

NEWSLETTER

Issue 114 – August 2026



Report from the Chair

Dear Oliveti Members

A very successful Field Day was held at John and Seok Dawn's grove in Waipapa on 2 August. Dr Laurence Eyres gave us a most interesting presentation on a wide range of olive oil issues. Awards were presented from our recent 2026 Oliveti Extra Virgin Olive Oil judging - held on 18 July. The Olive oil entries were also available for tasting, and what a range of intensities there were!

Our grateful thanks to Murray Thoms and to the four judges, led by Chief Judge Roberto Zecca for again managing this key Oliveti activity. The judges commented on the excellent quality of the entries, as evidenced by the high number of Gold awards measured by the IOC Mario Solinas quality evaluation process. Congratulations to Barry and Sheryl Wade of Wells River Estate who won the Best in Show trophy for their intense Picual entry, and to all the other entrants who were awarded Best of Class, Gold, Silver and Bronze medal certificates.

Thank you also to those members who took the time and contributed to two recent Oliveti surveys in June and in July. Firstly, the Harvest Return survey where Members reported on their 2026 olive harvest and oil production: - please refer to the detailed report in this Newsletter. Secondly, we had a more than 38% response to our Membership Consultation Document – thank you. A brief summary of the key findings and areas of focus are included in this newsletter. A more detailed Executive Summary is attached in PDF format.

As a result of this consultation, your Oliveti Committee will be able to identify and prioritise the opportunities, services and support the membership most values. This will now guide our thinking and planning for future services, activities and support for our Membership. Our thanks to Murray Thoms for coordinating this process.

We welcome as new members of Oliveti:- Chad Dick and Kaye Robinson of Quarry Grove Olives in Mangonui.

We trust members are managing to prune and fertilise their groves over the winter in anticipation of an excellent spring flowering later in the year. Some reported Koroneiki and Frantoio flower buds even at the end of July! A further Field Day is planned to be held around November - details to follow.

Ewen Hutchinson
Oliveti Chair

Oliveti Olive Oil Awards 2026

Oliveti held the 2026 edition of its annual EVOO Awards judging on Saturday, 18 July, in Hobsonville, West Auckland. The judging panel was led by Chief Judge Roberto Zecca, a long-serving IOC-trained olive oil judge with more than two decades of international experience in the USA, Italy and New Zealand. He was assisted by Geoff Webster, Georges Feghali and Ament Nagar, all regular members of the judging panel in recent years. Special thanks go to Murray Thoms for coordinating the awards process and to John Pearson and Ewen Hutchinson for assisting on the day.

This year there were 33 entries across seven classes, and the judges noted the very high overall quality of the oils presented.

Congratulations to all participants who entered their oils. Roberto noted that the judging standard was high, reflecting the care and effort being put into production across the region.



This trophy was carved from a pruning off one of New Zealand's oldest Olive trees located in a grove in Cornwall Park, Auckland. These were planted in the late 1860s and estimated to be over 160 years old.

Special congratulations to **Barry and Sheryl Wade** of **Wells Grove Estate, Whitford** who took out the **Best in Show** award with their wonderfully intense "Picual" EVOO. They are now a two-time winner of Best in Show.

Congratulations also go to our **Best-in-Class** winners:

Ewen and Lesley Hutchinson – **Class 1** Single Delicate & **Class 2** – Blend Delicate
Barry and Sheryl Wade – **Class 3** Blend Medium & **Class 5** – Single Intense
Derek and Sally Holland – **Class 4** Blend Medium & **Class 6** Blend Intense

Ann Clemance – Class 7 Flavoured

To receive an award, oils must meet three criteria: chemical testing for Free Fatty Acid and Peroxide Value using *Olives NZ* limits; sensory assessment showing no defects and clear fruitiness; and scoring under a process closely aligned with the IOC's Mario Solinas sensory assessment schedule. A small number of entries showed defects, possibly linked to diseased fruit, delayed pressing or storage-container cleanliness.

This year's results table also includes sensory scores. All oils that passed the organoleptic testing and scored bronze or above have been assessed as "**Certified**" in accordance with IOC standards and will receive the new OLIVETI "**Certified 100% Extra Virgin Olive Oil**" sticker.

Roberto said the overall quality was remarkably good: of the 33 entries, 30 received an award, showing that this group of producers has achieved an impressive level of quality despite less-than-ideal Auckland and Northland growing conditions, particularly around fruit set.

MEMBERSHIP CONSULTATION UPDATE

Initial findings:

Members most value practical field days, peer learning, the Olive Awards, useful growing advice, and the sense of community that Oliveti provides.

Field days and awards stand out as the strongest membership benefits, while growers also want more structured technical guidance on pruning, fertilising, soil testing, pest control, and crop management.

The main priorities the committee will look to develop for 2026–2029 are to: strengthen field days, maintain and promote the Olive Awards, develop practical grower resources, create a supplier and contractor directory, improve communication through online tools and a members-only website section.

Members also requested specific support for new growers through mentoring and onboarding, and the need to increase consumer awareness of Northland EVOO.

Overall, the consultation shows an engaged membership with clear interest in practical support, stronger visibility, and better access to relevant resources.

A more detailed Executive Summary of these findings is included with this email.



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2026 Oliveti Northland Inc. EVOO Awards Results

Class	Brand Name	Entrant	Varietal	FFA	Peroxide	PP Count	Health Awards	Score	Medal Awarded	Best in Class	Best in Show
Class 1 - Single Delicate	Oruaiti River Olives Ltd	Ewen & Lesley Hutchinson	Frantoio	0.26	7.80			89.25	Gold	Best in Class	
	Midgley Rd Olive Estate	Ann Clemance	J5	0.23	4.20			89.00	Gold		
	Piwakawaka Estate	Adrienne & Rob Gilmore	J5	0.12	5.20			88.00	Gold		
	Piwakawaka Estate	Adrienne & Rob Gilmore	J5	0.12	5.60			79.75	Silver		
	Koutu Olives	Cornel de Ronde	Ascolano	0.30	6.00	89		74.75	Bronze		
Class 2 - Blend Delicate	Oruaiti River Olives Ltd	Ewen & Lesley Hutchinson	Frantoio/J5	0.22	5.60			91.25	Gold	Best in Class	
	Koutu Olives	Cornel de Ronde	Nocellara	0.30	5.00	93		86.50	Gold		
Class 3 - Single Medium	Wells Grove Estate Ltd	Barry and Sheryl Wade	Frantoio	0.20	5.00	265	One Star	92.00	Gold	Best in Class	
	Vernazoni Grove	Murray & Alwin Thoms	J5	0.10	2.00	270	One Star	91.75	Gold		
	Donnall Grove	Donald & Alison Windybank	J5	0.14	6.80			90.75	Gold		
	Shaken Down Olive Oil	Marc & Julia Guillaume	J5	0.15	3.20			90.50	Gold		
	Opito Bay Olives	Jane Anderson	J5	0.16	3.20			88.00	Gold		
	Oruaiti River Olives Ltd	Ewen & Lesley Hutchinson	J5	0.20	5.20			87.75	Gold		
	Wells Grove Estate Ltd	Barry and Sheryl Wade	Koroneiki	0.70	6.00	198		83.00	Silver		
	Opito Bay Olives	Jane Anderson	J5	0.18	3.60			81.50	Silver		
	Hihi Estate	Anaru Moa	Ascolano	0.18	2.60			79.50	Silver		
	Hihi Estate	Anaru Moa	J5	0.15	3.20			79.50	Silver		
	Duck Creek Olives	Derek and Sally Holland	Frantoio/ J5	0.16	5.40			92.00	Gold		Best in Class
	Oruaiti River Olives Ltd	Ewen & Lesley Hutchinson	Frantoio/J5 PB Blend	0.22	6.00			89.50	Gold		
Class 4 - Blend Medium	Oruaiti River Olives Ltd	Ewen & Lesley Hutchinson	Frantoio/J5 Tuscan Blend	0.26	7.80			88.75	Gold		
	Wells Grove Estate Ltd	Barry & Sheryl Wade	Frantoio/Leccino/Pendolino	0.38	3.80			83.00	Silver		
	Totara Barn	Chris Bayly	J5/Frantoio	0.14	6.20			80.50	Silver		
Class 5 - Single Intense	Wells Grove Estate Ltd	Barry and Sheryl Wade	Pical	0.30	4.00	328	One Star	94.50	Gold	Best in Class	
	Puketi Olive Farm	Peter Crellin	J5	0.30	6.00	326	One Star	90.50	Gold		
	Spudoli	Mark Darin	J5	0.15	4.20			89.50	Gold		
Class 6 - Blend Intense	Duck Creek Olives	Derek and Sally Holland	Frantoio/ J5	0.13	5.40			90.00	Gold	Best in Class	
Class 7 - Flavoured	Midgley Rd Olive Estate	Ann Clemance	Lemon Fused	0.26	6.00			89.50	Gold	Best in Class	
	Vernazoni Grove	Murray & Alwin Thoms	J5 Lemon/Lime	0.11	3.60			88.00	Gold		

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR NZ OLIVE GROWERS

To produce high-quality extra virgin olive oil Laurence Eyres recommends that growers should focus on preventing defects before they occur. Oil entered into competitions or sold as premium product should be clean, fresh and free from fermentation, rancidity or taints.

Key recommendations:

Process only sound fruit. Sort olives carefully and reject diseased fruit wherever possible. If more than about 5% of a batch is diseased, the oil is at high risk of developing a “rotting fruit” aroma and flavour.

Clean processing equipment thoroughly. Pay particular attention to the grinder, malaxer and decanter. Any olive paste left behind can ferment and introduce defects into the next batch of oil.

Use suitable storage containers. Store oil in clean stainless-steel vessels and take extra care with seams where old residues can collect. Avoid food-grade plastic except for very short-term use and **never reuse plastic containers for new oil.**

Control storage temperature. Where possible, store oil at 12°C–14°C to retain freshness and slow the onset of rancidity. Keep storage areas clean, stable and protected from heat.

Minimise oxygen exposure. Do not let oil cascade or fall freely through the air during processing or bottling. Provide a surface for the oil to run down so splashing and aeration are reduced.

Flush containers with inert gas. Use argon or nitrogen before and after filling tanks and bottles to reduce oxygen contact and help preserve freshness.

Protect oil from light. Avoid exposure to sunlight and strong artificial light during processing, storage and after bottling. Dark bottles, closed cartons and shaded storage all help maintain quality.

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Field day Report

Earlier this month around twenty-five Oliveti members travelled to John and Seok Dawn's lovely property in Waipapa, just north of Kerikeri for our second field day of the year.



Set amid Cryptomeria shelter belts is a wonderful orchard comprising every conceivable variety of fruit tree imaginable from cherimoya to pomegranate, citrus, apples and even a large banana grove. John says that these days it is more of a hobby than a cash cow and for instance with the bananas – the crop **almost** pays for the fertilizer expended on them. Amid this oasis of fruit trees is a small olive grove - mostly Frantoio and Koroneki.

John who is a passionate horticulturalist, told us that after they purchased the 5 + hectare property over 20 years earlier, they planted out more new and exotic fruit trees among the existing orchard. He had space for Olives which he and Seok only really got into because a neighbour had said to John, if he bought and planted them, this chap would then manage the grove, look after all the pruning and harvesting and pay John and Seok for the oil. "A great deal" says John. Long story short – John planted around 160 trees himself and before they had even had their first harvest, the neighbour welshed on the arrangement and John was left with an Olive grove he wasn't that keen to manage or even look after. Now twenty years on, the grove remains largely unmanaged and unharvested save for some olives that John and Seok have been pickling.



Members enjoy the sun and a shared lunch on the deck at John and Seok's AirBnB

After lunch we had a brief Oliveti business update from Chair Ewen and Murray Thoms summarised the preliminary findings from the recent Membership Consultation. A copy of these findings and recommendation in the form of an Executive Summary is included as a separate PDF attachment, along with this Newsletter.

Prior to officially handing out Certificates and the Trophy for our 2026 Oliveti Awards, Ewen introduced our guest speaker - Dr Laurence Eyres who is one of New Zealand's leading food scientists specialising in Fats and Oils. Laurence is a former Head Judge for the Oliveti Awards and served on the tasting panel for several years.

Laurence gave us a very interesting and informative presentation on Olive Oil quality and the opportunities this presents for growers like us. (see article below).

2026 Oliveti Awards presentations:

Murray Thoms – Convenor for the Oliveti EVOO Awards presented the unique “**BEST in SHOW**” Trophy to Barry and Sheryl Wade of **Wells Grove Estate** for their very intense **Picual Olive Oil**. (The second time they have been awarded this trophy.)

Gold, Silver and Bronze Certificates were also handed out to all entrants along with the various Class winners. The day concluded with a grove tour led by John Dawn.

On behalf of Oliveti, our sincere thanks to John and Seok for hosting the field day at their lovely property.

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FROM GROVE TO BOTTLE: Laurence Eyres lifts the lid on Olive Oil Quality

A Presentation to Oliveti members at the recent Field day

Oliveti members enjoyed a lively and informative presentation from our guest speaker - Laurence Eyres on olive oil quality, authenticity, processing, and the opportunities for New Zealand producers. Drawing on his long experience in oils and fats chemistry, Laurence helped turn what can be a technical subject into a practical

discussion about what growers, processors, and consumers need to understand if they are to value excellent extra virgin olive oil.

A key theme of the session was that olive oil is not simply a commodity. It is a fresh food product whose quality depends on decisions made from the grove through to the bottle. Laurence explained that fruit condition, harvest timing, the speed of processing, oxygen exposure, temperature control, filtration and storage all influence the finished oil. For members, this reinforced the idea that quality is not accidental; it is built through discipline at every step.

There was strong audience interest in how consumers can recognise good oil. Laurence noted that many people are used to mild supermarket oils and may not expect the bitterness, pungency, and peppery finish often found in fresh extra virgin olive oil. He explained that these characteristics are frequently linked to polyphenols, which contribute to both flavour and potential health value. Rather than seeing these sensations as faults, consumers need to learn that they can signal freshness, complexity, and careful production.

Questions from the audience also focused on imported oils and whether they can be trusted. Laurence was careful not to suggest that all imported oil is poor, but he did highlight the difficulties consumers face when trying to assess age, handling, storage, blending, and authenticity. Oil that has travelled long distances or spent time in storage may no longer offer the freshness suggested by its label. In international markets, blending and adulteration can also be difficult to detect without proper testing.

This led to a wider discussion about trust. Members asked how buyers can be confident that an oil is genuinely extra virgin, accurately labelled, and worth paying more for. Laurence emphasised the importance of independent testing, transparent certification, and clear communication. For New Zealand producers, this is both a challenge and an opportunity. Local oils can stand apart through freshness, traceability, and honest storytelling, but only if consumers understand what makes them different.

Processing was another major topic. Laurence explained that once olives are harvested, time becomes critical. Delays can damage quality, and poor handling can increase oxidation or allow defects to develop. The use of appropriate equipment, controlled temperatures, nitrogen to reduce oxygen exposure, polishing separators, and filtration can all help protect the oil. These practical details were particularly relevant to growers and processors in the room, who were keen to connect the chemistry of oil quality with the realities of small-scale production.

Laurence also placed olive oil in a broader food and health context. He referred to the Mediterranean tradition, where olive oil is used daily and appreciated as part of a wider pattern of eating. In contrast, New Zealand consumption remains relatively modest, and many consumers still make purchasing decisions primarily on price. Members commented that education may be just as important as production, because people need to know why a fresh, carefully made local oil may cost more than a mass-market import.

The discussion showed how much knowledge already exists within the Oliveti community. Members raised the practical issues producers face every season: when to harvest, how quickly to process, how to protect oil in storage, how to explain

robust flavours to customers, and how to respond to confusion in the marketplace. Laurence's answers encouraged members to see science, tasting, and communication as connected parts of the same quality story.

Overall, Laurence's message was clear: excellent extra virgin olive oil depends on care, evidence, and integrity. It begins with good fruit, but it continues through rapid processing, clean equipment, careful storage, proper testing, transparent labelling, and consumer education. For Oliveti members, the presentation was a timely reminder that New Zealand's olive oil sector has a strong story to tell. Its success will depend not only on producing high-quality oil, but on helping consumers recognise and value it.



EXTRA VIRGIN OLIVE OIL: WHAT THE LABEL REALLY MEANS

The phrase "olive oil" covers a wide range of products, but Extra Virgin Olive Oil is the category consumers should understand first.

Adapted from Olive Oil Times Story

by Daniel Dawson

In technical terms, "olive oil" is not a single quality class but a regulatory family of products made from *Olea europaea* fruit. The key distinction is between virgin oils, extracted only by mechanical or physical means, and refined or pomace-derived oils that have been industrially corrected. Extra Virgin Olive Oil is the highest grade because it must meet both chemical and sensory standards.

EVOO must be produced from sound fruit under conditions that avoid thermal or oxidative damage. Allowed steps include washing, crushing, malaxation, centrifugation, decantation and filtration. It must not be solvent-extracted, deodorised, neutralised, bleached, re-esterified or otherwise chemically refined.

Its central chemical limit is free acidity, expressed as oleic acid, which must not exceed 0.8 g per 100 g. Low acidity does not measure flavour directly; it indicates limited breakdown of the oil before and during milling. EVOO must also meet other quality and purity tests, including measures of oxidation, ageing, refining indicators and possible adulteration.

Sensory assessment is just as important. A recognised panel checks for positive fruitiness and faults such as rancid, fusty, musty or winey-vinegary notes. To qualify as extra virgin, the median defect score must be zero and fruitiness must be

present. Bitterness and pungency are positive traits linked to variety, maturity, phenols and extraction practice, not spoilage.

Quality is largely determined before bottling. Fruit condition, harvest maturity, time to milling, malaxation temperature and duration, oxygen exposure, water use, filtration and storage atmosphere all affect aroma, phenol levels, oxidative stability and shelf life. Poor fruit or delayed processing cannot be fully corrected without moving the oil out of the extra virgin category.

Lower grades help explain the difference. Virgin olive oil is also mechanically extracted but may have higher acidity or sensory defects. Refined olive oil is made by treating defective virgin oils to remove unwanted colour, odour, acidity and flavour, then may be blended with virgin oil. Retail "olive oil," "pure" or "light" products are usually refined-oil blends; "light" refers to colour or flavour, not calories. Pomace oil comes from residual olive paste and is normally solvent-extracted, refined and blended.

For consumers, useful indicators include harvest date, traceable origin, protective packaging and credible quality assurance. Dark glass or tins, low headspace, cool storage and fast turnover reduce exposure to light, heat and oxygen. Best-before dates are less useful unless linked to harvest or bottling conditions.

Marketing terms such as "premium," "smooth," "pure," "classic," "first cold pressed" or "polyphenol-rich" should be treated as secondary unless supported by grade, harvest information, analysis or certification. "Organic" describes production methods, not the sensory or chemical grade of the finished oil.

In short, Extra Virgin Olive Oil is defined by non-refined extraction, low degradation chemistry, no sensory defects and clear olive-fruit character. Refined and blended grades may be stable and neutral, but they no longer express the full chemical and sensory identity of fresh olive fruit.

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2026 OLIVETI GROVE HARVEST REPORT

Introduction

Oliveti Northland undertook its second and more extensive Harvest Data survey this year and we really appreciate those members who have contributed to this. Our data collection has improved, with the inclusion of the number of trees harvested, so we can more accurately assess harvest yield on a kg/tree basis. This should provide members with a basis to compare their grove with others and to see how their operational changes might stack up; e.g. pruning techniques, fertiliser regime, harvest timing etc.

20 members provided harvest returns, with 4 recording no harvest. Reasons for the variable 2026 crop have been variously attributed to weather events during flowering, very high rainfall and strong winds prior to harvest, diseased fruit at optimal harvest time, difficulty in bringing back to operation groves that haven't been well managed for a time, and lack of tree response to the fertiliser regime applied.

Two press houses also advised their total non-member results too - thank you.

2026 Crop by Area

AREA	RETURNS	# TREES HARVEST	TONNES	KG/TREE	LITRE	OIL %
Auckland	2	1245	8.4	6.8	1019	12.1
Matakana Mangawhai	5 (3 NH)	145	2.13	14.7	349	16.4
Kaipara	1	21	0.32	15	50	15.7

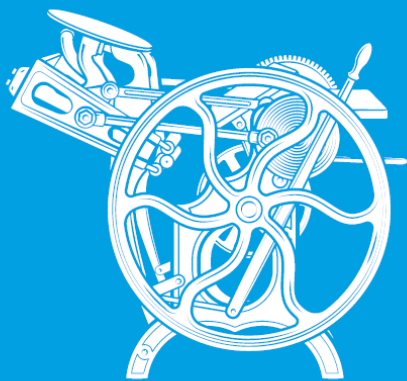
Waipu - Whangarei	0	-	-	-	-	-
Russell - Kerikeri	2	139	4.27	30.7	706	16.5
Doubtless Bay	9	2173	37.11	17	7093	19.1
Hokianga	1 (1 NH)	-	-	-	-	-
TOTAL OLIVETI	20	3723	52.23	14.0	9217	17.6
Hihi Press			4.8		800	13 - 23.8
Midgley Presshouse			1.45		225	15.5

Result Discussion

Overall, 52.23 tonnes of fruit harvested was double that recorded last year and all areas reporting improved harvests - except Hokianga where the harvest was minimal. Doubtless Bay groves contributed 70% of the total harvest. This due to: a) more members reporting and b) improved harvest. Individual grove returns over all areas ranged from 0.32 to 7.7 tonne.

In terms of kg/tree produced, the reported harvest averaged 14 kg/tree (an increase of 40% over last year), with areas ranging from 6.8 to 30.7 kg/tree. Russell-Kerikeri area was highest at 30.7kg/tree (skewed by one high-yielding grove at 31.9 kg/tree), followed by Doubtless Bay area at 17.0 kg/tree (individual results here ranged from 8.6 to 26.0 kg/tree).

The total oil produced was 9217 litres - more than double that reported last year. Oil yield was variable and ranging by area from 12.1% to 19.1%. This possibly due to a number of factors, Viz; tree variety, timing of harvest, fruit load on tree. Overall the average yield was 17.6%, an increase of 12% over last year with individual groves ranged from 11.6% to 21.5%. Improved yield was especially noted on the larger machine harvested groves which had poor oil yields in 2025.



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We would encourage more members to contribute to this survey next year, so we can gain a better understanding of olive production in Auckland and Northland.

MACHINE HARVEST COMPARISON - 2025-2026

Machine harvest results for 2025 across two groves in Kerikeri and Mangonui was discussed in the November 2025 Oliveti newsletter. The J5 fruit yield from both groves was around 70% at 30kg/tree, while oil yield was only 13.6%. The fruit was quite green at harvest. Further hand harvesting at one of the groves over the next month gave a further 30% fruit yield, with oil yield increasing to 17.6%, a 31% improvement.

For the 2026 harvest, two issues were to be investigated - the optimum harvest time to achieve an increased oil yield, and changes to the pruning regime so as to increase the mechanically harvested fruit yield and thereby decrease the percentage of trees that required further hand harvesting (to say less than 6 - 8kg residual fruit)

Comparative results for the two seasons are shown below.

Machine and Hand-Harvest Results - 2025 and 2026

Year	Variety	Machine kg	Reharv kg	Kg/tree total	% Reharv	Oil yield %
2025	Frantoio	1394	175	37.6	46	15.3
	J5	3588	1567	44.1	96	14.4
2026	Frantoio	1541	93	32	20	18.1
	J5 small	814	0	18.9	0	17.7
	J5 large	3300	459	28.9	35	19.1
	J5 total	4114	459	26.4	26	18.3

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The Mangonui 2026 mechanical harvest occurred a week to 10 days later than in 2025, and visually the fruit was riper with around 30% starting to colour compared to very few in 2025. Oil yield was improved over 2025 and was within 1% of the Doubtless Bay average. Interestingly, two J5 test trees left mechanically unharvested did not ripen further even over another 2 weeks, unlike 2025.



There was a major improvement in the mechanically harvested fruit yield, through the later harvest and pruning regime. The Frantoio (large trees) reharvest percentage dropped from 46% to 20%. With J5, some rows of smaller trees gave a high yield of mechanically harvested fruit and did not require reharvesting. The larger J5 trees, up to 5-6m in height, gave significantly improved results, with only 35% requiring reharvest. Overall J5 required 26% reharvest compared with 96% in 2025, and the additional fruit was only 10% compared with 30% last year. Note trees with an estimated 8kg residual fruit were not reharvested. The overall fruit yield was less in 2026, probably due to the severe pruning regime used!

Pruning the trees over time to eliminate internal growth, drooping and horizontal subbranches off the core 3 to 5 branch vase structure, means that eventually they become too wide for the harvesting umbrella net, and over say 6m in height. At this time there are two options. Removal of one main branch may reduce overall width sufficiently, and a cut of say 400mm above the vase will enable new shoots to develop and renew the structure. However, more than 30% of the canopy must be removed, or the new shoots will have insufficient light and droop rather than forming the strong upwards structure required. Alternatively, the trees can be completely pollarded to 400mm above the vase. After 6 months, up to 10 new upwards growing

shoots should be selected and be reduced to 4 or 5 evenly spaced ones after a year. At year 3 the trees should begin fruiting and initially may fruit annually. We will continue this learning experience over the 2027 harvest season!

Ewen Hutchinson
Mangonui

THE POLYPHENOL RACE: INSIDE OLIVE OIL'S NUMBERS GAME

As olive oil brands compete over polyphenol counts, experts say shoppers should look beyond the biggest number on the bottle.

By Daniel Dawson

Original article appeared in Olive Oil Times - July 2026



From Italy to Albania, producers are chasing higher polyphenol levels. Scientists, chefs and olive oil makers say the best oils still need balance, flavour and reliable evidence.

For many shoppers, extra virgin olive oil is no longer judged only by origin, variety or flavour. Increasingly, one number is doing the selling: polyphenol content. Producers now promote laboratory results on labels, websites and social media, with some oils advertised at 500 to more than 2,000 milligrams per kilogram (mg/kg).

Polyphenols are naturally occurring compounds linked to some of olive oil's health benefits. In the European Union, olive oil may carry a health claim when it contains enough hydroxytyrosol and related compounds to equal about 250 mg/kg. But that threshold has become a starting point rather than a finish line, with some producers presenting much higher counts as proof of superior quality.

That race raises a simple question: does more always mean better? Doctors, chefs and some olive oil makers are cautious, saying the number can overshadow what consumers notice most in the kitchen: taste, freshness and balance. Testing methods can also vary between laboratories, so comparisons are not always as clear as they appear.

Medical experts caution that evidence does not yet show ever-higher polyphenol intake produces ever-greater health gains. Mary Flynn, an associate professor of medicine at Brown University, says polyphenols explain much of extra virgin olive oil's benefit and effects on blood lipid markers may begin around 150 mg/kg. Physician and author Simon Poole agrees the aim should be quality, not simply

maximisation: there is little evidence consumers should try to “max out” on polyphenols.

Flavour is another concern. Chef and author Amy Riolo says oils above 800 mg/kg can shift from everyday ingredient to something almost medicinal because they may taste intensely bitter or unbalanced. Arsen Khachaturyants of Arsenio in Italy makes a similar point: olive oil is food, not medicine, and producers should protect sensory quality while explaining its healthful compounds.

High numbers are not necessarily a problem. Bianti Danaj of Donika Olive Oil in Albania says his company has won international gold awards with oils around 800 mg/kg. Such oils can still appeal to consumers when strong phenol content is matched by aroma, pepperiness and balance.

Even so, part of the market is moving away from the dinner table. Some high-polyphenol oils are sold in capsules or pharmacy-style vials, while phenolic compounds are also extracted from olive oil and pomace for separate sale. This has intensified debate about whether these products are premium foods, supplements or something in between.

Poole and Khachaturyants say more research is needed before very high doses are treated as automatically beneficial. Poole points to antioxidant supplements as a cautionary example: early enthusiasm around high doses was later complicated by studies showing limited benefit and possible harm in some groups.

Labels can also be confusing. Polyphenol levels may fall during storage and transport because of heat, light and time. Listing phenol content can be useful, but only if shoppers see it as one clue among many, not proof that one bottle is better than another.

Leandro Ravetti of Cobram Estate in Australia argues that “polyphenols” is an umbrella term covering compounds with different effects. More phenols, he says, do not necessarily make better oil, just as more tannins do not necessarily make better wine. In one experiment, he pushed phenolic content as high as possible in an Arbequina oil, but the result tasted “like water with pepper” and was not desirable.

For Ravetti, the issue is not just how many phenols are present, but which ones, from which olive variety and in what balance. Phenolic compounds can support health benefits and shelf life, but they do not replace flavour, freshness or craftsmanship. For shoppers, the takeaway is straightforward: polyphenols matter, but the best olive oil is still more than a number.

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