

OIL **ANGUS WATSON** EXPLORES THE HEALTH BENEFITS AND PROPERTIES OF POPULAR OILS

It's oil you need

Thirty years ago, olive oil was only available from the chemist, sold as earwax remover. Today, a vast gallery of oils glows imperiously on supermarket shelves.

They have varying health benefits. The scientific jury is still out on the advantages of the various types of fat but evidence suggests that polyunsaturated reduces cholesterol and saturated increases it, although polyunsaturated may damage your immune system. Omega-6 is cholesterol-lowering – and omega-3 and monounsaturated oil can reduce the risk of heart disease.

As if that wasn't enough to make you dither, there's taste and practicality. Some have strong tastes for superb salad dressings, some have low 'smoke points', meaning that they burn easily and are useless for frying. Some olive oils are treated like fine wines by connoisseurs and sell for up to £40 a litre.

Here's our guide through the viscous river.



Picture: Getty Images

Which one? Choose carefully and you could lower your cholesterol and protect your heart

Groundnut or peanut oil

This pale oil doesn't burn easily, so it is great for stir-fries. The subtle nutty flavour also works well in a salad dressing. High in monounsaturated and polyunsaturated fats, it is healthy for most, although potentially fatal for those with nut allergies. *Sainsbury's groundnut oil, 1litre, £1.59*

Avocado oil

With the highest smoke point of any vegetable oil, this glides through all frying, roasting and barbecuing. It's swimming with vitamin E (which is meant to

combat the effects of ageing) and monounsaturated fats and has a light, distinctive flavour which works well as a dressing.

Olivado avocado oil, 250ml, £4.99 at Waitrose

Rapeseed oil

This is rich in omega-3 and vitamin E. It has a high smoke point and a fresh, hay-like taste which is great for salad dressings.

Farrington's Mellow Yellow rapeseed oil (pictured left), 500ml, £4.49. Tel: 01933 622 809, www.farrington-oils.co.uk



Walnut oil and pumpkinseed oil

These burn easily so are useless for cooking but their warm, nutty flavours are marvellous for winter salad dressings. Walnut is strong in omega-3, while reassuringly expensive pumpkinseed is omega-6 heavy.

Sainsbury's walnut oil, 250ml, £1.85

Waitrose Virginia Harvest pumpkinseed oil, 250ml, £7.99

Toasted sesame oil

A very strong oil, high in polyunsaturated fats, used in Chinese cooking. Strangely, given its reputation as 'the stir-fry oil', it's actually useless for frying because of its low smoke point – but slosh it on to cooked stir-fries for that Chinese sesame taste.

Tesco Finest toasted sesame oil, 500ml, £1.38

Sunflower oil

This cheap, more or less flavourless oil is high in polyunsaturated fat and packed with omega-6. It smokes relatively easily but is fine for shallow frying and salad dressing.

Sainsbury's pure sunflower oil, 1litre, 52p

Corn oil

Good old-fashioned golden oil, high in polyunsaturates, great for deep frying and, because of its bland taste, baking.

Sainsbury's corn oil, 1litre, 79p

Grapeseed oil

This oil's exciting green colour belies its clean flavourlessness. With a medium smoke point, it's good for frying delicate foods, such as fish, and it's high in omega-6.

Sainsbury's grapeseed oil, 1litre, £1.73

OLIVE OIL

Called liquid gold by the ancient Greeks, olive oil has been used since at least 2,500 BC as food, fuel, medicine, shower gel and, of course, earwax dissolver. It's rich in monounsaturates – the reason, perhaps, that Mediterranean countries have low rates of heart disease. The best – extra virgin – has quite a low smoke point but it's fine for low-ish temperature cooking, such as roasting. Expensive ones should be reserved for dressings and drizzling.

National olive oils

Like wine, olive oil varies greatly. Generally, Greek is fully flavoured, Italian lighter, Spanish fruity in the south and nutty in the north.

Tesco Finest Greek extra virgin olive oil, 500ml, £3.18

Tesco Finest Italian extra virgin olive oil, 500ml, £3.14

Tesco Finest Spanish extra virgin olive oil, 500ml, £3.18

Estate oils

Single estate olive oil is fine wine to mass-produced oil's Ribena. Here are three excellent examples:

Ravida: Made by the same Sicilian family since the 1700s, this light, slightly peppery oil smells of tomatoes (500ml, £13.40).

Colonna Granverde

Lemon: Olives are pressed with lemons to produce a powerful lemony blend, good for fish, chicken and summer salads (250ml, £8.60).

Marques De

Valdeza: This tastes of where it's from – the dry, grassy Wild West plains of Spain's Extremadura (pictured, 500ml, £12.45).



All available from *The Oil Merchant*. For stockists and mail order, call 020 8740 1335.

TIPS FROM CHARLES CAREY OF THE OIL MERCHANT

- Keep two bottles of olive oil – supermarket for cooking; estate for finishing dishes by pouring over fish and veggies, or mixing with vinegar for salad dressing.
- **Keep it in a dark place but not the fridge because it solidifies.**
- The best-before date is about 18 months after harvesting or bottling but oil will last indefinitely kept in the right conditions.
- **It's a fallacy that the deeper colour an olive oil is, the better it is. Colour has no relevance.**
- Use oil instead of butter for everything – in mashed potatoes, on bread – apart from with your toast and marmalade in the morning.
- **To clean your ears with olive oil, warm it up very slightly, syringe a few drops into your ears, then bung them with cotton wool and let it do its business for a bit.**