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The Miracle of Olive Oil

Written by Dr Penny Stanway

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THE MIRACLE OF OLIVE OIL

Practical Tips for
HEALTH, HOME
& BEAUTY

DR PENNY STANWAY



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*This book is dedicated to every cook whose effort
and thoughtfulness make the most of the oils, vinegars,
fruits, vegetables, meat, fish, grains, sugars and spices
that we are so blessed to have.*

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Introduction

Is olive oil truly a miracle, you may ask? Well, arguably it is – if we define a miracle as an amazing or wonderful occurrence.

Olive oil's colour is attractive, its smell is delightful, its flavour is luscious and unusual, its feel in the mouth and on the skin is sensual and its light (from an olive-oil lamp) is soft and glowing. In addition, olive oil (as part of a healthy diet) can help to prevent and treat many ailments, thanks to constituents such as its monounsaturated fats and antioxidant polyphenols.

In this book there is much to discover about olive oil, including where it comes from, what is in it, its health benefits, and its use as a beauty aid and in cooking. Finally, there are lots of recipes, all of them containing olive oil as an important ingredient.

So valuable a commodity has olive oil been over the centuries that it is easy to understand why Homer called olive oil 'liquid gold' in the 'Odyssey', and why the 'father' of medicine, Hippocrates, referred to it as 'the great healer'.

CHAPTER 1

Olive oil

This hugely popular oil comes from the fruits of the olive tree, which is known to botanists as *Olea europaea* – ‘olea’ being Latin for ‘oil’. The fruits are olives, and both their pulp and their stones are oily; indeed, oil forms 12–30 per cent of the fruit pulp and 10–12 per cent of the stone, depending on the ripeness and variety. Besides being oily, olives are also bitter, thanks mainly to a substance called oleuropein. Some of this is present in olive oil, making this slightly bitter too.

Olive oil is highly prized as a food, a source of light (when burned in a lamp), a medicine and a beauty aid. For millennia it has been carried up and down the trading routes of Asia and Europe. Christopher Columbus took olive oil to America in 1492, and today it is exported from olive-growing countries to consumers around the world, with its markets growing year by year. However, consumers are also becoming more sophisticated in their choice of olive oil and are seeking higher grades that have more flavour as well as a higher content of polyphenols and other health-giving substances.

History

Experts have dated fossilized olive leaves found on certain Greek islands to an astonishing 50–60,000 years old! Many believe that wild olive trees first grew in what is now eastern Turkey, though others think they originated in North Africa. Olive trees were eventually cultivated in order to improve their yield.

Phoenician, Roman and Arabic traders took olive trees to nearby countries, known today as Algeria, France, Greece, Iran, Iraq, Israel, Italy, Lebanon, Libya, Morocco, Pakistan, Portugal, Saudi Arabia, Spain, Syria and Tunisia. Spanish and Portuguese explorers exported olive trees to the West Indies in the 15th and 16th centuries and later to the Americas. In the late 18th century, Franciscan missionaries introduced them to California. Today, olive trees are also grown in Australia, China, Japan and South Africa, but the country that produces more olive oil than anywhere else is Spain, with Greece and Italy tying in second place.

Geography

Olive trees require hot dry summers, mild wet winters, well-drained soil, enough wind for pollination, and irrigation during the growing season. All these conditions are found in Mediterranean countries and at equivalent distances from the Equator in the Americas, Africa and Australia.

Symbolism

The olive tree, or often just an olive branch (as in ‘offering an olive branch’), is sometimes used as a symbol of peace. The tree is also a

symbol of wisdom. Picasso's image of a dove carries a sprig from an olive tree. The olive is a sign of peace, friendship, wisdom, glory, power, fertility and purity. Kings and queens are anointed with olive oil to symbolize their authority. And two other names for Jesus – the 'Messiah' and the 'Christ' – mean 'one anointed with olive oil' in Hebrew and Greek, respectively.

Olive oil in the last 50 years

Around 50 years ago, scientists linked the traditional diet in southern Italy and Crete with a reduced risk of heart disease. Since then, others have associated this with a reduced risk of many other health conditions. This diet is dubbed the 'Mediterranean Diet', and olive oil is one of several of its components that aid health. Indeed, Cretans consume a very large amount of olive oil, with figures from 1996 revealing that the average Cretan adult consumed 31 litres (more than 54 pints) a year.

Other studies (see Chapter 4) suggest that olive oil on its own can also aid good health.

During the last 50 years there has been exponential interest around the world in using fresh, well-produced culinary ingredients, such as extra virgin olive oil. And just as some people delight in getting to know and enjoy different wines, so, too, are increasing numbers of people now fascinated by tasting and using different olive oils.