

Cooking with Olives

By Wendy Gist



Even Hippocrates knew that olives, now a key ingredient of the Mediterranean diet, are not only delicious but also nutritious.





The early kings of the Jews were anointed with olive oil. Mohammed, Prophet of Islam, counseled his followers to apply olive oil to their bodies. Christians use holy oil, often that of the olive, in baptisms. Olives are more than just a food—they're considered holy by the three major religions of the West. The olive is one of the world's oldest cultivated trees, dating back some 6,000 years, before the invention of written language. Native to Asia Minor, the olive branched out from Iran, Syria, and Palestine to the rest of the Mediterranean. In Greece, according to legend, the goddess Athena graced humanity with a gift of the olive. Since olives are an integral part of the Mediterranean diet, maybe they should play a role in your healthy diet, too.

From the family Oleaceae, the tree is subtropical and contains about 900 species. The olive tree doesn't bear fruit for four to eight years or achieve full potential for about 15 to 20 years. Thousand-year-old trees can still be found in the Mediterranean region, and olives have existed in the wild for some 14,000 years.

Christian missionaries carried the olive tree to California, where they used the fruit for food and ceremonial purposes. *The Olive in California: History of an Immigrant Tree* by Judith Taylor, MD, provides a detailed account of a ruined mission with a producing olive grove in 1842, but one source indicates that the olive appeared in California as early as 1769.

NUTRITIOUS AND DELICIOUS

Olives are so tasty that some people find it hard to believe they're healthy, but even the ancient Greek physician Hippocrates referred to olive oil as "the great therapeutic." A nutritional powerhouse, olives are a good source of iron, dietary fiber, and copper. These juicy bites contain a good dose of phytonutrient compounds known as polyphenols and flavonoids that boast anti-inflammatory activities. Olives are rich in monounsaturated fats, and eating them may help reduce the intensity of a number of health problems, including asthma, osteoarthritis, rheumatoid arthritis, and hot flashes in menopausal women.

Don't let their fat content alarm you. Monounsaturated fats are considered downright healthy and may even improve blood cholesterol levels. According to the Harvard School of Public Health, "In studies in which polyunsaturated and monounsaturated fats were eaten in place of carbohydrates, these good fats decreased LDL [low-density lipoprotein] levels [bad cholesterol] and increased HDL [high-density lipoprotein] levels [good cholesterol]."

"Olives are a great way to change the type of fat in your diet," says Susan Mitchell, PhD, RD, FADA, coauthor of *Fat is Not Your*

Fate. "Since the majority of fat in olives is monounsaturated, (the more heart-healthy type) you can replace or decrease the amount of saturated fat in your diet by including olives."

An average jumbo olive has about seven calories and one half gram of fat, while the larger colossal olive has about 12 calories and one gram of fat. Approximately 75 percent of the fat is monounsaturated. Small olives average four to five calories and less than half a gram of fat per olive, the majority being from monounsaturated fat.

"They also contain a small amount of vitamin E as well as 75 [for jumbo] to 135 [for colossal] milligrams of sodium per olive—an important thing to keep in mind for those watching their sodium intake," says Mitchell. Even better, "both olives and olive oil contain substantial amounts of other compounds deemed to be anticancer agents..." according to a 2004 study in the *European Journal of Cancer Prevention*.

THE PROCESS

It's hard to believe these little fruits cannot be eaten straight off the tree. Olives must undergo various processing to reduce bitterness before ready to be eaten. Fermentation, brine-curing, dry-curing, oil-curing, water-curing, and lye-curing are methods to do so. Green olives are soaked in a lye solution before preserved in salt water. A large amount of the olive crop is used to make olive oil, a process during which olives are pitted, ground to a pulp, and pressed to remove juices.

KNOW THY OLIVE

Olives are grown commercially around the globe, but Mediterranean countries produce most of the world's crop. Myriad varieties differ in size, shape, looks, and taste—ranging from bitter to sharp to sweet. Today, five important varieties are grown in the United States, predominately in California where almost all American olives are produced. To become better acquainted with the variety of olives, experiment with these top five easy-to-find picks:

ASCOLANO

This big, light green olive is native to Italy. When ripe, the fruit is tender with a slight bitter flavor. It is brine-cured and may have a salty bite. The Ascolano is served as an hors d'oeuvre to arouse the appetite and added to pasta and antipasto dishes for gusto.

BAROUNI

Initially from Tunisia, the Barouni is the most versatile olive in the world. These round, large green olives with a fruity flavor are commonly shipped to those who make home-cured olives.

“The olive tree is surely
the richest gift of Heaven.”

–*Thomas Jefferson*



The Cultural Olive

Arab countries:

Muncachita salad is made from the pulp of oranges, sliced onions, and halved olives. Mix the ingredients with olive oil and spice with salt and pepper.

Greece:

The famous Greek salad is made from pulpy black olives, lettuce, tomatoes, and feta cheese.

Italy:

Olives are chopped into small pieces and boiled with broccoli and cauliflower to make the Sicilian sauce putanesca, which is added to spaghetti.

South America:

Onion and sweet peppers are oiled and added to a puree of stewed tomatoes. Crushed olives are added to the mix and boiled for 10 to 15 minutes. Season the “Creole” sauce to taste with wine, salt, and pepper and usually served with meat.

Turkey:

Olives are used as pie filling.



MANZANILLO

Produced in Spain and California, Manzanillo is also known as the Spanish olive. The oval-shaped fruit is greenish-brown and changes to a bluish-black when ripe. The pitted olive is brine-cured. The firm meaty texture offers an unforgettable flavor similar to that of an almond and can be bitter or smoky. It's delicious stuffed with pimento or garlic and is perfect for scrumptious appetizers and salty garnishes for alcoholic beverages. This one is traditionally plunged into a martini. Manzanillos are enjoyed in breads as well.

MISSION

A common olive, the Mission is medium-sized, bitter, and deep purple but turns black when it ripens. It's enticing served with table cheeses and is used for cold-pressed olive oil.

SEVILLANO

A large, bright green olive from Spain, the Sevillano is known as Spanish Queen, Queen, and Gordal. It's a purple to blue-black color when it's ripe, it's processed as a pleasant table olive, and it has a good meaty texture. The Sevillano, used to Sicilian-style salt-brined cured olives, is the type most often canned.

Don't miss out on an alluring assortment: Think Alphonso (Chile), Botilla (Peru), Kalamata (Greece), Nicoise (France) when writing out your shopping list. They're available year-round, and you can find a wide variety at gourmet shops, supermarkets, and from growers. You can also purchase them online at <http://greatolives.com>, www.dibruno.com, and www.oliveshoppe.com.

A CULINARY DELIGHT

Olives add flair to almost any meal when used in tapenade, pate, sauce, pizza, salad, and with poultry and fish. The tender morsels make perfect fret-free appetizers, ready to place on the table to enjoy in a flash. Pick Ascolano or Manzanillo green olives and Kalamata or Mission black olives.

Many experts agree it's better to add olives to a dish at the last minute since they can turn bitter if cooked too long.

Celebrity Chef Carlo Cavallo opened Sonoma-Meritage Martini Oyster Bar & Grill in the heart of Sonoma County, California, so he could take advantage of year-round abundance of locally grown fresh products, artisan food producers, superior wines, and, of course, olives. He shares a tip you won't want to forget: “When cooking with cured olives, be sure not to season with salt until the very end of the cooking process.” Olives, he explains, release salt as they cook, so you'll probably need less salt. Try these tempting olive recipes and you'll soon be looking for more and more ways to enjoy the taste and reap the nutritional benefits of this ancient fruit.



Herb-Encrusted Lamb Lion

You can easily prepare Carlo Cavallo's elegant and flavorful lamb lion dish to impress any dinner crowd. This winning recipe will have guests asking for more. Serve it with roasted vegetable terrine and a cabernet reduction sauce.

Roasted Vegetable Terrine

- 1 eggplant, cubed
- 2 zucchinis, cubed
- 2 Roma tomatoes, cubed
- 1 red onion, cubed
- 2 red bell peppers
- 1/2 cup of goat cheese
- 1/4 cup olive oil
- 1/2 cup julienne basil
- Salt and pepper

Preheat oven to 400 degrees. On a sheet pan, add all the vegetables and oil. Roast until vegetables are al dente, approximately 20 minutes. Remove from heat and let cool. In a mixing bowl, combine the goat cheese, basil, salt, and pepper to taste. Place in six oil-brushed ramekins (six ounces) and keep warm.

Lamb Loin

- 3 lamb noisettes
- Salt and fresh ground pepper to taste
- 3 tablespoons of fresh chopped rosemary
- 4 garlic cloves, chopped

Encrust the meat with rosemary and garlic, sprinkle with salt and pepper. Grill for three to four minutes on each side. Set aside, covered with aluminum foil.

Cabernet Reduction Sauce

- 3 chopped shallots
- 3 tablespoons of olive oil
- 1 bunch thyme
- 1 1/2 cups of Cabernet Sauvignon
- 1/2 cup chopped Kalamata olives

In a saucepan on medium low heat, caramelize the shallots in olive oil with the thyme. After about seven minutes (be sure not to let the shallots burn), add the Cabernet Sauvignon and the olives. Increase the heat to high and reduce the volume by three quarters. Add the demi-glaze and strain through a sieve.





Plating the Final Dish

Slice the lamb loin on a diagonal bias on a 12-inch plate, unmold the vegetable terrines, feather the lamb slices, and top with cabernet reduction sauce.

Serves six

Striped Bass Baked in Parchment

Carlo Cavallo's pleasing entrée is cooked with Kalamata olives and extra virgin olive oil. You can't go wrong with this robust favorite.

- 4 pieces of parchment 18 x 18 inches (aluminum foil can be substituted)
- 4 striped bass, whole, 1 1/2 pound each (cleaned and scaled; 2 pounds of fillets can be substituted for the whole fish)
- Salt and pepper to taste
- 8 cloves garlic
- 4 sprigs fresh thyme
- 3 lemons
- 1/2 cup pitted Kalamata olives
- 1 basket of heirloom cherry tomatoes
- 4 baby artichokes, cleaned, trimmed, and quartered (you can substitute artichoke hearts)
- 1 fennel bulb, thinly sliced
- 1/2 cup white wine
- 1/4 cup lemon juice
- 1/4 bunch of chopped Italian parsley
- 1/4 cup extra virgin olive oil

Preheat oven to 450 degrees. Start by folding the parchment paper in half; open it up like a book. In the center of the right side, place the bass and salt and pepper the cavity. Stuff each bass with two cloves garlic, thyme sprig, and lemon slices. Top each bass with Kalamata olives, tomatoes, artichokes, and fennel. Drizzle with white wine and fold the parchment by closing it like a book. Pinch and roll the edges in until you get a calzone-shaped parchment that is sealed. Place in the oven and bake for at least 20 minutes or until the parchment turns a toasted color. In a small bowl, add the lemon juice and parsley. Slowly whisk in the extra virgin olive oil until an infusion forms. Add salt and pepper to taste.

Remove the fish from the oven and serve immediately. Take the fish out of parchment and place on plate, drizzle the fish with olive oil and lemon infusion. Place the vegetable topping on plate. Serves four

Kalamata Olive Hummus

Beverly Lynn Bennett, a vegan chef, food writer, and author who prefers to cook with organics, raw foods, and alternative grains, created this tasty appetizer and spread that can also be used as a filling for sandwiches or veggies. The slight saltiness of the Kalamata olives and pungent richness of aged balsamic vinegar combine to provide a wonderful contrast to the flavors of a traditional Middle Eastern hummus.

- 1 cup Kalamata olives, pitted
- 2 15-ounce cans chickpeas, rinsed and drained
- 6-8 large cloves garlic
- 1/3 cup balsamic vinegar
- 1/4 cup lemon juice
- 3 tablespoons filtered water
- 3 tablespoons raw tahini
- 2 tablespoons olive oil
- 1 teaspoon ground cumin
- 1/2 teaspoon sea salt
- 1/4 teaspoon freshly ground black pepper
- 1/4 cup fresh chopped parsley

Roughly chop the olives and set aside 2 cup. In a food processor, place the remaining chopped olives, chickpeas, garlic, balsamic vinegar, lemon juice, water, tahini, olive oil, and seasonings and process one to two minutes until smooth and creamy. Scrape down the sides of the container, add parsley, and process an additional 30 seconds. Transfer hummus to a medium bowl, stir in reserved chopped olives, and serve. Serve with pita bread or assorted raw vegetables for a snack or appetizer, or use as a filling for sandwiches, wraps, or hollowed-out or sliced vegetables. Store hummus in an airtight container in the refrigerator for up to one week or in the freezer for several months.

Yield: 4 cups





Green Olive and Almond Relish

Joanne Weir is a James Beard award-winning cookbook author, a cooking teacher, and a chef. She was awarded the first IACP (International Association of Culinary Professionals) Julia Child Cooking Teacher Award of Excellence. Her green olive and almond relish is delicious with grilled chicken, fish, and vegetables, and works equally well as a dip with pita. It's perfect to have on hand when guests arrive.

- ❶ 2 anchovy fillets, soaked in cold water for ten minutes and patted dry.
- ❷ 1/2 cup pitted and finely chopped green olives
- ❸ 1/2 cup toasted and chopped almonds
- ❹ 1 clove garlic, minced
- ❺ 1/2 cup chopped fresh flat leaf parsley
- ❻ 1 tablespoon white wine vinegar
- ❼ 2 tablespoons lemon juice
- ❽ 4 tablespoons extra virgin olive oil
- ❾ Salt and freshly ground black pepper

Tips for Cooking with Olives

Before Cooking:

Keep in mind that oil-cured olives are better for cooking than eating raw due to their bitter flavor. The most common are black Moroccan olives, easy to spot by their dark, wrinkly skin.

To pit olives, press the flat blade of a knife on the olive, break the meat, and remove the pit.

“Even if the olives are said to be pitted, still check for yourself by either roughly chopping or cutting through each one before using it in your favorite recipe,” recommends Beverly Lynn Bennett, a vegan chef in Eugene, Oregon, and coauthor of *The Complete Idiot’s Guide to Vegan Living*. “Not only can a pit ruin your enjoyment of a dish, you can even crack a tooth!” she says.

The Cooking Phase:

The brine in which olives soak may be used as a replacement for salted water in recipes.

If you must fry, try frying in olive oil, which coats foods rather than absorbs into them.

After Cooking:

Store olives (in their own liquid) in air-tight, nonmetal containers. Keep in the refrigerator for freshness.

Mash the anchovies and place in a small bowl. Add the olives, almonds, minced garlic, parsley, white wine vinegar, lemon juice, and olive oil. Mix well. Season with salt, pepper, and additional lemon juice for taste. Makes approximately 1 1/2 cup.
Serves six