

HEALTH NEWS

Gold, healthy and Georgia grown

Americans consume more olive oil, as GA farmers deliver quality EVOO.



Woodpecker Trail Olive Farm olive oil has been judged one of the best in the world by the New York International Olive Oil Competition. (Courtesy of Woodpecker Trail Olive Farm)

By Michael Scaturro

Americans are consuming more olive oil than ever, according to a report released last month. The uptick coincides with research indicating that extra virgin olive oils made from freshly harvested olives can be one of the healthiest fats for cooking or eating.

The growth in popularity of the golden liquid could be due to research indicating that antioxidants and monounsaturated fats in extra virgin olive oils reduce the occurrence of heart attacks and [several other illnesses](#). Here in Georgia, farms large and small are producing varieties that aren't just healthy, but also winning awards for taste.

“We now know that it is a great way to prevent aging — from improving skin, to protecting bones, to reducing the risk of cancer,” said Tracy Poling, owner of [Woodpecker Trail Olive Farm](#), in [Glennville](#). Her extra virgin olive oil (EVOO) was [named](#) one of the world’s best at the New York International Olive Oil Competition in 2020.

Poling says customers are switching to olive oil in order to improve their eating habits. “We have paid our price in other oils and meat fats,” she said. “I think people are making up for that by switching to olive oil.”



Credit: Handout

Curtis and Tracy Poling established Woodpecker Trail Olive Farm in 2014. (Courtesy of Woodpecker Trail Olive Farm)

The United States now accounts for 15% of global olive oil consumption, second only to Italy and [ahead of Spain](#), the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) [said](#) last month.

Domestic production from groves in California and, increasingly, Georgia, represents less than 2% of U.S. olive oil consumption. That means the U.S. is importing nearly all of its supply from the European Union countries like Spain, Italy and Greece, despite the uptick in production in the Peach State, where growers are producing premium extra virgin olive oils in limited quantities.

Olive oil consumption has increased over the past 20 years, as Americans have become interested in the role that EVOO plays in improving cardiac health, said Dr. Danny J. Eapen, medical director of the Cardiac Rehabilitation Center at Emory St. Joseph's Hospital at Emory University School of Medicine.



Credit: TNS

Olive oil has long been touted for its ability to lower heart disease risk. (Marjolein Parijs/Dreamstime/TNS)

EVOO as superfood

The first studies looking at olive oil as a potential health food began in the 1970s, when a wide-ranging research project called the [Seven Countries Study](#) looked at the diets and lifestyles of people in Europe and Japan.

“As you know, olive oil is a key component in the Mediterranean pattern of eating,” Eapen said. “In the decades after this, particularly the 1990s and after, the scientific data on olive oil’s association with a reduction of adverse cardiac events, such as heart attacks, began to increase.”

Eapen said antioxidants and monounsaturated fats in EVOO appear to reduce cardiovascular event risk.

Monounsaturated fats are found in plant foods such as nuts, avocados and can help [lower](#) LDL (bad) cholesterol level.

Antioxidants are molecules present throughout the body, including in the bloodstream, cells and organs. In the bloodstream, antioxidants like vitamin C and vitamin E in olive oil help neutralize free radicals circulating through the body that can damage cells and DNA and contribute to aging and disease.

Extra virgin olive oils also [contain](#) high concentrations of polyphenols, which are a specific group of plant-based compounds with antioxidant properties. Foods rich in polyphenols include blueberries, cherries, apples, strawberries, black olives, dark chocolate, black tea, coffee, some nuts and some spices.

Olive oil is rich in polyphenols that not only act as antioxidants but [also provide anti-inflammatory and heart-protective benefits](#). Inflammation — whether from a brief illness or due to a chronic health condition, like obesity, heart disease, or diabetes — [is harmful for the body](#).

Lab tests can check whether an EVOO has a high polyphenol count — which might indicate how beneficial a specific variety of olive oil is. But a simple taste test can work too: If it has a strong peppery or spicy sensation when it hits the back of the throat, it's probably fresh and thus high in polyphenols.

Antioxidants in EVOO appear to benefit brain health as well.

A 28-year [study](#) that included nearly 92,000 people in the U.S. found that consuming at least a half tablespoon of olive oil every day lowered risk of death from dementia by 28%. A [study](#) in Greece found using olive oil in cooking can improve aging, particularly among individuals over 70 years of age. And [numerous studies](#) have demonstrated a connection between olive oil consumption and lower risk of heart attack and stroke.



Credit: Handout

Woodpecker Trail Olive Farm olives are crushed and pressed with 24 hours of harvest. (Courtesy of Woodpecker Trail Olive Farm)

The freshest oil is the best

To derive the greatest cardiovascular benefit from olive oil, Eapen says look for fresh, cold-pressed extra virgin olive oils. These EVOOs are made from freshly picked olives using a method that keeps the oil extraction process below 85°F.

A [study](#) at Brown University notes that the freshest olive oils – those consumed closest to the date of harvest and pressing – bring the greatest health benefits because they contain the highest levels of antioxidants.

That is how [Ciriaco Chavez](#), director of agriculture at Redlands Farm Holding Inc., produces olive oils near the Georgia-Florida border in Colquitt. The company's [Fresh Press Farms EVOOs](#) are created less than eight hours after the olive harvest.

"I like to describe olive oil as a juice," Chavez said. "It's always best when it's freshest. It's like a Georgia peach — it's best right off the tree. It's not like wine, because it doesn't get better with age."

Redlands Farm Holding is owned by Paris-based Bolloré Group, which also runs a vineyard in southeastern France, and holds stakes in Vivendi SE, a French mass media holding company, and Universal Music Group, according to the company's [annual report](#).



Credit: Redlands Farm

Olives are shown being harvested at Redlands Farm in Lakeland. Courtesy of Redlands Farm

Bolloré has invested over \$50 million in Georgia, and its EVOO is sold in 5,000 supermarkets nationwide and Costco, according to Redlands Farm CEO, Frederic Lebourg.

“We are by far the largest olive grove East of the Mississippi, with 2.4 million olive trees,” Lebourg said. The company grows olives on 3,500 acres in Miller County and 2,000 acres in Seminole County.

Lebourg said European investors view Georgia as a good growing climate for olives that can be pressed into EVOO quickly and shipped to customers on the East Coast right after harvest.

“Our EVOOs hit the shelves no more than four weeks post harvest, offering a unique flavor that an older imported product can’t match,” Lebourg said.

Two hours east by car, Belgian agronomist Aurelien Rifaut oversees Georgia Olive Farms in Lakeland.

Georgia Olive Farms maintains 50 acres of olive groves, and provides farm management, maintenance, harvest, and pressing services for over 4,000 olive acres in the area, he said.

Rifaut's company, Swiss-based [Agrigrada](#), also grows olives in Portugal. He says Georgia's climate is helping prepare companies like his for climate change in Europe.



Chef's Blend Extra Virgin Olive Oil from Georgia Olive Farms

"Georgia has a much different climate than Spain or Portugal, but it has been very interesting for us in Europe because we are facing challenges climate wise — increasing rain, among them," Rifaut said. "The hurricanes that we see in Georgia are now unfortunately coming to Portugal, and impacting olive trees."

Georgia Olive Farms doesn't just bottle its own olive oils. It also maintains an olive mill that smaller olive farms in Georgia rent to press their own harvests.

This past fall, Stephanie and Easton Kinnebrew brought olives from their farm, [New Era Olive Farm](#) in Americus, to nearby Georgia Olive Farms' press in order to produce what they call *olio nuovo*, or new oil. It's a practice not unlike what one sees in towns throughout Italy, where farmers bring their olives to communal presses in late September and early October.

Easton Kinnebrew, a sixth-generation farmer, began growing olives as a hobby, after learning that olive groves existed a century ago on Jekyll Island. As the family's groves grew to 20 acres, and their bottles gained popularity online and in stores throughout the Southeast, they have swapped out animal fats in their own cooking to gain the benefits of extra virgin olive oil.

"I use our extra virgin olive oil for pretty much everything — even grits," Stephanie Kinnebrew said. "The family loves it."

Rifaut of Georgia Olive Farms tells friends on both sides of the Atlantic that if they want heart-healthy olive oils, they should seek out Georgia-grown EVOO.

"The EVOOs that you can find in Georgia are always the latest harvest," Rifaut said. "Everything is sold after harvest, so we never have oil that is over a year old. It's different from a lot of olive oil imported into the U.S., which tends to be a year old when it reaches stores."

