

THE OLIVE



Fruit and its nectar come from an ancient tree

Story by Carol Goodman Kaufman
Photos by Christine Peterson

Charles Dickens walks into a bar and orders a martini. The bartender asks, “Olive or Twist?” While the olive may or may not be the choice of garnish for your cocktail (for James Bond it certainly wasn’t), this fruit has established itself in multiple civilizations since time immemorial. And the trees on which it grows are ancient. For example, the trees on Jerusalem’s Mount of Olives are reputed to be over 2,000 years old. And olive orchards hundreds of years old continue to produce.

Olives are technically called drupes, or stone fruit, and like other drupes, they have an outer flesh surrounding a pit. But unlike other stone fruits, these drupes grow on a tree that is technically an evergreen. More than 800 million of them dot the surface of planet Earth today, almost 90% in the Mediterranean region alone.

In Nikos Kazantzakis’ novel, “The Last Temptation of Christ,” one scene stands out in my memory to this day. Jesus plucks from a tree an olive the size of an apple and takes a big bite from it. The author’s imagery was so powerful that I could practically see Jesus sitting in the shade of that tree, the sun filtered through its shimmering gray-green leaves. It made such an impression on my young mind that I picked an olive (more the size of an, er, olive) from a tree in the neighborhood and took a bite.

Big mistake. What I didn’t know then, but quickly learned, is that the fruit of the olive tree must be ripe before it is edible, and it must be cured in either brine, oil or lye to leach out the bitter oleuropein from its flesh. Once cured, olives can be eaten out of hand, mashed into a tapenade, or included as an umami enhancer in recipes as varied as eggplant caponata and chicken marbella. There are many cultivars, or varieties, of olives, each with its

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particular flavor and texture that makes a trip to the salad bar an adventure.

I can only assume that Kazantzakis had never eaten a raw olive himself, but growing up in Greece, he should have known better.

And then there’s olive oil, perhaps the most talked-about and debated ingredient in cooking. Made from a millennia-old process that involves crushing the fruit, then pressing them to extract the oil, the result is a fruity liquid that has a bit of a peppery tang to it. Olive oil has been used not only in the cuisines of many cultures, but in everything from religious rites to cosmetics and household products.

Olive trees and oil production in the Eastern Mediterranean can be traced as far back as the 7th century BCE, as evidenced by oil jugs found at a prehistoric site happened upon by an Israeli road construction crew. Phoenician traders carried cultivated fruit trees from Israel and Syria throughout the Mediterranean to Africa and Southern Europe. From there, the olive spread to the early Greeks and Romans, who then brought the olive with them on their forays throughout the known world. The Greeks used the product to oil athletes’ bodies.

Today, Spain produces almost half of all olive oil in the world, while Greece consumes the most.

Olive oil aficionados spend as much time choosing their oil as oenophiles devote to wine, and for good reason. The flavor of olive oil can vary due to reasons similar to those that influence wine, such as the variety of the olive, when they are harvested, and the oil’s age.

While on the tree, the fruit changes color from green to violet, and then black, and the flavor of the oil will vary depending on the stage of the fruit’s ripeness.

Among the various grades of the stuff, the highest is extra virgin (aka EVOO). Due to its high quality and minimal processing, EVOO is high in natural antioxidants, vitamin E and phytosterols from the olive fruit. The product of the first “cold” press is the best and most expensive.

But while wine improves with age, olive oil just gets rancid, and although you can continue to use it for up to a year, the older it gets the more it will deteriorate. If you’ve ever dipped a piece of bread into rancid oil, you’d have known it immediately. Make sure to buy yours only in dark or opaque bottles and keep it in a cabinet away from light.

And as with wine, the flavor of olive oil can vary according to its country of origin, so you may want to experiment by trying different brands.

And look for certifications from either

Olive oil cake

Between the olive oil and the citrus in this recipe, dreams of golden Mediterranean afternoons will carry you away when you bite into this moist confection.

Ingredients:

1 cup fresh extra-virgin olive oil	¼ teaspoon baking soda	3 tablespoons Grand Marnier
2 cups all-purpose flour, plus more for the pan	1½ cups granulated sugar	Juice of one lemon
1 teaspoon kosher salt	3 large eggs	1 cup plus 1 tablespoon whole milk
1 teaspoon baking powder	Grated zest of one lemon	2 tablespoons sugar mixed with 1 teaspoon cinnamon
	Grated zest of one orange	



Directions:

Set the oven to 375 degrees.

Coat a 10-inch round cake pan with flour-and-oil baking spray.

In a large bowl, whisk together the flour, salt, baking powder and baking soda.

In the bowl of an electric mixer set on high, beat the sugar, eggs and citrus zest until very thick and fluffy, about 5 minutes.

With the mixer still running, gradually add the oil and beat until incorporated, another 2 minutes.

Reduce speed to low.

Add the milk, Grand Marnier and lemon juice.

Gradually add the flour mixture and beat until just combined.

Transfer the batter to the pan.

Sprinkle the top with the sugar cinnamon mixture.

Bake the cake until a skewer inserted into the center comes out clean, 40 to 45 minutes.

Transfer to a rack to cool for 20 minutes, then run a knife around the edge to release the sides of the cake from the pan.

Invert the cake onto a plate and then flip it back over onto the rack to cool completely.

The cake will keep for a week if covered well.

the NAOOA (North American Olive Oil Association) or its European counterpart, IOC (International Olive Council). These two organizations can attest to the quality of the oil in the bottle.

And then there's the "smoke point." Olive oil has suffered from a bad rep in recent years as being unsuitable for cooking. That myth has now been debunked, by no less an authority than the CIA (the Culinary Institute of America, not the Central Intelligence Agency). In fact, olive oil's smoke point is above the temperatures required for cooking and it actually has a greater resistance to oxidation than most other cooking oils due to its antioxidant and mono-unsaturated fat content. You can, they say, fry with olive oil, and get excellent results.

Having said all that, however, they also recommend that the best, most aromatic — more expensive — extra virgin olive oil be used raw or as a finishing condiment.

In ancient times and modern, it is the oil of the first press that was used in the rituals and sacraments of many religions. For example, the Roman Catholic, Orthodox and Anglican churches all use olive oil for baptism, confirmation, the ordination of priests, and in the consecration of altars and churches. The East-



ern Orthodox still use oil lamps in their churches, home prayer corners, and cemeteries. The Church of Latter Day Saints uses virgin olive oil that's been blessed by priests for anointing the sick.

In Islam, the practice of treating illness through a ritual known as ruqyah makes use of olive oil. And like the oil used in anointing priests and kings, it must be pure and not blended.

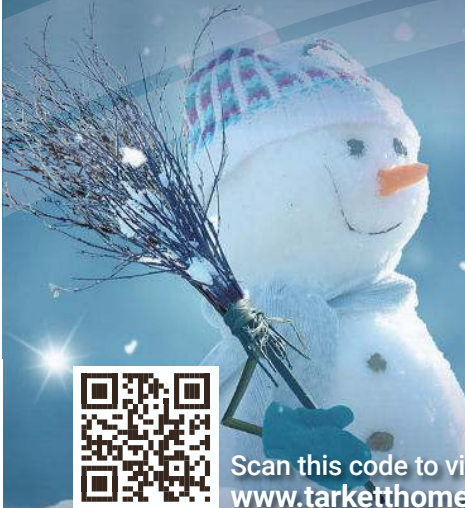
In the Jewish tradition, pure olive oil consecrated by the priests was used to anoint priests, kings and prophets. It was also the only fuel permissible for the seven-branched menorah in the Holy Temple. The Hanukkah story tells of the search for pure olive oil to re-dedicate the Second Temple after the Seleucids had defiled it during their war against the Jews. Today, many Jews use olive oil in commemoration of that episode in their history.

Despite the label on the bottle, what we have in our cupboards today may not be quite as pure. While trade in adulterated oil has been going on for millennia, the practice continues today. There's even a name for this fraud: Agro-mafia. Journalist Tom Mueller, interviewed on the CBS news magazine "Sixty Minutes," reported that only about 40 percent of olive oil sold as "extra virgin" in Italy actually meets the criteria for that designation. And although the Italian government tried to enact a law with strict labeling requirements, the European Union vetoed it.

Business in fraudulent olive oil is much bigger than you might imagine. In fact, the profit margin on non-pure olive oil is an astounding three times that of cocaine — at \$16 billion per year. And most of the fraud consists of trying to pass off adulterated olive oil as extra-virgin Italian.

If you really love your olives (I do, hubby can't stand them), you can order buckets of them on the internet and cure your own, using various flavorings, from garlic to hot peppers. And you can even grow your own olive tree — indoors, this being New England, after all — provided you have a place with a really good southwest exposure. ■

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