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Certified olive oil out soon

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The Australian olive-oil industry says consumption of local oil is expanding dramatically, but Australia still imports by far the majority of its oil.

Australian Olive Association president Paul Miller says about 12,000 tonnes of oil will be produced this year, and given the number of young trees coming into production, that figure could easily rise by half again to 18,000 next year.

Forty per cent of our oil is exported, to places like the United States and China, where he says the Mediterranean diet is taking hold among the wealthier in big cities.

But Australia still imports a massive 35,000t of oil, a habit the Australian industry is trying hard to break.

Miller says Australians consume about 2lt a person a year. But most of that is not extra-virgin but refined olive oil, which starts its life “not fit for human consumption” – the olives from the ground, rotted or poor-quality fruit, which produces rancid oil which is then filtered, heated filtered and deodorised.

“You end up with that stuff labelled as pure or worse still, lite,” he says. “When you refine oil some of the processes strip everything out except oil, so you lose antioxidants, flavour

colour, and other good aspects, and you’re just left with the vegetable oil.”

Miller says the health benefits of extra-virgin are clear, but one of the biggest recent studies, the Euroolive study, concluded that to get the benefits you need to consume about 9lt a year, more than four times consumption in Australia.

The Australian industry funded tests recently which demonstrated that some imported oils claiming to be extra-virgin were not – failing European and German tests. Miller says adulteration of olive oil with deodorised oil is becoming a major problem in Europe as demand increases.

These poor-quality oils are sent to places like Australia, where the producers can get away with sending the oils because of the lack of quality testing. In contrast, the same producers send very good-quality oils to Germany, where testing is stringent.

The Australian industry introduced a code of practice in July which allows local producers to have their oils certified as extra virgin – ensuring it is fresh and properly made. The first certified oils will be on supermarket shelves within weeks Miller says.

The Australian Olive Association is holding its national expo in Canberra yesterday and today.