

INTRODUCTION

A Brief History of Olive Oil

The olive tree was first cultivated around 6,000 BCE, and yet historians are still baffled by the plant's origins. Artifacts discovered at archaeological sites suggest that the practice of olive oil cultivation began in central Persia and later spread to Greece, the Mediterranean basin, and northern Africa. To this day, ninety percent of olives are grown in this region.

Olive oil was once the most highly traded commodity in the ancient world and the olive tree played a role in many ancient civilizations. In Egypt, olive oil was used for cooking, medicine, and religious purposes, such as anointing the dead and to light lanterns for rituals. In Greece, the olive tree was revered as sacred and seen as a symbol of respect. The tree was praised for its food and medicinal properties. Excavations reveal the culture's sophisticated techniques for storage and extraction of oil. By the sixth century CE, the Greeks had become major exporters of oil throughout the Mediterranean. The Romans spread the fruit of the olive tree throughout their empire. They cured olives and mastered the method of oil extraction, inventing the screw press, perfecting the storage and distribution of olive oil, and making

its sale a lucrative business. Imperial taxes were paid to Rome in bulk oil. But the fall of the Roman Empire caused a reduction in the scale of olive production. By the end of the Middle Ages, however, the cultivation of olives had expanded once again, due in part to improved transportation and trade between northern and southern Europe. And from the Christian church's earliest days, olive oil illuminated its halls, embalmed its dead, and was used to bless its religious figures.

For centuries, the production of olives and olive oil was managed by small estate, family businesses. But the nineteenth century saw the development of industrial oil-refining plants and large-scale growing and production cooperatives. Small amounts of olive oil remained in each producing country, while vast amounts of olives went to central refineries to be made into amalgamated oil blends that were then marketed worldwide.

By the 1970s, consumers were intrigued by the nutritional benefits of the Mediterranean diet and olive oil. Many wished to move beyond the widely available, cheap tinned olive oils that weren't of the best quality and began to seek out high-quality oils produced on a small scale.

Today the olive tree is cultivated worldwide and is found in countries including the US, Mexico, several South American countries, China, and South Africa. Its global expansion is a true testament to the growing demand for olive oil.

THE OLIVE TREE

The olive tree is an evergreen, with leaves that are dark green on one side and a lighter silvery color on the other. It tends to grow between thirty and forty degrees latitude and in elevations up to 1,300 feet (400 meters) high. Some trees require very fertile soil, while others can grow well on rocky hillsides. To produce abundant fruit, olive trees like well-drained soil and prefer alkaline conditions, although they can tolerate most acidic soils. The tree thrives in hot dry summers and mild, moist, and temperate winters—more or less a Mediterranean climate. As such, the olive tree can withstand high heat and drought but cannot tolerate prolonged humidity in the summertime. The olive tree is also sensitive to cold (below 32°F/0°C), and its leaves are susceptible to mold, especially during the growing period, but it requires cooler temperatures in the winter to induce a dormant state so the tree can rest. Cool winters induce flowers to bud, but harsh winters will wither the fruit and cause it to fall or prevent flowers from budding altogether.

We generally irrigate our trees two to three

times during the sweltering summer months, being careful not to over-water (which would increase the olives' water content, making them less flavorful and aromatic). If the olives don't get enough water, on the other hand, they'll end up looking like raisins.

There are hundreds of olive varieties grown worldwide, each with its own distinct characteristics, including the Koroneiki, which we grow in Greece, the Manzanilla de Jaén in Spain, and the Frantoio in Italy. Some are grown for table olives, others for olive oil production. Most varieties are self-pollinating, but in order for a wild olive seed to first germinate, it must pass through the digestive system of a bird.

The olive tree is a biennial crop: a big olive harvest one year is followed by a small one the next, with another bumper crop in year three. A small yield puts great economic strain on the farmer, but also gives relief to the laborers. If the olive tree were to produce fruitful crops every year, it would be difficult to pick the olives in time. Regular pruning, irrigation, and fertilizing will counteract the tree's natural tendency to biennial cropping and ensure a steady yield.

The olive tree produces many tiny white flowers in late spring. By summer, these have developed into olives, although only a small fraction of the flowers become fruit. The tree naturally sheds its surplus fruit before it fully matures, so that it isn't burdened by more olives than it can support. An

olive tree takes four to five years to yield its first fruit, and ten to fifteen years to reach its full fruit-bearing capacity.

The unripe olive is pear-shaped and green in color. It changes from green to purple and lastly to black when fully mature. The olive fruit is fully ripe (black) six months after the flower has blossomed, but the best oil is produced from the fruit while it is young (green). Olives pressed for oil can be picked at any stage; however, the more unripe the olive, the less oil it will yield. Picking olives while they're still green is referred to as the early harvest.

The olive tree should be pruned every year, and this is done either by hand or mechanically. Pruning structures the tree by balancing out the branches and making them equal in size. By exposing the fruit to the sun and distributing energy to the tree's new shoots, pruning increases the number of fruit-bearing growths and therefore the productivity of the trees. We do "rough" pruning—cutting branches loaded with olives and leaving the less burdened branches to grow bigger next year—in October and November, during the harvest period; then in February and March we prune before the olives flower ("fine" pruning). Mature trees are usually fertilized every three years, near the end of winter, again at the end of spring—when the olive tree has flowered—or at the end of the summer, when it rains.

Fertilizing, like pruning, can help counter the olive tree's biennial cropping. The tree grows best when watered, pruned, and fertilized, and these all help increase the yield of olives.

The olive tree is subject to a variety of pests and diseases, but the olive fruit fly (*Bactrocera oleae*) is the tree's worst enemy. An iridescent fly, it bites into the olive and lays an egg in the developing fruit, and there the larva will feed on the pulp. Infected olives usually drop to the ground, but if harvested and pressed, the larva will give the olive oil a "dirty" taste. To combat the prevalence of disease, trees are either sprayed with chemicals or have sulfur traps hanging on their branches (an organic method). Spraying the leaves against the olive fly will prevent damage to the tree and its fruit, but the chemicals will also be absorbed by the plant.

HARVESTING

The art of making great olive oil begins with the harvest. During the harvest, the fruits can be easily bruised or damaged, which will accelerate the oxidation process and produce an unpleasant-tasting, lower quality oil. When picked, the olives need to be healthy, with no blemishes and free from pests and disease. A cut in the olive's skin can lead to bacterial infection, yeast, or fungi, which can also ruin the oil.

There are several ways to pick olives. Handpick-

ing is the most laborious and time-consuming, but ensures the best quality oil. Pickers climb ladders and comb the olives with wooden rakes. Tarps are slung in the trees and stretched just above the ground to catch the olives as they fall to prevent them from bruising and to avoid any contact with the soil, which may stick to the olives and leave an unwanted taste.

The collection of our Koroneiki olives is done in the early part of the harvest season (November). Picking olives early ensures our oil is low in acidity (making it extra virgin) and high in nutritional value. Basil and the workers first place tarps under each tree to collect the olives and make sure the fruit doesn't come into contact with the soil. In years past, the harvest was a time when families worked together to pick and press the olives. Today, our family is dispersed, so we rely on work crews. The harvest is very labor-intensive and begins with the picking of the olives while they are still green. Green olives have the highest nutritional value but produce less oil—a fair trade-off in our eyes. The workers pile the collected olives into burlap sacks and send them to the olive mill for the first cold pressing.

Pickers can also strike the olive branches to rattle the olives and allow them to drop into the nets. This method may take less time, but it can also bruise the fruit and damage the tree, leaving the olives susceptible to disease and increased

oxidation, especially if left in the heat. For larger groves, machines are used to shake the trees and rattle the olives free. This works well for big cooperatives, but can also damage the fruit and tree branches.

The longer the fruit remains on the tree, the more oil will be produced upon extraction, but most producers tend to pick their olives while they are still green, which ensures the freshest olive oil. Younger olives are also high in polyphenols and low in linoleic acid, both of which help delay the oxidation, decay, and rancidity of the fruit.

PRESSING AND PROCESSING

The pressing of olives is a relatively simple process. It takes about ten pounds (4.5 kg) of olives to produce one quart/liter of olive oil. The best olive oil producers press within twenty-four hours after the harvest to minimize damage to the fruit and ensure a quality oil. Olives left in the heat are subject to oxidation, which will increase the oil's acidity. (An olive's oil acidity level is the true measure of its quality and can only be determined by chemical analysis.) There are three main methods of pressing—millstone, sinolea, and mechanical press. Deciding which pressing method to use is crucial; it will impact the amount and quality of oil produced.

With millstone pressing, two or three millstones are used to crush the washed fruit and pits into a

FAKI (Lentil Soup)

Faki is a traditional Greek soup made with lentils. It's simple to make, and very tasty. Serve with baked or grilled fish. (Tip: Make sure to wash your lentils well before cooking to remove any tiny stones.)

2 cups lentils, washed
1 large onion, finely chopped
3 garlic cloves, finely chopped
¼ cup olive oil
1 bay leaf
1 tsp dried thyme
1 tsp sea salt
½ tsp freshly ground black pepper
¼ cup uncooked white rice (optional)
1 fresh tomato, puréed (optional)
white vinegar, to taste

Bring a large pot of water to a boil. Add lentils, onions, garlic, olive oil, spices and about 6 cups water. Add rice and tomato, if desired. Simmer on medium heat until lentils are soft and the stock is thick, about 30–45 minutes.

Just before serving, add a dollop of vinegar.

Makes 4–6 servings.

LAMB CHOPS WITH ARTICHOKEs

The secret to this recipe is to slow cook the lamb, so the meat falls off the bone and the artichokes are tender. The flavor combination here is mouth-watering.

½ cup olive oil
6 green onions, finely chopped
2 lbs (1 kg) lamb loin or shoulder chops
1 tsp sea salt
2 tbsp finely chopped fresh dill
6 artichokes, cleaned and quartered (see p. 37) (or use canned)
juice of 2 lemons
2 eggs
freshly ground black pepper, to taste

Heat olive oil in a deep saucepan on medium. Add green onions and sauté until translucent. Lightly brown lamb chops on both sides, then add enough water to cover, add salt and dill, and bring to a boil. Stir in artichokes and half the lemon juice.

Reduce heat to medium-low and let simmer until meat is tender and the artichokes are cooked, about 45–60 minutes. Remove pan from heat.

Remove 1 cup of broth and set aside. Whisk the eggs in a bowl until foamy. While whisking, slowly add remaining lemon juice to eggs. Continue to whisk, and slowly pour the broth into the egg-lemon mixture. Stir this sauce into the lamb and artichokes. Season the chops with freshly ground black pepper and serve in a shallow bowl with thick slices of fresh crusty bread to mop up the delicious sauce.

Makes 4–6 servings.

GARIDES YOVETSI ME FETA (Shrimp with Feta)

In Greece, this dish is traditionally made in clay pots, but you can use a casserole dish or Dutch oven. Serve as a main course over a bed of rice with a green salad or steamed vegetables on the side.

1½ lbs (¾ kg) shrimp, peeled and deveined
juice of ½ lemon
3 tbsp olive oil
½ cup finely chopped onion
3 garlic cloves, finely minced
4 green onions (green part only), finely chopped (or chives)
1 cup crushed tomatoes (fresh or canned)
½ cup dry white wine
1 tsp dried oregano
2 tbsp finely chopped parsley
sea salt, to taste
freshly ground black pepper, to taste
1–1¼ cups feta cheese, crumbled or cubed

Preheat oven to 400°F (205°C).

Place shrimp in a bowl and squeeze lemon juice on shrimp. Heat ½ the olive oil in a frying pan on medium-high, add shrimp, and cook until shrimp has turned pink. Remove from heat and set aside. Add the rest of the olive oil to the pan and heat on medium-high. Add onions and garlic and sauté until lightly golden brown. Add green onions, tomato, wine, oregano, parsley, salt, and pepper. Reduce heat to medium and simmer for 15 minutes. Remove from heat.

Pour tomato sauce and shrimp into a casserole and top with feta cheese. Bake for 20 minutes, or until hot and bubbly.

Makes 4–6 servings.

IMAM BAYILDI (Stuffed Baby Eggplants)

A dish my mother made when I was young, Imam Bayildi is a fusion of Turkish and Greek cuisines.

8 small (about 4-in/10-cm long) eggplants
sea salt, to taste
3 large fresh tomatoes, finely chopped
3 medium onions, finely chopped
3 garlic cloves, minced
1 cup finely chopped fresh parsley
sea salt to taste
freshly ground black pepper, to taste
1 cup olive oil
juice of 1 lemon
1 large tomato, sliced
salt, to taste
freshly ground black pepper, to taste

Preheat oven to 375°F (190°C).

Remove stems from the eggplants. Make three slits lengthwise in each eggplant and sprinkle with sea salt. Let sit on baking sheet or cutting board for 30 minutes. Squeeze out any excess liquid from the eggplants and set aside.

Combine the finely chopped tomatoes, onions, garlic, parsley, salt, pepper, olive oil, and lemon juice in a mixing bowl.

Stuff filling into slits in eggplants. Arrange the stuffed eggplants in a large baking pan and cover with sliced tomato. (Add any leftover filling to the pan.) Salt and pepper the tomatoes and add about 1 cup of water to pan. Cover the pan with aluminum foil and bake for 1 hour, or until the eggplants are soft. Serve hot or cold.

Makes 4–6 servings.

SPANAKOPITA (Spinach & Cheese Pastry)

Spanakopita is a staple in any Greek home and one my daughter Vicki makes well. Great as a snack or a side.

2 bunches spinach, washed, dried, and roughly chopped
½ cup finely chopped fennel, bulb and greens
6 green onions, finely chopped
sea salt, to taste (taste the feta for saltiness before adding salt)
freshly ground black pepper, to taste
1 cup crumbled feta cheese
4 eggs, lightly beaten
2 tbsp uncooked white rice
¼ cup olive oil
1 1-lb/454-g pkg phyllo pastry

Preheat oven to 375°F (190°C).

Combine spinach, fennel, green onions, salt, and pepper in a bowl, then mix in feta, eggs, and rice. Lightly oil a 9 x 12-in (23 x 30-cm) baking pan with olive oil. Line the bottom of the pan with one phyllo sheet at a time, carefully brushing each layer with olive oil. Keep unused phyllo under a moist towel to prevent it from drying out. Repeat with 5–6 sheets, then spread the spinach mixture evenly over the phyllo. Layer another 5–6 sheets of pastry (brushing each sheet with olive oil) onto the spinach mixture.

Sprinkle a little water on the final sheet to prevent it from cracking before placing in the oven. Bake for 30–45 minutes, or until golden brown.

Makes 4–6 servings.