Olive Oil: A Marriage of Taste and Health

The Folklore. The olive tree has been a part of many cultures. The Greeks, in particular, have embraced the olive tree, under which the ancient Greek gods were born, as a symbol of purification, victory and honor. In ancient Greece, winners at the Olympic Games were traditionally crowned with olive wreaths.

The Facts. While olive oil boasts a bounty of heart-healthy monounsaturated fats and antioxidants like phenols, its distinct flavor is what attracts food aficionados. The flavor, color and fragrance of olive oil vary significantly depending on where the olives are grown and the crop’s condition at harvest. Extra-virgin olive oil—the crown jewel of olive oils—can range from a crystalline champagne color to greenish-golden to dark green. The deeper the color, the more intense the fruity flavor. A deeper color also generally indicates more antioxidants.

As for “cold pressed” and “first pressed,” the terms mean little, because they are unregulated. Almost all olive oil comes from the first pressing now, unlike in the past. Moreover, almost no olives are heated before pressing; they are pressed at room temperature, which qualifies as “cold pressed.”

Olive oils are typically classified by their acid content; a greater acidity imparts a more bitter taste:
- **Extra-virgin olive oil**—no more than 1% acidity.
- **Virgin olive oil**—1% to 3% acidity.
- **Fino olive oil**—a blend of extra-virgin and virgin oils.
- **Light olive oil**—lighter in fragrance and color, but the same fat and calories as regular olive oil; filtering removes the fruity olive-oil flavor as well as healthful antioxidants.

The Findings. Olive oil is an excellent source of monounsaturated fats, which help lower total blood cholesterol when used in place of saturated fats. Some studies suggest they help lower low-density lipoprotein (“bad” LDL) cholesterol, when included as part of a low-saturated-fat diet.

Researchers at the University of Pennsylvania and Monell Chemical Senses Center, in Philadelphia, recently reported that newly pressed, extra-virgin olive oil contains oleocanthal, a compound that acts like a natural anti-inflammatory, much like ibuprofen (Advil, Motrin). As an anti-inflammatory, oleocanthal may help protect against stroke, heart disease, some cancers and certain dementias.

The Finer Points. Sealed tightly, olive oil keeps at room temperature for up to two months. Because monounsaturated oils are extra perishable, refrigerate olive oil kept longer. It turns cloudy when cold, but clears up at room temperature.

The distinct flavors of extra-virgin and virgin olive oils work well in dressings, marinades and for sautéing. One caution: While olive oil is heart-healthy, it is still pure fat; monitor your intake to avoid too many calories.

—Luanne Hughes, M.S., R.D.

Notable Nutrients
(1 tablespoon olive oil)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Nutrient</th>
<th>Amount</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Calories</td>
<td>119</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vitamin E (alpha-tocopherol)</td>
<td>2 International Units (13% Daily Value)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total Fat</td>
<td>13 grams</td>
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<tr>
<td>Monounsaturated Fat</td>
<td>10 grams</td>
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**EN’s Own Tempting Tapenade**

3 anchovies
1 clove garlic, minced
1 tablespoon fresh thyme leaves, minced (or 1 teaspoon dried thyme)
1/2 cup pitted Kalamata olives
1/2 cup pitted black olives
1/4 cup sun-dried tomatoes in olive oil
1/4 cup extra-virgin olive oil
1 tablespoon fresh thyme leaves, minced (or 1 teaspoon dried thyme)
1 cup pitted Kalamata olives
1/2 cup pitted black olives
1/4 cup sun-dried tomatoes in olive oil
1/4 cup extra-virgin olive oil

1. Place anchovies, garlic and thyme in a blender or food processor and purée.
2. Add olives, tomatoes and oil; pulse to a smooth paste.
3. If tapenade is too thick, add more olives; if it is too thin, add more oil.

Serve with crusty Italian bread or crackers. Makes about eight 2-tablespoon servings.

**Nutrition Information Per Serving:**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Nutrient</th>
<th>Amount</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Calories</td>
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<tr>
<td>Protein</td>
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<tr>
<td>Sodium</td>
<td>564 milligrams</td>
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<tr>
<td>Vitamin E</td>
<td>1 International Unit</td>
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**Research Roundup**

- Older people eating diets rich in beta-carotene, vitamins C and E and the mineral zinc may greatly reduce their risk of age-related macular degeneration (ARMD), the most common cause of irreversible blindness in the U.S. As part of the Rotterdam Study, Dutch researchers followed 4,170 men and women 55 years of age and older for an average of eight years after assessing their dietary intakes. Participants whose diets provided the most of these four nutrients were 35% less likely to develop the eye disease. While one large study found that supplementing with these nutrients can delay progression of existing ARMD, this research found that diet could help prevent the disease. *Journal of the American Medical Association*, January 12, 2006.

- Women who drink tea may have a lower risk of developing ovarian cancer than non-tea drinkers. That’s the conclusion of Swedish researchers who studied more than 66,000 women for an average of 15 years. They found that women who drank two or more cups of tea a day had a 46% lower risk of ovarian cancer than non-tea drinkers. And the more tea they drank, the greater the protection, even after controlling for factors such as age at menopause and use of postmenopausal hormones. The researchers partly credit the antioxidant polyphenols in tea, including catechins, theaflavins and flavanols. *Archives of Internal Medicine*, December 12/26, 2005.

- Pistachios and sunflower seeds are among the best foods you can eat to get cholesterol-lowering phytosterols. That’s what Virginia researchers found when they analyzed 27 varieties of nuts and seeds for their phytosterol content. Wheat germ and sesame seeds were highest, but are generally not eaten as often or in as large a quantity as pistachios or sunflower seeds. Also tops were almonds and pine nuts. *Journal of Agricultural and Food Chemistry*, November 30, 2005.

**In Coming Issues**

What you can do to improve your odds against lung cancer...When organic makes sense; when it doesn’t...New controversy over aspartame’s safety.
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