

The good oil

A GREAT way to stay healthy

OLIVE OIL has been a symbol of health and prosperity ever since the people of the Mediterranean started to understand its extraordinary properties more than 7,000 years ago. Fast forward to the diet-conscious 21st century and it has lost none of its allure. Olive oil has a high content of both monounsaturated fatty acids and antioxidants, and studies have shown that it offers protection against heart disease by controlling cholesterol levels.

Now that dietary message is being spread in Hong Kong's leading food hall, GREAT, a member of the A.S. Watson Group that has been tantalising the palates of Hong Kong gourmets for more than five years. Thanks to European supplier Crescendo, shoppers can sample a wide range of different olive oils straight from the barrel and then return to have their bottle, no matter big or small, refilled.

"It's the first time something like this has been tried in Hong Kong," said GREAT's Executive Chef, Timothy Broderick. "In Spain and Italy, it is part of everyday life. People bring their bottle to the local shop to have it refilled and have a chat. Olive oil is part of almost every meal in those countries. People cook with it, use it for salads or dips and put it on bread or toast instead of butter."

"Hong Kong people are always interested in food, so there is a natural curiosity when they see what we have on offer. It is really only in the last two or three years that people here have started to introduce olive oil into their diet," he adds. The message appears to be getting through. Supermarket sales of olive oil in Hong Kong rose 13.7 per cent in the 12 months to June 2006.



The attractive barrel display and the tasting counter draws shoppers who want to sample different types of olive oils, everything from standard fare that can be used in cooking through to flavoured oils and high-end extra virgin for use in salads. Spanish and Italian brands are the best sellers.

Olive oil is produced principally in Spain, Italy and Greece. Just like wine, the flavour depends on the variety of olive, soil conditions and the weather. The oil is pressed from ripe olives after they are harvested. Oil from the first pressing is classified as virgin. Extra virgin, oil from the first pressing that is particularly low in acid - less than one per cent - is considered the finest.

The customers at GREAT are an eclectic mix - Hong Kong Chinese, Asian and European expatriates, tourists and visitors from Mainland China. "We show people how to make salad dressings and explain which types of oils best complement specific foods," said Mr Broderick.

Customers of Great can always get the freshest olive oil in a wide range of flavours.

As he prepared some delicious samples, the Spanish Consul General appeared and dabbed a piece of bread into one of the sample bowls of olive oil. "Mmmm. Delicious," the Consul General said. "It's the perfect way to start the day." 

