

Cooking: Italy beats France: the nourishing values of the olive oil

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Italy has defeated France with a hundred and sixty-six food specialties, gaining the top in the list; France has reached only the second place with a hundred and fifty-six specialties. Therefore Italy has achieved the leadership in Europe for top-quality food production: the so-called registered designation of origin or indication of origin (PDO/PGI). That's what farmers stated when they commented Nicolas Sarkozy's speech (the President of France), where he affirmed that the French gastronomy is the best in the world and France deserves to be recognized by UNESCO as mankind's heritage. A similar request was sent to the international body of the United Nations by Spain, supported by the European Commission for the "Mediterranean diet". Of course even Italy is directly interested in this proposal thanks to its top-results in the production of fruit, vegetables and pasta and to its leadership in the EU, after France and Spain, in the production of wine and olive oil. But before reaching the most important part of the speech, the recipes, I will give you some information about the nourishing qualities and the specific terms in the field of olive oil. This will be useful while reading the recipes and can give us the possibility to repeat some basic knowledge of food science you certainly already know.

When was oil first used as a dressing?

In the Mediterranean area oil has been used as a dressing for ages. The codex by the Babylonian King Hammurabi (about 1760 d.C.) contains rules for olive oil trading, the Egyptians used it, the Greeks spread it throughout all their colonies; the Romans had a sort of oil-market where they distinguished five kinds of olives, depending on the ripening level and the quality of the olives; in the Middle age a lot of monks, as the Benedictines, were very careful olive-farmers, after a period of pause caused by the barbarians and their dominions. Nowadays the olive oil is wide-spread, even

outside the traditional productive areas, thanks to both its organoleptic characteristics and its good influence on man's health.

How can olive oil be preserved?

In a fresh place, at a constant temperature, protected from light. If darkness is not possible, and the bottles are transparent, the olive oil must be folded with a sheet of aluminium. Glass and ceramic are the best materials to preserve the oil.

Which food does oil match best?

With cooked or raw vegetables, with fish: both salt-water fish and fresh water fish, with "white" meat, with poultry, with pork, with mutton. Even with milk-derived products: many kinds of cheese are really good if dressed with oil.

Is olive oil suitable for frying?

The olive oil is really fantastic for frying, and it is perfect even when it is used raw. Every way you use it, the olive oil is a perfect food because it is genuine, digestive and healthy, over all thank to its organoleptic characteristics. In fact it helps other food to be tasty.

It is one of the best way for frying. It can bear the high temperature frying needs, without burning; that is to say without reaching the "point of smoke". The point where a fat alters and fades its colour, is called "point of smoke", which generates also bad taste and sometimes gets toxic.

The point of smoke of the olive oil is set beyond 200° (200 grades/centigrade): as fried food at the highest temperature never overcomes 180°, the use of olive oil is certainly advisable for frying many kinds of food.

Other fats do not have this quality.

How can you understand that the oil is hot enough for frying?

Frying temperatures shift from 140° to 185° depending on what you want to fry, and the best system, from a technical point of view, is to use a thermometer or a fryer-machine having a thermometer, even if there are simpler methods, usually used at home. Some water-drops into hot-oil sprinkle only at 140°: the loudest its sound, the highest the temperature. Another method is dropping just a little part of the food to be fried into the hot pan:

if it rises up the surface within 20 seconds, the oil has reached the right temperature for frying that food. Another one: a little piece of bread, one centimetre long, thrown into hot oil, will get golden-coloured within 40 seconds at medium temperature (140°-160°), within 30 seconds at high temperature (170°), within 20 seconds at very high temperatures(180°-185°).

**In cookbooks you can read : ‘throw in smoking oil’ while frying.
What does this exactly mean?**

It is a misunderstanding. When oil heats, even at medium temperature, the air over the pan vibrates because of heating, giving the impression the oil smokes, but it isn't like that. If the oil is really “smoking”, it is burning and it must be thrown away.

What kind of pan is more suitable for frying?

The usual pan, called ‘Lionise’ by the cooks, not too deep, round-edged and single-handled, made from aluminium coated with antiaderente, but high quality and endowed with a thick fund, gives better results; just like a similar shaped one, from heavy aluminium and not coated. The so-called iron-pan (it is actually made from stainless and burnished steel) is fantastic for frying at high temperature, (it has the traditional shape, of course). A cast-iron pan is better for “ long” frying (as for example chicken or artichoke cut into big chops).

How is the so-called pastella (batter) made?

The batter is a sticky compound that is used to envelope certain food to be fried: when in the hot oil the batter turns into a golden and crispy crust, this keeps food unaltered even if it favours its cooking.

There are several kinds of batter depending on the use: its basic elements are always flour and water but some oil or egg or yeast can be added. Any batter needs about an hour rest and must not be salted(the salt attracts wet and affects the crispy effect).

Can oil for frying be used again? How many times?

It can be used more times. The number of times depends on the kind of food to be fried: if the oil is used for frying at

high temperatures in pans you can use it twice; if you fry at low or medium temperatures you can use it four times. In the frying machine you can use it from four to seven times.

How can you keep the olive oil to be used again?

It is to be decanted from the pan to a pot, so impurities and fried chops go to the bottom. Then it must be carefully filtered with the so-called "Chinese" pass and kept in a fresh place(but not in the fridge), into a covered pot. Two important information: oil must be used again only for frying a alike food(fish with fish, vegetables with vegetables....etc.); fresh oil must never be added to a "second-hand" oil: this must be used alone.

Is the olive oil good for the so-called soffritto?"(mixture of slightly chopped vegetables and garlic of onion)

Yes, it is. Nowadays almost all the "soffritti" of Italian cooking are made with oil, even in regions where other fats were used.

Which is the best oil to make the mayonnaise?

A light, delicate oil is normally used with a light aroma. But it depends on individual tastes, even fruity oil can be appreciated.

How is salad to be dressed?

You can dissolve some salt in a spoon of vinegar, then pour it in the salad and stir, add two spoons of olive oil and then meld it again; if the vinegar is high you can use three spoons of olive oil. These quantities serve 3 people (150 grams of watered salad). If you want to suit the quantity you can use the multiples or fractions of the ingredients. If you use a lemon instead of vinegar, you can use less oil (because lemon isn't as high as vinegar) and salt quantities can be adjusted, depending on tastes.

Which oil can be used to dress salad?

Which oil should be used to dress salad without affecting the taste of these vegetables?

An oil with taste and aroma proportioned to the ones of the vegetables. Salad like endive, lettuce, valerian should be dressed with delicate oils, as the oils from Liguria

and Tuscany, stronger salads like radicand, chicory, wild salad are better tasty with aromatic and fruity oils like the oils from Apulia, Umbria, Tuscany, Lazio, Sicily. The same for raw artichokes and pinner.

What about cooked vegetables?

It works the same way. Many people love fruity oil for not-particularly-tasty vegetables, as potatoes for example. Savoury oil is traditionally used for beans.

Is the olive oil advisable for soups?

Of course. Soups, particularly vegetables soups, result excellent if they are made with olive oil, both cooked and raw when the soup is served.

Is the olive oil good to prepare roasted beef?

Certainly it is. Tuscany cookery, one of the most savoury, simplest and healthiest of our tradition, has always used it: a delicate olive oil, thanks to its high temperature resistance, gives perfect cooking and golden and crispy surfaces, exalting the natural tastes of fish and meat.

Can the olive oil be used to make risotto?

Yes, it is particularly good for risotto with fish(shell fish, sea food) and for vegetable risotto. The spring risotto from Veneto needs definitely delicate olive oil. Moreover the nourishing principles are basic substances for our body. Some of them provide energy and they are said to be macro-nourishing.

Carbohydrates or glucoses: they comprehend starch and sugar.

Basically they are energetic stuff for our body, they provide 3,75 kilocalories every 100 grams. Sugar is absorbed and used very fast, while starch is slower. There are also fibres among carbohydrates; they are not used directly by our body, but they are very important for the function of the intestine and they favour the absorption of nourishing elements.

Fats or lipids: they are an excellent source of energy (they provide 9 kilocalories every 100 grams), they bring other nourishing elements with them (some essential fatty acids, and some lip soluble vitamins, soluble in the fats).

They are mostly made from fatty acids, they differ according to their chemical bonds, and are mainly characteristic of animal fats, as palm or coco fat. The monounsaturated fatty acids have a double free bond.

Proteins: They are the most constructive part of food, those elements that are bricks for the body, to grow tissues and substitute the dying cells. Even these last provide energy (4 kilocalories every 100 grams). They are built by minor elements the amino acids. 20 amino acids exist in nature, 8 among them are considered essential, because our body is notable to produce them on its own. The proteins are said to be complete or not complete depending if they contain all the 8 essential amino acids. These kinds of food provide complete proteins: red meat and salami, fish, eggs, milk and its derived food.

Alcohol: it provides energy, and it is usually absorbed in the diet but it is not nourishing, because it is a superfluous element for our body. There are nourishing elements that don't provide energy, the so called micro-nourishing.

Vitamins: they are different substances with different functions that our body can not synthesize on its own. Almost all the food brings some quantity of vitamins particularly fruit and vegetables are rich in anti oxidant vitamins (that are **useful** to prevent cancer and heart-diseases. Among these there is the beta-carotene (a precursory of vitamin A) and some other similar molecules, the so-called aryteneoids, some with vitamin activity (alpha carotene, luteinize, cryptoxantine) some others instead have no vitamin activity, although they have a very powerful antioxidant activity (limonene). This last element is present in red, orange, yellow, and green coloured fruit and vegetable. The well-known anti-oxidant with vitamin activity is the vitamin C(or ascorbic acid) that is abundant in citrus, kiwis, peppers, tomatoes and some other vegetables (for example parsley, that is used and consumed in small quantities).

Minerals: they are basic elements for our body, present in several processes taking place into our body and with

very important specific functions (e.g. calcium for the bones or iron for the delivery of oxygen in the blood)

Water: the main element of our body without which life wouldn't exist. This has a clear antioxidant activity, present in the extra virgin olive oil, in red wine, in fruit (over all green tea). It has been discussed for some years, researchers study these elements for their probable protective effect towards several degenerative diseases.

Is flavones or phi oestrogens, among which genisteine, present in the pulses, and in particular in soy and the derived products. They have attracted the researchers' attention for their activity, similar to that of hormones; there are some hypotheses that the diet rich in these substances can reduce the cases of breast cancer but data are not very convincing. In this short report regarding recipes, the only protagonist is necessarily the main ingredient for food cooking: the olive oil. This food is wholly made of fats, and particularly about 16% by saturated fatty acids, 75% monounsaturated fatty acids(almost totally oleic acid) and for 9% by polisaturated. This kind of oil has few saturated fatty acids and a lot of monounsaturated as main characteristic. Beyond its composition, as regards fatty acids, the olive oil (extra-virgin or coming from oil-mills) is rich in some polyphenols, with an important anti-oxidant activity, which highlights top-quality oil at the researchers' eyes. The olive oil is also a good source of vitamin E, an antioxidant substance, too. Everybody advices to consume vegetable fats, among which the olive oil seems to be the best choice. The recipes included in this section have the olive oil as main ingredient. A food that has overcome the continental limits and has arrived to what was once called Sol Levante (Rising Sun). Twenty-four children, aged from 7 to 12, and their mothers discovered for the first time top-quality extra virgin olive oil and the traditional hand-made pasta during a lecture about Italian cooking in Japan. It happened in Yokohama(3,4 million inhabitants) where a cooking school of Tokyo Gas society (a huge organization in the field of energy with 10 million

subscribers) usually organizes cooking courses to promote the use of Gas as alternative energy to electric power. The Japanese cook Kotomi Kaneko (who studied in Italy) and one of the oldest Italian oil farms (Regello-Florence) attended this initiative. Kaneko taught the unusual class, made of students and mothers, two “made in Italy” dishes: handmade “maccheroni” (a special type of pasta) from Apulia (starting from the sheet of pastry, obviously made with Italian flour, stone-milled in Piemonte), with Emilian meat-sauce and honey ice-cream. According to the format of Yokohama cooking school, first the cook explained (with the help of closed-circuit cameras and maxi-screens) the ingredients for this recipe and then she showed how to prepare it alive; then mothers and children tried to do it in a very modern kitchen, set for 48 cooks. There was also a funny “pasta-quiz” for the children, to let them know pasta better. Finally the dishes were served as unusual meal.