

EPICURE PRODUCE

Olive, olive olive... oil, oil, oil

Richard Cornish puts this season's best to a taste test

WHAT'S the biggest challenge for any food producer? Probably consistency — because customers expect the same quality from a brand every time. Meeting customer expectation will be a hard job for the olive oil industry this year. The 2005 season produced balanced, fruity, luscious oils of high quality across the state. This season, however, Victoria experienced some of the worst weather on record — the

driest/hottest summer, followed by the longest stretch of sub-zero temperatures and the worst frosts have been recorded in some olive growing areas. These factors have caused a substantial drop in the quantity and quality of this year's extra virgin olive oils.

In some areas, such as parts of central and western Victoria, the hot summer caused some fruit to ripen too quickly without time to develop complex fruity flavours. Many of

these oils are pleasantly "grassy" but lack other more interesting characteristics.

The threat of early frosts also pushed some growers into harvesting with a higher percentage of unripe green olives. These oils are harsh and can be irritatingly peppery. Some growers waited too long and harvested frost-affected olives. The oil from these is dead, dank and flat.

The news is not all bad, however. Some smaller growers in higher altitudes escaped the heat, as did those with more maritime climates such as the Bellarine and Mornington peninsulas. The two big producers, Timbercorp and Boundary Bend, with the ability to irrigate and the capital to invest in sophisticated harvesting, production and storage infrastructure, produced some very good oils, which have been bought and blended into some better-known brands. Some predict blending is the way for the industry to go. Just as the wine industry standardises quality by buying in fruit and wine from around the country, the olive oil industry will follow, as some buy premium oils to improve quality and hide faults and others bring in average bulk oil to extend their caches of quality product. The advice this year, however, is try before you buy — and remember that medals for last year's oil count for little on a bottle of this year's oil.

After a week of tasting oils from around the nation, here (see panel) are some that stood out.



HOT OFF THE PRESS

Cobram Estate Murray Valley 375ml \$5.99 (\$16/litre)

A good supermarket EV00, which is lively with a grassy nose and a little bite in the tail. A blend of Pidalqual, Barnea and Correggiola olives from Cobram Estate and Boundary Bend in northern Victoria. Available from supermarkets.

Chapman Hill New Norcia 500ml

A velvety, buttery oil with a grassy nose, which develops into more complex fruity flavours in the mouth. A lovely olive finish and a lingering warmth at the back of the mouth. Grown at 300 metres at Glenora near Kilmore. Stockists include Ruffy Produce Store; Richmond Hill Cafe & Larder; Replete, Hawthorn; Oliveria, Prahran.

Mt Moriac Arbequina 375ml \$15 (\$40/litre)

Just 20 kilometres from the Great Ocean Road, Mount Moriac has a cooler maritime climate. This and great arboriculture in the grove has paid off for Stephen Parker. His six-year-old trees have produced olives that have released a nutty, grassy oil that is almost malty. It's also the most subtle and most delicate. Farm Foods, Queenscliff; Essential Ingredient, Prahran; Oliv, Hawthorn.

Red Rock Robust 375ml \$16 (\$43/litre)

Despite a bushfire destroying 80 per cent of this year's crop, Greg Aimer was able to create this distinguished and balanced oil from the surviving Manzanillo, Frantoio and Nevadillo Blanco olives. It's early



summer hay on the nose, developing into more complex citrus notes rising from a velvety oil with robust pepperiness. Hall's Gap Newsagency; Oliv, Hawthorn; Timewize Fresh Fruit & Vegetables, North Balwyn.

Ridge Estate 375ml \$19 (\$51/litre)

This is a balanced oil from olives grown on the upland slopes of Main Ridge between Port Phillip Bay and Western Port. It starts with fresh mown hay supported by tropical fruit and brassa on the nose, which is soft and supple in the mouth and develops a nice little kick at the end, like biting into wild rocket. Made from a blend of Frantoio, Leccino, Pendulina and Manzanillo olives. Red Hill Cellars; Houghton's, Mornington; Oliv, Hawthorn.

Gooramadda 250ml \$25 (\$100/litre)

This oil made from Hardy's Mammoth olives grown near Rutherglen is handmade and very expensive. It smells of tropical fruit including paw paw and ripe mango. The luscious fruit continues with a fine mouthfeel that grips ever so lightly on the tongue. It finishes with gentle pepperiness and a lingering aroma of fruity olives. Direct at 1468 Gooramadda Road, Gooramadda, or phone (02) 6026 5658.

CHAPMAN HILL

Extra Virgin Olive Oil



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