

# OLIVE OIL - MEDITERRANEAN MIRACLE

By WR White

‘Olive oil and Italian recipes go together like stamp and envelope. That’s the analogy used by the Chef de Partie at a ristorante in the North West as he spoke with me about the popularity of what, for centuries, has been a fundamental part of Italian cuisine.

It’s a fact, whether you are in southern Italy or in the north of England, olive oil is in your pizza topping, in your pasta and on your salad. It is also true that although this Italian staple, once branded as ‘liquid gold’ by Homer the Greek poet, dates back to 5000 B.C., it was not grown in Italy before the 18<sup>th</sup> century.

History places the first cultivation of the olive tree in the Middle East. Based on the book of Genesis in the Bible, the tree probably flourished on or near Mount Ararat where it is believed Noah’s Ark came to rest after the flood. The Bible says only when a dove he had released returned with an olive branch, that Noah knew the floods had receded. The olive branch is still regarded as a symbol of peace.

Evidence of the medicinal properties of the olive also comes early in the Bible. In the book of Exodus, the Lord tells Moses how to make an anointing oil of spices and olive oil.

Authoritative sources including ‘Olive Oil Source,’ (OOS) set the olive in Asia Minor more than 6,000 years ago. Arguably among the first plant life to be cultivated, it flourished in several countries including Iran and Syria before spreading across the Mediterranean to Africa and the south of Europe.

Early civilization used olive oil during special ceremonies and for their well being. The oil was used to anoint Greek and Jewish kings and the Greeks used it to anoint winning athletes. As recently as the 2004 Olympics, wreaths of olive leaves and twigs were a prominent feature.

Actually, researchers have surmised that the olive culture spread to the Greeks and then the Romans who along with every conquest seized the paranormal olive and took it back with them.

## **Symbol of Purity**

Apart from the health properties for which its fruit is renowned, the olive tree itself is hardy. The elements including drought and high winds do not impact it. And some if not all varieties of olive trees are very resistant to insects and never require treatment with insecticides. The 2,000 year old olive trees on the Mount of Olives in Jerusalem are a testament to its resilience.

Just as the tree is a symbol of strength and purity so too is its fruit and all around the world, olive oil is an icon of excellence, purity and versatility.

The olive tree is in full bloom from the beginning of spring to early autumn and harvesting usually runs from November to March. Some countries are now turning to mechanical harvesters, but traditionally olives are beaten from the tree with poles and caught in large nets.

The olives are collected and taken in for pressing in most cases the same day since olives not pressed immediately begin to oxidise and ferment.

The fruits are crushed or pressed and the oil is separated from the resulting paste. This first press produces what is known as extra virgin olive oil with its full flavour, colour and nutritional properties. A second and third press produces light virgin and pure virgin oil.

“La Cucina Italiana” reports that Tuscany is an area renowned for the production of extra-virgin olive oil which is universally recognized as being both full-bodied and delicate. “La Cucina Italiana” has an even higher regard for the extra-virgin olive oil produced in the Chianti area of Tuscany. The extra-virgin olive oil from the area is produced with olives of the Frantoio, Moraiolo, Leccino, and Olivastra varieties. And it describes the product as pleasant with a greenish colour. It says the perfume is fruity with overtones of almonds and sometimes of actual olives; the taste is intense, fine, sweet and, in some production areas, slightly pungent.

According to “La Cucina Italiana”, this type of olive oil is perfect for drizzling over hearty vegetable soups and grilled meats.

Pronouncing on the nutritional values of extra-virgin olive oil “La Cucina” says it is the most digestible of the edible fats, it helps to assimilate vitamins A, D and K it contains so-called essential acids that cannot be produced by our own bodies; it slows down the aging process; and it helps bile, liver and intestinal functions.

On olive oil, The European Community gives the following parameters: Extra-virgin olive oil with perfect taste is oil of the highest quality; it has a minimum organoleptic rating of 6.5 out of 10, low acidity (1% or less), and is untreated. Olive oil has a minimum organoleptic rating of 5.5, a maximum of 2% acidity and is untreated.

Olive oil has been and continues to be the subject of a myriad of medical and scientific studies. One such study in the Mediterranean concluded that a lower than expected incidence of heart disease in the surrounding countries had a direct correlation to the high consumption of olive oil in the diet.

Many thousand years ago it was labelled ‘liquid gold’. More recently it has come to be known as the ‘Mediterranean miracle’ and since studies continue to link extra virgin olive oil to the reduction of cholesterol, the lowering of blood pressure, the regulation of the body’s blood sugar levels and oxidation, it could be a long time yet, before we hear the last of this Mediterranean wonder oil.

###