New Reasons to Love Olive Oil
It may be as good for your skin, pearls and garden tools as it is for your heart and your salads

In Health
According to the Madrid-based International Olive Oil Council, a diet rich in olive oil can help prevent arteriosclerosis, lower total cholesterol, slow the aging process and prevent constipation and bad breath.

A study published in the June 2002 issue of *Alternative Medicine Review* reported that Mediterranean-style diets—which are rich in olive oil—have "significant protective effects against cancer and coronary heart disease." And, the study reports, the major compounds in olive oil contain potent antioxidants that protect us from free radicals, which are ions that can damage cells. Another study published in the June 26, 2003 issue of *The New England Journal of Medicine* found similar results. Following a traditional Mediterranean diet, the researchers found, is associated with fewer deaths from coronary heart disease and cancer.

But not all theories about olive oil's health benefits have been replicated. A study published in the March 27, 2000 issue of *Archives of Internal Medicine* reported that people on high blood pressure medications might be able to reduce their medications if they substitute extra virgin olive oil for other types of fats. "This study needs to be followed up," says Alice Lichtenstein, professor of nutrition at the Human Nutrition Research Center on Aging at Tufts University. "I hope that no one reduces their [blood pressure] medications and starts consuming extra virgin olive oil based on this one study."

Ever since Vito Corleone imported those gleaming barrels from his native Sicily, all Americans have slowly learned to love olive oil. One wonders what took us so long. Ten thousand years ago, Homer called olive oil "liquid gold," an opinion shared by Israel's King David, who ordered guards to watch it day and night. Hippocrates, 500 years later, called olive oil the "great therapeutic," an early assessment that scientific research increasingly supports.

In ancient Greece, where cutting down an olive tree was punishable by death, healers used the oil to treat wounds, aid in digestion and slow the effects of aging. Women rubbed olive oil into their hair to add luster and on their skin to keep it supple and soft, which, in one form or another, the oil continues to do today. Sophia Loren credits her youthful beauty to her use of olive oil as a facial oil. This versatile oil is a cooking fat, a salad dressing and a moisturizer. It can also be a furniture polish, a fabric softener, a shaving cream and a heart-healthy alternative to butter.
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In Cooking
In addition to its health benefits, olive oil has a unique flavor that many chefs integrate into their repertoires. "Without olive oil," says Michael Bilger, chef at Carneros, the restaurant at The Lodge at Sonoma in California, "I would have to rethink my whole style of cooking. When I [use] olive oil, I'm going for strong, bold flavors. If I didn't have olive oil in my kitchen, a lot of my food would be a lot less soulful."

Bilger uses extra virgin olive oil as a finish over pasta or as an ingredient in soup broths and salad dressings. Bilger says extra and virgin olive oils do not, however, react well when heated. Olive oil has a low smoke point (meaning it smokes at a low temperature), and some of the compounds in extra virgin olive oil are volatile. You can cook the flavor and beneficial nutrients away easily.

When cooking, Bilger blends olive oil with a second oil, such as canola oil. The blend has a higher smoke point and has a lighter flavor than straight olive oil.

For sautéing, the International Olive Oil Council recommends ordinary olive oil instead of the virgin or extra virgin varieties because ordinary olive oil doesn’t break down or smoke at frying temperatures.

The biggest enemies of olive oil are light and air, both of which will cause the quality of the oil to rapidly deteriorate. To ensure olive oil stays fresh, keep it tightly sealed, and store it in a dark cupboard where it can last for up to 6 months.

Lisa Deane, the founder of the Web page www.oliveoilsource.com, keeps a pantry full of varied olive oils that have a diverse range of flavors. “I use my olive oil like I do herbs and spices: as a finisher to add a particular flavor to my food. To me, that is what olive oil is best for.”
Out of the Kitchen
Olive oil may be prized primarily for the flavor it adds to food, but it’s also valued for its uses outside the kitchen. In ancient Greece, the oil was used to consecrate priests, to fill household lamps and to anoint royalty. Today, you can find olive oil as an ingredient in many lip balms, soaps, bath oils, shampoos and body lotions. You can even mix up potions at home. To soften your skin, mix 2–3 tablespoons of the oil into a bath. To nourish dry scalps and hair, Greta Breedlove, author of *The Herbal Home Spa*, suggests mixing ½ cup olive oil with five drops of essential oil and massaging the mixture onto your scalp. Leave it on for half an hour, then rinse and shampoo.

Carole Firenze, author of the forthcoming *The Passionate Olive*, suggests using olive oil—lower grades will do—on squeaky hinges. “If it drips, you can wipe it across your wood floor, and it adds beauty and luster. You can hydrate your pearls with it. You can use it for preserving cast-iron skillets.” To keep gardening tools from rusting, spread a light coat of olive oil on them before storing. Because of its moisturizing properties, olive oil is a suitable furniture or wood-floor polish. Deane cautions that if you use the oil alone, it may turn rancid over time, but Firenze suggests that anyone concerned about a sour smell try a mixture of 1 teaspoon olive oil, one-half cup vinegar and 1 teaspoon water for household polish.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Olive Oils Compared</th>
<th>Type</th>
<th>Acidity Level</th>
<th>Quality</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Extra virgin</td>
<td>Less than 1 percent</td>
<td>Highest grade; extracted without using chemicals.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Virgin or fine virgin</td>
<td>1–3 percent</td>
<td>Next highest grade; uses chemicals in processing.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Ordinary olive oil</td>
<td>No more than 1.5 percent; a blend of refined olive oil and extra virgin or virgin olive oil</td>
<td>Next highest grade; uses chemicals in processing.</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Pure or refined</td>
<td>No more than 1.5 percent; a blend of refined olive oils and may include small quantities of extra virgin or virgin olive oil</td>
<td>Lower edible grade; uses chemicals in processing.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Light</td>
<td>No more than 1.5 percent; a mixture of refined olive oils and may include small quantities of extra virgin or virgin olive oil</td>
<td>Lower edible grade; uses chemicals in processing. Contains the same amount of fat and calories as the other varieties. “Light” refers to the color and fragrance of the oil, which has a reduced classic olive oil flavor.</td>
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