



olive oil

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If I were in charge of the world, people would need a license to have children, telemarketing would be illegal, and fatty foods would be good for you. I'm told I lack certain qualifications needed to wisely rule all of nature and mankind, so I'm not holding my breath; however, there *is* one rare but significant consolation: olive oil is a healthful and gloriously fatty food. The blunt, lemony smell sings of wellbeing. It's like the autumnal Mediterranean sun in a jar—warm, bright and big-hearted.

The olive tree has deep roots in ancient worship practices, politics, and cooking tradition. According to Greek mythology, Athena and Poseidon laid claim to the same city. Competing for the goodwill of the citizens, they both made a gift at the Acropolis: Poseidon called forth a spring of water, Athena created the olive tree. *She* won the favor of the people. The capital of Greece commemoratively bears her namesake.

For over 3000 years, the trees have been cultivated, the olives cured, and their oils pressed. And many world religions have forged an enduring bond with that primeval tree—infants anointed, the dead laid to rest, ceremonies and altars alight with the energy from its oil. A proffered olive branch bestows peace. A dove bearing an olive branch brings hope. A wreath on the head symbolizes power. Sir Lawrence Olivier and my cat, Oliver, both wear monikers borne of the tree. It's been a lubricant d'amour and the subject of knock-knock jokes. I most remember the unlikely jealousies of Popeye and Brutus over the *disturbingly skinny* Olive Oyl. I guess I was just too young to appreciate the irony.

We now prize the fruit in a wildly divergent parade of dishes: salads, tapenade, bread, olive loaf, antipasti, olives stuffed with almonds, garlic, lemon, onion, blue cheese, goat cheese or pimento, served in martinis, decorating a Reuben with a frilly toothpick poking through, served on Tupperware next to carrot sticks and sweet gherkins. The olive goes from t-shirt to black tie with astonishing ease. And there's no substitute for the oil. Nearly every meal I prepare includes what Homer referred to as “liquid gold”.

I tip the bottle of olive oil—my thumb poised on top to control the flow—and the glowing, silky stream arcs a line into the bowl as my whisk blurs back and forth. Making salad dressing is one of my favorite simple pleasures just because I get to lick the olive oil from my thumb. There's that urgent moment when a fat, golden drop forms heavy on my thumb tip—an amber jewel hanging in indecision. Just before it falls to the counter, I swoop it to my open lips. Warmed by my skin, the buttery liquid delights my senses—taste, smell, touch. There's nothing like the mouth feel of olive oil, the tongue and teeth sliding on a whisper-thin coat of slick, verdant richness.

I have a passion for butter that makes Judy Garland seem like a poster-child for temperance. But I'm always thrilled to see butter replaced by the ubiquitous saucer of olive oil served with bread in restaurants. Thankfully, the practice has outlived its own trendiness. The café down the street serves a chive and cilantro olive oil that nearly eclipses the entrées. When the waiter sets down that saucer, I fight the urge to push him out of the way and slurp up the herbaceous, shining pool in one gulp. Then, I sternly remind myself that social convention doesn't allow me to guzzle oil at a white tablecloth establishment.

If I were in charge of the world, this would be different.

But forget about the obsessively sumptuous feel and flavor. Olive oil is good for you. Abundant in antioxidants, it appears to aid in the prevention of colon, breast and skin cancers. It reduces the risk of coronary heart disease by lowering your LDL cholesterol levels. Some claim olive oil helps relieve high blood pressure, complications from diabetes, asthma, arthritis, indigestion, and even gallstones. Recommended consumption varies, but two tablespoons, daily, seems to be the general consensus.

Although all olive oils provide antioxidants, extra virgin has the highest levels. It's processed the least and tastes the best. In the grocery, you're usually going to find three grades—extra virgin, virgin, and pure (pure being the poorest quality). The International Olive Oil Council (IOOC) governs the standards and labeling for imported products. In the U.S., the California Olive Oil Council (COOC) certifies domestic extra virgin olive oil. Regardless of the origin, you can ignore everything but extra virgin. If you decide to buy a lower grade, congratulations! You've saved \$1.59...but sacrificed health benefits and flavor. You may now drizzle the tasteless abomination over your Vienna sausages and eat in contentment—your dreamy thoughts filled with all of the exciting purchases made possible by your bountiful nest egg.

But I say extra virgin is your starting point. Beyond, there lies an electrifying, glassy, green galaxy of top shelf creations. Don't limit yourself to mass produced brands. For everyday cooking, I use ordinary extra virgin. This is good for sautéing, as well as grilling meats and vegetables; and the heat won't significantly impact flavor. You can use olive oil for shallow frying, but the smoke point is too low for deep-frying. For dressings and finishing, I use first cold press, unfiltered selections. Unfiltered oils still contain olive solids. You can't actually see the pulp; however, the liquid is cloudy and greener. The result is a boisterous, energetic character. Unfiltered olive oils are the Dixieland bands of the lipid world.

Filtered oils last longer and are better for dishes with many ingredients. They still ring clear and strong without all of the loud trombone solos typical of *unfiltered* varieties. I also tend to prefer early and Fall harvest to late harvest. Unlike most fruits, the olive harvesting season lasts for several months. Earlier harvests produce notes that are fresh, grassy, and more complex. Late harvests make for a more buttery depth.

Infused oils, such as rosemary olive oil, can't be called extra virgin because an ingredient has

been added, but if it's a good oil, the label will state that it was made from extra virgin oil. I particularly like the products from Temecula Olive Oil Company and Pasolivo. But you couldn't possibly exhaust the distinguished list of fine oil makers throughout the world. There are over 200 producers of olive oil in California and I tend to buy domestically. I don't have any firm rationale for this, but I suspect the operations are smaller and their information is more accessible.

The culinary applications of olive oil are boundless. Nonetheless, cosmetics, moisturizers and soaps all benefit from the oil's salutary attributes. Allergic reactions are very rare. Olive oil soap has long been touted as an emollient skin cleanser. Ancient Greek athletes slathered their bodies with the oil to give them strength. (I don't know if that worked, but it does put ideas in one's head.) So, now that your imagination is going, here are a few of my favorite uses in the kitchen:

Preserving Roasted Garlic | I always have roasted garlic in the fridge. Cut the top off a head of garlic. Coat liberally with olive oil, salt and pepper. Roast in foil at 400 degrees for 45 minutes. After cooling, squeeze the cloves into a small bowl or ramekin. Cover with olive oil and they'll keep refrigerated for over a month. When you've added the last cloves to a sauce, you're left with a deep, manly oil superbly blooming of the stinking rose.

Preserving Herbs | Generally, herbs preserved in oil resemble freshness more closely than dry herbs. If you have leftover fresh herbs, or herbs in the garden, wash and dry them thoroughly. Place them in a small jar or bowl and cover with olive oil. It's the same as preserving garlic, but make sure there are no sneaky air pockets trapped in the folds of leaves or mold will grow there. When you want a bright herbal addition to a recipe, just shake off the oil and chop it as you need it. Long after the herbs are used up, you'll be enjoying the poetry of that vibrant oil at dinner.

I also add a layer of olive oil to help preserve sun-dried tomatoes and pesto when the jar gets low.

Meats and vegetables on the grill are always more flavorful when marinated in olive oil and herbs. I finish soups, pizza and pasta with a thin stream of my best reserve. It is as close as you can get to having the Italian Riviera in your mouth.

I can imagine myself living in the dappled shadow of an olive grove, somewhere in Italy. I see myself lying on a blanket under one of the ancient trees with a straw hat covering my eyes. A just-finished book lies next to me as my stomach rests from the simple lunch of bread, cheese and olive oil. No phone, no faxes, no computer and no paparazzi; just the sun dancing in the leaves and a slow, warm breeze.

That's how it would be if I were in charge of the world.

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