

DILEMMA

Olive oil is good for you, and the planet... Isn't it?

Italy's amber nectar gives your kitchen a wholesome halo, but there are healthier alternatives closer to home, says **Lucy Siegle**



Global oil standoffs tend to involve crude rather than vegetable. But the latter may spark conflict one day. A quarter of all vegetable oil consumed is from soybean, with palm oil running a close second. Both types are charged with habitat loss, particularly deforestation and the dramatic decline of species. One in 10 common or garden products in the supermarket basket, from shampoo to ice cream, contains palm oil.

But when it comes to cooking oil, olive is king. In the UK, sales increased by nearly 40 per cent between 2000 and 2005. At the point of purchase, our brains tend to conjure up visions of bucolic groves, and we seek out the finest "virgin" or "first press" so as to ingest its health benefits (critics say these are far from conclusive). However, given the size of the market and the industrialisation of olive farming, hillside groves are rare. More than 4% of the EU's agricultural land is given over to olive farming, while 2.5 million producers make up a third of EU farmers. Until last year the famous Cap (Common Agricultural Policy) encouraged industrial farms to grow olives in larger quantities than ever by giving them subsidies. Water shortages, drought, soil erosion, and desertification and pollution from agrichemicals can be attributed to progressive industrialisation in olive farming across Mediterranean regions. Then there's the impact of the processing and disposal of liquid effluent from olive mills to contend with.



Olive oil's audacious marketing and subsidies get the goat of British oilseed rape producers. Given the import's shortcomings and the fact that oilseed rape is the only vegetable oil crop grown in cooler temperate climates like ours, it would be a shame not to support it. Good-quality versions (with high omega 3 content) include Mellow Yellow, a cold-pressed rapeseed oil (www.farrington-oils.co.uk); Hillfarm oils (www.hillfarmoils.com), and virgin rapeseed oil

from Oleifera, a farming cooperative in the Borders (www.oleifera.co.uk). This is not to say that rapeseed oil is the perfect ethical oil (that accolade goes to groundnut oils from developing communities); the vast majority of the 450,000 hectares of oilseed rape grown in the UK is winter grown, though spring-grown crops offer better habitat cover for wildlife and require less fertiliser.

It would be nice to reinforce the message that homegrown products are valuable and that the more sustainable they become, the better. The Little Red Tractor label confirms to the consumer that food has been farmed and packed in the UK, but can still hardly be called an ethical label – Friends of the Earth has previously slammed its standards. Besides, the label focuses on bigger markets rather than quirky British farm products with bigger sustainable merits, such as rapeseed oil briquettes (www.greendragonfuel.co.uk), which burn three times longer than normal logs and give out twice the heat. Sustainability exists down on the farm – we just need to find it. ★
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GREEN GAUGE

GOING DOWN

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