

2016 Olive Oil Production in Greece : Producer Perspectives

Greek olive oil production is expected to fall to 200,000 metric tons or less for the 2016/17 crop year, with quality ranging from poor to excellent. Olive oil producers from different parts of Greece offer varying perspectives based on the situation in their area. Some are more optimistic about this crop year's production level and quality than others.

For example, Elawon's Ioannis Kampouris tells Greek Liquid Gold of "regions such as Laconia [southeast Peloponnese], Mytilini [Lesvos], and our own Mycenae, Xylokastro, Kiato [all in northeast Peloponnese], where acidity is very low" especially for early harvest extra virgin olive oils (EVOOs), for which he reports "a balanced fruity, bitter, and spicy taste" and total healthy phenolic content as high as 2750 mg/kg in the region of Corinth.

On the other hand, Thanos Kloutsiniotis of Ladolea has spoken with many producers in Corinth and Achaia (northwest Peloponnese) who are producing less than half what they did last year, with higher free acidity and less pleasing organoleptic qualities due to last year's warm winter, a drought, and an October olive fly attack.

Nikos Charamis of Kasell expects improvement in extra virgin olive oil quality "now that the temperature finally decreased," meaning "the end of the olive fly infection, and [since] the wind dropped all the olives infected by the olive fly." He anticipates about 20,000 metric tons of olive oil from the prefecture of Laconia, suggesting that this region is better off in terms of both quality and quantity than many parts of Greece this year—and enjoying higher prices. An analysis of Kasell's early harvest Athinolia EVOO has also shown very high polyphenol content: 2092 mg/kg, far above the 250 mg/kg required for the European health claim approved in 2012.

Katerina Lalagianni of Hellenic Fields anticipates medium quality olive oil in the PGI Olympia area (western Peloponnese) due to problems with bacteria and the olive fruit fly, and only half as much olive oil as last year, but enough healthy phenols in the oil to qualify most of it for the European health claim. Lalagianni fears that "climate change is affecting olive oil production," as she already sees changes in the microclimate.

Achilleas Mavranzoulis of Makaria Terra predicts “a decrease of quality” this year because of rot in ripening olives due to anthracnose as well as olive fly problems, but he adds, “still Greece will remain possibly the best country in terms of percentage of extra virgin olive oil compared with the overall olive oil produced in Greece.” Many sources, including the National Bank of Greece, consider a high percentage of extra virgin the usual state in Greece. Mavranzoulis expects about 45,000 metric tons of olive oil from Messinia (in the Peloponnese) this year.

Dimitris Chondrakis of Elidia in northwest Crete expects less fruity olive oil from Crete due to the drought, with about 40,000 to 50,000 metric tons of olive oil from the island this year. This 50 to 60% drop (compared to an average year) has also been mentioned in recent local Greek articles and blamed on a warm winter, a spring heat wave, hot winds, drought, and belated efforts to control the olive fly.

As Argyris Bouras of Eleones sees it, “the Cretans had the drought, the Peloponnesians had the floods and the hurricane like thing, the Halkidikians had a very good year the previous season, so it is only normal what happens here” — “a bad year” but with a better yield and higher producer prices than usual in Halkidiki.

Stratis Camatsos of evo3 paints a rosier picture from the island of Lesbos, where he forecasts around 25,000 tons of olive oil this year, although prices there have been lower than in many parts of Greece (around 3 euros/kg or less). He is aware of no problems there, commenting that “Lesbos' olive oil is well known to keep our high standards, year in, year out.”

Camatsos tells Greek Liquid Gold he believes Greek olive oil will retain its “high quality” even in this difficult year: “even if the fruit fly has affected some stock and quality, I think that producers are more aware of the need to separate the bad olives from the good ones to produce the high standard” expected from Greek olive oil. He has faith that “producer knowledge, experience, and education” are leading Greek farmers to take better “care of our trees and understand more of what makes a quality olive oil.”

Several producers assured Greek Liquid Gold that their care for their own olive trees and olive oil enabled them to sustain the high quality their customers expect. Achilleas Mavranzoulis of Makaria Terra points out that olive oil quality depends “on the practices followed by each producer.” Some small-scale producers cannot afford to pay large teams to harvest their

olives, so their harvest is extended over a longer period of time, during which the fruit may be attacked by diseases, pests, and harmful weather. Others find ways to avoid these problems.

Inadequate control of the olive fly is also a challenge for some producers, but not all of them. Maria Guadagno Katsetos of Elea says she hears that “the acidity, K values and peroxide levels will be high this year” due to late preventive efforts or inaction against the olive fly in some areas, although all of her collaborators in the Peloponnese took action to avoid that.

Commenting on the unique aroma and flavor of Greek olive oil, Katsetos adds, “profits from olive oil production touch the lives of thousands of people in Greece. Cultivators, unions and the state should take the cultivation of the olive trees and olive oil production more seriously” in order to increase and improve Greek olive oil production “and bring in even higher incomes, not just for the producers, but also for the state. My advice is for young people to return to the lands and begin to cultivate their ancestors’ olive trees that are currently resting and abandoned in many parts of the south.” Some citizens have already heeded her call on both counts—rejuvenating neglected trees, and taking olive oil production very seriously. Many serious, careful producers will continue to offer the world excellent Greek extra virgin olive oil even in this difficult year.

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