows the same routine every time to ensure accuracy, and the same oil can be checked three or even four times in some instances. When conducting a tasting, the judge needs to heat at least 15ml of oil and breathe in the aromatic sensations. The smells the jury is looking out for include: vanilla and almond notes for light flavours; grassy and green characters for medium forms, and strong tomato tones for intense varieties. Negative sensations the judges are looking to avoid include: mustiness, vinegary, and a smell of cucumber which is usually related to prolonged bottling. All of these odours are an indicate of a bad oil.

Have your lines won a prize?

So, after months of preparation and a week of sorting the good from the bad, the results were finally revealed at the town hall centred in Spolento, Italy. Gathered in the theatrical setting the results were delivered as follows:

Light and Fruity

For the extra virgin olive category, a producer called Soc. Agricola Ceraudo Roberto based in Calabria scooped first prize. Whereas Veneto Valpolicella located in Veneto secured first prize in the PDO classification.

Medium and Fruity

For the extra virgin olive category, Chisu Sandro based in Sardegna won first prize, and the producer, Colline Pontine centred in Lazio won first prize for the PDO classification section.

Intense and Fruity

When focusing on the final category, an extra virgin oil made by Quattrociocchi Valentina trumped the first prize, and Valli Trapanesi based in Sicilia claimed the PDO category.

If one of the oils mentioned is already stocked in your delicatessen, be prepared to explain its award-winning properties in-store. After beating off 350 applications, customers will be pleased to hear what makes a premium oil stand out from standard supermarket offerings.

Point of View

Leonardo De Felice, managing director of Leonardo De Felice Ltd reveals how this competition will affect the UK food industry



"This event allows retailers and customers to understand the different olive oils that are available in Italy, and hopefully encourage them to use oils from alternative regions. Like wine, there are many different factors to consider, and the more customers understand the more likely they are to experiment with flavours and hopefully trade-up. A few years ago, olive oil in Britain would have only been seen in the chemist, but now it's readily available. Projects like this make consumers feel confident about what they are buying, and they are inspired further by the range offered in their local delicatessen. They start to think more about the oil's versatility and try using in many dishes. To increase sales in-store try explaining in detail the different ways people can enjoy it – a mild oil goes with fresh cheeses, whereas a strong, spicy one is better for vegetable dips (Pinzimonio!)"

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