



Olive oil deteriorates fast, so buy it fresh and store it well.



Newell on her biodynamic farm in the upper Hunter Valley. Images from *Tree to Table*, by Patrice Newell.

# The good and bad of extra-virgin

Patrice Newell wants Australians to get a taste for home-grown olive oils, **Kirsten Lawson** writes

For Patrice Newell, olive oil is in the category of vocation. She lives and breathes the stuff. Or more accurately, eats and bathes it. It is her job, but also her passion.

Newell is a former model and television journalist (she was a newsreader with SBS and fronted the *Today Show*) who turned to farming in 1987 with her partner, journalist Phillip Adams. They produce olives, beef, garlic and honey on their biodynamic farm in the Upper Hunter Valley, and Newell makes soap with the olives and honey.

She was there at the beginning of the Australian olive-oil renaissance in the 1990s, when local growers saw themselves building an industry that would replace imports. No more reaching for the Italian, Spanish or Greek oils. Australians used instead buy their own fresh, locally made oils.

But 10 years down the track, we're still buying cheaper imported oils, and some of the best Australian oils are being exported, Newell says, at a loss to understand why anyone would chose a substandard Italian oil over the much fresher local product.

She speculates we're not confident using extra-virgin oils because we don't know what to look for – in the same way we didn't know until recently what a good coffee should taste like.

Newell publishes a new book next week, *Tree to Table*, aiming to help people buy and use the best oil. Her book includes some excellent, usable recipes from Australian chefs, like Maggie Beer's broad beans with pasta and prosciutto, Cath Claringbold's lamb tagine, Greg Malouf's Tunisian lamb soup, and local chef Janet Jeff's smoked trout and yabby salad.

The No 1 rule for buying good oil is freshness, because unlike wine, olive oil does not get better with age. So look for oils from the latest harvest – at the moment that's 2007, with 2008 oils becoming available in the next month or two. This is harder than it might seem, since the vast majority don't tell you when they were pressed. But Newell says most will have a (far too long) three-year use-by date, so if you find an oil with a use-by of 2010, it's most likely a 2007 harvest, and therefore still fresh.

Don't buy in bulk, and store it away from light. If you use as much as 250ml of olive oil each week, buy by the litre. If you use less, buy smaller bottles. Newell sells her oils in 250ml bottles.

And taste your oil. It should taste fruity, not

bland, the fruitiness balanced with bitterness and pungency, the three characteristics in tune. You taste bitterness in the front of your mouth, and its presence is a good thing, a sign of its health-giving properties. Pungency is a sensation, an after effect of olive oil, in which it catches in your throat, like honey. Again, this is a healthy factor. Pungency is produced by polyphenols, believed to be antioxidants. "I want nutrition in every mouthful I eat, so I want the freshest, maximum vitamins, maximum polyphenols, antioxidants," Newell says. "You get that with fresh oil."

Newell looks flushed with health, and as such, is a walking advertisement for lots of olive oil. But perhaps more surprisingly, she also consumes lots of saturated animal fat. Beef, butter, cream. She eats the fat on the steak. This is not for any perverse anti-consensus motivation, but because it's good for her.

Newell is big on fat, as long as it's the best-quality fat from natural, unadulterated sources – beef and sheep raised eating grass in a natural environment. She says fats are an important part of cell membranes and hormones, essential for the absorption of some vitamins and antioxidants, and can help avoid arthritis.

"I eat a lot of fat," she writes. "I even melt the fat when we butcher our grass-fed lamb in order to provide fresh tallow, in which I deep-fry potatoes, lamb cutlets and crumbed chicken, and every time I do it, my joints are grateful."

She elaborates in an interview: "Beef fat is beautiful fat from an animal that's eating grass – versus a feedlot animal, where the fat looks different, tastes different, smells different and is different."



Patrice Newell, whose new book, *Tree to Table*, is a guide to buying and using good olive oil.

Our fear of fat has produced one of the abominations of our era – "the great lie of low-fat", she says, insisting you'll end up fatter, as well as unhealthy, if you eat low-fat and highly processed foods. Instead, she says, simply eat "normal food" – high-quality, well-bred, natural food. Newell despairs at the state to which our diet has descended, relating the story in her book of a friend visiting her biodynamic farm, surrounded by fresh olive oil, home-grown vegetables and grass-fed meat, and

bringing with her a "blasphemous" low-fat salad dressing. The dressing was banished. And what about poor old corn, she laments. Once simply corn, now deconstructed into perhaps 15 different components used for food processing, "corn syrup this and corn additive that".

"It's tragic what's happened to food," she says. "To me you don't have to get hung up about it. All you have to do is ask a simple thing: did that animal live a natural life and eat grass?"

Newell now has 6000 olive trees (she started planting in 1997), but says this year her commercial crop will be tiny, because of rain during blossoming. Australia-wide, growers have planted nine million trees, many still young, but expected to be in full production by 2010. But growers face competition from a heavily subsidised European industry, bringing cheap oils that, in many cases Newell says, don't meet minimum standards.

An advantage of the youthful Australian industry is that the oils are pressed on top equipment, because it's new. "We have a high standard of processing plants, hygiene in groves, transportation. What I've witnessed in certain parts of Spain and Italy is funny by comparison – it's 19th century tradition... And Spanish olive oil finds its way into Italy, and then gets exported as Italian, which is standard practice."

Newell says Australians must adjust, not only to support local industries, but because of climate change, to the true price of food.

When you're talking oil at Newell's level, the discussion is about the way an extra-virgin oil has been handled, pressed and stored, and how quickly it gets to your plate. But for many people, the

## Stefano Manfredi's roast beetroot and hazelnuts with gorgonzola

Serves 4

**100g hazelnuts**  
**20 small to medium beetroots (a mixture of the usual red and unusual golden beets is a good idea)**  
**extra-virgin olive oil, for sprinkling**  
**sea salt and freshly ground black pepper**  
**150g gorgonzola, broken into chunks**

Preheat oven to 180C. Roast hazelnuts for about eight minutes, taking care not to let them burn. Remove from oven and crush lightly in a mortar using a pestle. Trim stem and beard from beetroots. Scrub well with a soft brush under cold water. Place in some foil and sprinkle with a little olive oil, salt and pepper. Seal package and roast in the oven until tender (this will take upwards of

15 minutes, depending on their size). Open foil and allow to cool before peeling and quartering each one. Place quartered beets on four individual ceramic plates, or one large heatproof serving plate, and sprinkle with a little extra-virgin olive oil, salt and pepper. Scatter gorgonzola chunks over beets. Place under a hot grill for one minute until cheese has melted. Scatter crushed hazelnuts on top and serve.



nuances are far coarser than that. Even to the question, does it need to be olive oil in the cupboard? And if so, surely not extra-virgin for everyday cooking? The answers, for Newell, are emphatically yes and yes. Extra-virgin means the oil has less than 0.8 per cent free fatty acids (these are fatty acids that have begun to oxidise, starting the oil's deterioration).

Virgin olive oil is oil that doesn't meet the 0.8 per cent limit, with free fatty acids above that level.

"Pure" only means it hasn't got other vegetable oils added. But this is a factory oil, "refined deodorised and re-blended". This oil has no place in your kitchen Newell says. It is highly processed and a betrayal of thousands of years of tradition.

"Pomace" is the lowest grade, made with the waste product after the pressing for extra-virgin. The result is tasteless and without any of the health benefits of extra-virgin. "Lite" implies low fat and as such is a con, she says. It's refined, tasteless and



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has the same number of kilojoules as any other oil. In researching her book, Newell trawled the supermarkets for olive oils, making grab-all sorties to buy one of each oil on the shelves. Each time, she came away disappointed, essentially because much of it wasn't fresh. Explaining why this matters, Newell makes a comparison curiously reflective of her modeling days. She evokes a person who has the "basics" – nice clothes, good posture, speaks well. But what makes you love that person, she says, are the extras. Are they lively, energetic, funny? In the same way, "what makes a good oil different from a really fantastic one is all those little components that come with freshness".

■ *Tree to Table*, by Patrice Newell. Lantern. \$59.95. Published next month.



## Tony Bilson's olive oil ice cream

You will need an ice-cream maker for this recipe.

Serves 6

2 cups milk  
250g creme fraiche  
1 vanilla bean, split  
5 egg yolks  
150g sugar  
100ml Catalan or other fruity olive oil

Heat milk with creme fraiche and vanilla bean. Beat egg yolks with the sugar until mixture is light and foamy. Slowly add hot milk to egg mixture, mixing constantly, then place over a low heat and continue to stir until mixture thickens enough to coat a spoon. Add olive oil and freeze in an ice-cream maker, according to manufacturer's instructions.

■ Recipes from *Tree to Table*, by Patrice Newell

