the epic tale of olive oil
Reap the health and culinary benefits of this mythic elixir

By Lisa Turner

In 1500 BC, in the rocky countryside of ancient Greece, there grew a sturdy tree that bore rich and fragrant fruit. Its origins are as legendary as its resilience. According to mythology, the goddess Athena, in a fierce competition with the god Poseidon to be the patron deity of the then-unnamed Athens, presented the city the very first olive tree. The city's king, Cecrops, accepted the olive tree, which would later bring Athens wood, oil, food, and prominence in the Mediterranean basin.

As olive trees propagated and covered the lands around the Mediterranean, the Greeks discovered that pressing the fruit yielded a rich, fragrant oil. It was infused with aromatic herbs and fragrances, rubbed on the body to confer strength and longevity, and treasured as a currency for trade.

Not to be outdone by the Greeks, Roman rulers soon ordered the cultivation of olive trees, and Italy enjoyed a robust olive oil trade by the first century. Not surprisingly, it was in Italy that the true culinary promise of olive oil was realized. Early Romans are credited with first using the oil as a condiment, drizzling it over roasted game, lentils cooked with leeks and coriander, tuna cooked with shallots and mint, or a mixture of herbs, arugula, fresh salted cheese, and peppered vinegar. Early Romans also realized the health benefits of olive oil, and it is said they used it to counteract poisons, heal wounds, and treat digestive problems.

Now, modern researchers have validated some of these early uses along with a heroic list of others: Olive oil is famed for protecting the heart, reducing the risk of cancer, lessening symptoms of arthritis, and controlling blood sugar. Most recently, one study showed that olive oil helps treat bacterial infections that cause gastritis and ulcers—proof that there often exists some truth in mythology.

Harvesting Nature’s Liquid Gold

But people are now focusing on more aesthetic considerations, including flavor, aroma, and color. These vary widely depending on many factors, including the type of olive used and its maturity, the region in which it is grown, and the finesse with which it is processed. Olives contain oil just after they’ve turned a light-green hue; the oil content increases as they ripen. Truly remarkable oils come from olives that have been grown under prime conditions and harvested at just the right stage of ripeness and maturity. Early-harvest oils, when the olives are still green, have a peppery, astringent quality that aficionados describe as grassy, green, bitter, or leafy. These oils are also higher in polyphenols and antioxidants—those healthy compounds we all seek. Later-harvest oils, when the fruit is black and fully ripe, have a lighter, fruity, almost sweet flavor, and may be described as having apple, melon, floral, or peach notes.

Once harvested, olives are immediately transferred to a mill where they’re washed and crushed into a paste, which is pressed to release the oils. The first pressing releases a superlative oil of low acidity; this is the “extra virgin” variety.
Olive oils are made after the harvest in the winter months when it's relatively cold, and the term "cold-pressed" means the paste has not been heated above room temperature before pressing.

**Pairing Color and Flavor with Food**

Based on these factors, olive oils may have hundreds of subtle flavors and nuances—grassy, herbal, woody, floral, and many more. Two qualities that are undesirable in other foods—bitterness and pungency—are prized in olive oil, and appear in most quality oils in varying levels of intensity.

You may also choose an oil based on its intended use. Rich, full-bodied oils with a deep-green hue and robust flavor are best for strong-flavored or spicy foods, game, red meat, stews, and pasta dishes. Smoother, more moderate oils with a fruity or buttery flavor are best as finishing oils on lighter soups, for dipping bread, with lighter pasta dishes, or for drizzling over chicken, seafood, or vegetables. Lighter-colored oils with a milder, more floral flavor are best on dishes that will enhance their subtlety, such as mild, white fish or green salads.

**Olive Oil Goes Global**

Olive trees and, hence, olive oil production, have long been concentrated around the Mediterranean basin. Now, however, in spite of its beginnings in antiquity, the olive tree—and the use of olive oils—has spread through many climes. In the last century especially, people became so enamored of the mythical olive that its cuttings were spread across the globe. The happy result? Olive oils hailing from such far-flung locales as Australia, which yields outstanding olive oils in late summer and early fall when oils from the Northern Hemisphere
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are fading in freshness; as unsurprising as Argentina, where the olive tree spread after it was transported by Conquistadors to Mexico and Peru in the 1500s; and as improbable as Texas, where growing conditions are not unlike the Mediterranean.

A World of Choices

Experiment with these praiseworthy global selections of olive oils—you’ll soon develop your own legendary list.

- **Spain.** Nunez de Prado Organic Extra Virgin Olive Oil, a robust and peppery oil that’s equally comfortable starring in hearty pasta dishes, drizzled into bean stews, or lavished on thick slices of ciabatta.

- **Italy.** Montebello Organic Extra Virgin Olive Oil, a medium-bodied oil with a smooth, sophisticated flavor that lends itself to most uses. Another absolutely divine selection is Manni Organic Olive Oil, an outrageously expensive-but-worth-it selection.

- **Greece.** Divina Extra Virgin Olive Oil from Crete is a pungent, powerful selection that hints of arugula and artichoke, with subtle undertones of garlic and pepper. Lapas Organic Extra Virgin Olive Oil from the Peloponese region is another noteworthy selection.

- **France.** Moulin des Penitents Extra Virgin Olive Oil, Haute-Provence is a smooth, complex selection with undertones of almond, banana, artichoke, and vanilla; drizzle it over grilled vegetables, salads, fresh cheeses, or fish. Julia Child is reported to have favored olive oils from Provence over all others.

- **Portugal.** Carm Grande Escolha Extra Virgin Olive Oil has a grassy, peppery flavor with subtle floral notes; lovely on bread or drizzled over salads, if you like a more pronounced oil.

- **Turkey.** Olivos Extra Virgin Olive Oil is a balanced oil, clean, and fruity, with no harsh or bitter undertones; perfect for all purposes, especially where a less prominent olive taste is called for.

- **Morocco.** Spectrum Organic Extra Virgin Moroccan Wild Harvest Olive Oil is a full, meaty oil with subtle, spicy undertones.

- **Chile.** Petralia Extra Virgin Olive Oil is a complex, balanced selection with fruity undertones and a mellow finish; it’s ideal as a finishing oil, drizzled over fresh cheese, cream soups, or grilled vegetables.

- **Australia.** 34 Degrees Extra Virgin Olive Oil comes from the rich, red soils of southern Australia; a delicate, fruit-forward selection with lush tropical notes and a mellow finish. Perfect for drizzling over salads or as a delicate finishing oil for fresh cheese or white fish.

- **Texas.** Alfresco Extra Virgin Olive Oil is made by First Texas Olive Oil from mission and arbequina olives. This lovely selection was recently lauded by *Saveur* magazine. In their words, “Bold, fresh and fruity, with subtle flavors of melon and banana.” What more can be said?

- **California.** Spectrum Organic Extra Virgin Olive Oil is made from Spanish arbequina olives. This robust oil is full-flavored and rich, with fruit and nut undertones and just enough peppery bite to keep things interesting.