

cooking with  
**olive oil**





Italian Culinary Institute

# cooking with olive oil

America's 27 top chefs  
share their best olive oil recipes

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A Greek vase showing the olive harvest.

## extra-virgin olive oil



Flowering olive branches.

### “Signor Paolo, how is oil made?”

“You pick the olives, wash them, strip the leaves and leave the olives to dry. Crush the olives, reducing them to a pulp, and then mix and press to extract the oil.”

Man has invented various methods for extracting olive oil, but fundamentally the techniques are still those which Cleopatra used to extract oil to make her bewitching perfumes. **The harvest** is a very delicate operation—even the Ancient Romans knew it. In the first century A.D., the historian Pliny wrote, “Take care not to scrape and beat down the olives.” To obtain the best oils, the olives must be picked either by hand or by machines that do not beat or bruise the fruit.

Oils extracted from olives before they are fully ripened have a longer shelf life; these oils are richer in healthy and sensory (appearance, flavor and aromatic) properties. **Harvest time** is generally between early November and late December, and the olives must be processed within 36 hours of being picked. They should not be left in large heaps. All these precautions are needed to delay oxidation as long as possible, since it is a process that causes the oil to age and consequently lose its most significant health-giving and sensory virtues.

A whole range of **crushing** systems has been invented. Olives are processed with grinding wheels made of stone, or with hammers or gears. The entire olive is crushed—the skin, pulp and pit—for the oil to be extracted. This must happen in the shortest time possible and with the least possible exposure to the air in order to delay the start of the oxidation process.

The oil is **extracted** using mechanical or hydraulic presses, with centrifuges that not only extract but also separate it from the vegetation liquid\*. The oil must not be subjected to other types of processing, or it cannot be called virgin olive oil.

### “Paolo, are all olives the same?”

“No, in Italy there are more than 350 types of olive tree.”

The Italian National Center for Research (CNR) is growing 850 different olive cultivars—olives for flowers, wood, table olives and those suitable for oil production at different latitudes. Different cultivars will have an effect on the final flavor of the oil.

\* see glossary, page 203





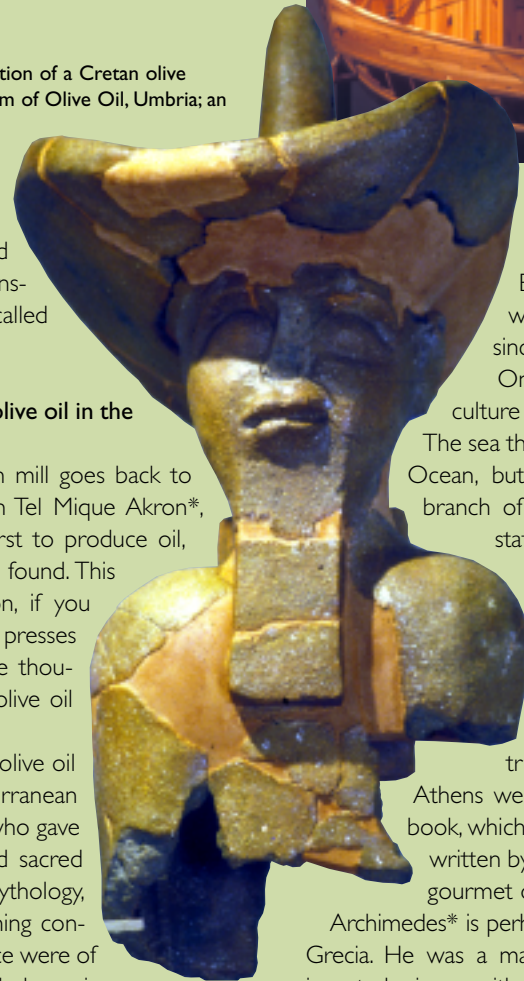
Clockwise from upper right: Reconstruction of a Cretan olive oil merchant ship in the Torgiano Museum of Olive Oil, Umbria; an Etruscan sculpture that was meant to guard the olive groves.

the Egyptians and the Greeks. Their boats were beautiful, decorated with olive branches and built to transport a large quantity of *amphorae* called *pithoi*.\*

**“Excuse me, Mr.V, who produced olive oil in the Middle East?”**

The first recorded oil extraction mill goes back to the year 1000 B.C. in Palestine. In Tel Mique Akron\*, where the Philistines\* were the first to produce oil, over 100 olive presses have been found. This was definitely industrial production, if you consider the fact that these olive presses managed to squeeze between one thousand and three thousand tons of olive oil every year!

The truly distinguished image of olive oil and its major launch in the Mediterranean must be attributed to the Greeks, who gave the tree and the oil a magical and sacred aura that it still possesses today. Mythology, art, trade, funeral rites and everything concerning this ancient plant and its juice were of ultimate importance and demanded maximum respect. Olive trees were protected by the laws of the state. Greeks disseminated these ideas with their great culture all over the world at the time, especially in Magna Grecia.



**“Paolo, what is Magna Grecia?”**

“Modern day Southern Italy: Apulia, Basilicata, Campania, Calabria and Sicily, where people have been farming olives since the fourth century B.C.”

One could compare this spread of Greek culture to immigration from Europe to America. The sea they crossed, however, was not the Atlantic Ocean, but the Adriatic, which is the narrowest branch of the Mediterranean. The *polis*\*, or city-states of ancient Greece, thrived in Greek territory, but they also sought to expand overseas—to Italy. The conquered and colonized Italian territories quickly gained wealth and power thanks to the economy of olive oil, in time achieving independence from their mother country. The most famous and admired chefs in Athens were all Sicilian and the first known cookbook, which provided sanitation and dietary tips, was written by a certain Arcestrato, a Greek poet and gourmet originally from Sicily.

Archimedes\* is perhaps the most famous Greek from Magna Grecia. He was a man of science and a mathematician, and invented mirrors with which one could reflect the sun’s rays and set fire to enemy ships in the harbor. The philosopher and mathematician Pythagoras\* was also Greek, but spent a great deal of his life in Calabria, where he established a community of

\* see glossary, page 203



Upper right: Egyptians were the first to add handles to their vases and *amphorae*. This one dates from 1450 B.C.

Pythagoreans. Plato\*, too, was Greek, but lived in Sicily, where he tested his ideas of democracy explained in “The City of the Sun.” Magna Grecia must have been overflowing with great artists, including those that sculpted the famous bronzes of Riace, discovered a few years ago in Calabria just yards from the beach.

**“Signor Villoresi, does all Italian olive oil come from the South?”**

“Today, oil is made in almost all regions of Italy, but at that time it was mostly the Etruscans from Umbria, Tuscany, Northern Latium and a part of Emilia-Romagna, who were primarily navigators, merchants, farmers and artists.”

\* see glossary, page 203

When the Greeks conquered the colonies of Magna Grecia, these Etruscans were the main producers and exporters of wheat and oil in the Mediterranean, and Roman historians speak of them often. In the first century A.D., Pliny the Elder\* told us that the Etruscans were already successfully growing olive trees during the reign of King Tarquino Prisco, one of the seven kings of Rome, all of whom were most likely Etruscan.

The Romans conquered the people of Magna Grecia, deposing the resident Etruscans. The combination of these two great olive oil producing powers made the Romans into the greatest producers of olive oil in the civilized world. The Romans organized olive farming and oil production throughout the regions



## olive oil in the kitchen

*One day the trees held a meeting to elect their ruler. They said to the olive tree, "Reign over all of us." The olive tree replied, "Why would I give up my oil, with which I honor the Lord and feed mankind, to reign over other trees?"*

—Judges 9:8-9

**With the modesty** and tenacity of the biblical olive tree, I assure you that extra-virgin olive oil is simply the best type of dietary fat. Ancient people recognized its nutritional value, but in 1977 an American professor proved the effectiveness of olive oil in the prevention of arteriosclerosis and heart attacks. Dr. Ancel Keys was the first to affirm the importance of the "Mediterranean diet," in which extra-virgin olive oil plays a fundamental role.

**"Seed oils are cheaper and I'm used to them. Why use olive oil?"**

"There are many reasons. For instance:

- 1 Because olive oil is the only oil produced just by pressing the source (i.e., the olive fruit), with no physical or chemical manipulation. All seed oils are produced by extraction using solvents like butane or propane and with special equipment.
- 2 Because olive oil contains relatively little linoleic acid, a substance that the human body only processes in small quantities. Olive oil is also a monounsaturated fat, while seed oils are richer in linoleic acid and polyunsaturated fats.
- 3 Because olive oil successfully withstands the high temperatures required for cooking while the unsaturated fatty acids in seed oils become harmful for the human body.
- 4 Olive oil can reduce LDL ("bad") cholesterol and maintain HDL ("good") cholesterol, which diminishes the risk of clogged arteries.
- 5 Olive oil reduces gastric acidity and helps bile function, thus reducing the risk of gallstone formation.
- 6 Olive oil encourages normal bone growth in children.

All these qualities constitute just a small part of the current research and are just the tip of the health iceberg that this tiny fruit has been bringing humans for thousands of years."

A freshly baked *porrata*, or leek pizza.

