



The Woodside Farm grove was encased in smoke from the December 2019 Cudlee Creek fire.

Will bushfire smoke taint my EVOO?

One of the worries communicated to Olivegrower by growers in close proximity to bushfires is the issue of smoke taint, particularly when the fires occur relatively close to harvest. It's hard to find a definitive answer on the subject, so we went to the experts - Boundary Bend Technical Director Leandro Ravetti, OliveCare® Code of Best Practice Administrator Peter McFarlane and growers who've been through the experience - to see what we could find out.

Leandro Ravetti

"There is not a lot of information about smoke taint in olive oil and it is limited to some anecdotal work and experience that we have had with small growers in the past," Ravetti said.

"In principle, it is not as bad as it is with grapes for wine and it takes much more exposure to affect the profile of the oil. In any case, if the risk exists we would suggest to do the following while processing:

- wash the olives, changing water regularly and providing a final fresh shower if possible.
- crush with slightly larger grids than you would normally use.
- limit malaxing times to no more than 45 mins to 1 hour maximum at the lowest possible (but reasonable) temperature.

Those things will hopefully minimise the chance of smoke flavour transferring from the fruit to the oil."

Peter McFarlane

"The good news is that bushfire smoke is unlikely to taint olive oil.

"Firstly, because olive fruit is later maturing than wine grapes, so it is unlikely that smoke will present during olive processing when the extracted oil could be exposed to contamination; secondly, because olive fruit is usually washed, any residual ash will be removed; and thirdly, because olive fruit, has a thicker, more waxy protective epidermis (skin) than grapes."

Grower experience

US producer The McEvoy Ranch had a worrying time during the 2017 California bushfires, experiencing an unprecedented amount of smoke and ash around six weeks before the harvest. They harvested anyway, knowing that a small amount of fruit could be harvested, processed and the oil tested to determine whether there was any issue with smoke taint.

Luckily, they reported that their oil emerged "unscathed by the weeks it spent ensconced in smoke" with pre-harvest trials and lab testing finding no off-flavours.

Tasmanian producer Lisa Britzman had a similar experience in 2019. The Huon Valley fires came within 700m of her Campo de Flori grove, which was encased in smoke for six weeks.

"We hand washed each tree individually to get the smoke ash off them but were worried as to whether the olives would be smoke tainted," she said.

"We asked many other growers and none knew whether olives are affected by smoke, so we persevered with the harvest not knowing if our oil would be worth processing.

"We picked what olives we had and took them to the press, and told the presser to taste the oil as soon as it came out - if it tasted of smoke or bad, just to stop and not waste anyone's time or money.

"In the end our oil, and the oil of the others in the fire, turned out ok but it was a nervous wait."

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Friday Olive Extracts

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