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**Amy Riolo**  
**Simon Poole, MD**

Authors of *Diabetes For Dummies* and  
world-renowned olive oil experts





# Olive Oil

by Amy Riolo and  
Simon Poole, MD

for  
**dummies**<sup>®</sup>  
A Wiley Brand

## Olive Oil For Dummies®

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# Recipes at a Glance

## Base Recipes

☞ Italian Soffritto/French Mirepoix . . . . .	218
☞ Cajun Holy Trinity and Spanish Sofrito . . . . .	219
☞ Aglione . . . . .	220
☞ Toux/Lebanese-Style Garlic Sauce . . . . .	221
☞ Salad Dressing/Vinaigrette . . . . .	223
☞ Aioli . . . . .	224
☞ Tapenade . . . . .	225
☞ Salsa di pomodoro/Fresh Tomato Sauce . . . . .	226
☞ Pesto/Fresh Basil and Pine Nut “Sauce” . . . . .	227
☞ Vegetable Stock . . . . .	228
Chicken Stock . . . . .	229

## Breakfast and Brunch

☞ Citrus-Spice Muffins with Olive Oil . . . . .	234
☞ Almond and Orange Biscotti . . . . .	236
☞ Artichoke, Caramelized Onion, and Tomato-Basil Frittata . . . . .	238
☞ Avocado Toast with Olive Oil, Sea Salt, and Flaxseeds . . . . .	240
☞ Chocolate Banana Bread . . . . .	241

## Appetizers

☞ Bravas-Style Potatoes with Aioli . . . . .	246
☞ Roman Risotto Croquettes . . . . .	248
☞ Zucchini Fritters with Pesto Sauce . . . . .	250
☞ Golden Potato, Pecorino, and Olive Croquettes . . . . .	252
☞ Sicilian Caponata . . . . .	254

## First Courses

☞ Cream of Cauliflower with Chile-Infused Olive Oil . . . . .	257
☞ Carrot and Cardamom Risotto with Burrata and Pistachios . . . . .	259
☞ Barley, Lentil, and Chickpea Soup . . . . .	261
☞ Linguine with Olive Tapenade and Pecorino . . . . .	262
☞ Busiate Pasta with Sicilian Pesto . . . . .	263

## Second Courses

- 🍷 Greek-Island Style White Bean and Feta Puree with Olive Oil-Sautéed Dandelion Greens . . . . . 267
- Milanese-Style Veal Scallopine with Creamy Polenta and Brussels Sprouts . . . . . 269
- Seafood Kabobs with Salsa Verde and Grilled Summer Vegetables. . . . . 271
- Fresh Fish Poached in Olive Oil with Sun-dried Red Pesto and Broccolini . . . 273
- Herb Roasted Chicken with Chestnuts, Shallots, and Fennel. . . . . 275

## Desserts

- 🍷 Sweet Olive Oil and Red Wine Taralli Cookies . . . . . 278
- 🍷 Olive Oil-Poached Pears with Dark Chocolate Mousse and Sea Salt . . . . 280
- 🍷 Ricotta, Limoncello, Almond, and Olive Oil Cake. . . . . 282
- 🍷 EVOO and Chili Infused Chocolate Brownies. . . . . 283
- 🍷 Olive Oil Gelato with Homemade Chocolate Taggiasca Sauce . . . . . 284

# Table of Contents

<b>INTRODUCTION</b> .....	1
About This Book .....	2
Foolish Assumptions.....	4
Icons Used in This Book.....	4
Beyond the Book.....	5
Where to Go from Here .....	5
<b>PART 1: INTRODUCTION TO OLIVE OIL</b> .....	7
<b>CHAPTER 1: Exploring the Story of Olive Oil</b> .....	9
Defining the Olive Tree throughout its History.....	10
From wilderness to farm .....	10
From ship to shore .....	12
Shaping ancient empires .....	12
Religious and culinary influences .....	17
Recognizing the New World of Olive Oil .....	21
Groves going west .....	21
Expansion into Asia and beyond.....	23
Olive oil in Africa .....	23
<b>CHAPTER 2: Understanding Olive Oil Classifications</b> .....	25
Recognizing the classifications of olive oil.....	26
Olive oil categories .....	26
Classification standards .....	29
Defining Other Olive Oil Standards .....	31
Australia .....	32
NAOOA .....	32
OOC .....	32
PDO/DOP .....	33
IGP/PGI .....	34
Slow Food Presidia .....	35
Organic .....	35
<b>CHAPTER 3: Appreciating the Production Process</b> .....	37
Producing the Best Product.....	38
Tree care and maintenance .....	38
Keeping enemies at bay .....	39
Environmental challenges .....	39
Harvest time.....	40

Processing at the Mill . . . . .	44
Juicing the fruit . . . . .	45
Waste not, want not . . . . .	46
Storing at the mill . . . . .	47
Maintaining “Green” Groves . . . . .	48
Built-in sustainability of olive trees . . . . .	48
Sustainable farming . . . . .	49
Modern mills . . . . .	50
<b>CHAPTER 4: Explaining Quality and Comparisons with Other Oils . . . . .</b>	<b>53</b>
Recognizing Quality Olive Oil . . . . .	54
Olive oil fraud . . . . .	54
Defective olive oil . . . . .	56
Testing Criteria for EVOO . . . . .	57
Tasting panels and laboratory tests . . . . .	58
Sensory categories . . . . .	59
Comparing EVOO to Other Oils . . . . .	61
What makes EVOO different . . . . .	61
Bioactive compounds in EVOO . . . . .	62
<b>PART 2: HOW OLIVE OIL IMPROVES HEALTH . . . . .</b>	<b>65</b>
<b>CHAPTER 5: Choosing Healthy Fats . . . . .</b>	<b>67</b>
Identifying Different Types of Fat . . . . .	68
Correlating fats to cholesterol and health . . . . .	69
Understanding how fats relate to calories and weight . . . . .	72
Determining the Benefits of Eating Healthy Fats . . . . .	74
Olive oil: A fat for life . . . . .	75
Other foods that contain nutrient-rich fats . . . . .	76
<b>CHAPTER 6: Incorporating Antioxidant and Anti- Inflammatory Polyphenols . . . . .</b>	<b>79</b>
Understanding Polyphenols . . . . .	80
Plants have a survival instinct . . . . .	81
Polyphenols and inflammation . . . . .	83
Knowing the Extraordinary Polyphenols in EVOO . . . . .	86
Naturally high in polyphenols . . . . .	86
Conditions that effect the levels of olive polyphenols . . . . .	87

<b>CHAPTER 7: Recognizing Olive Oil’s Role in the Mediterranean Diet</b>	89
Focusing on Olive Oil as the Primary Ingredient	90
Reflecting on the extraordinary benefits	90
Measuring the effects of the diet	95
Considering Olive Oil as Medicine	97
Ancient olive-oil treatments	97
Mediterranean cultural practices	98
<b>CHAPTER 8: Maximizing the Health Benefits of Olive Oil</b>	101
Examining the Benefits of EVOO	102
The protective power of olive oil	103
Discovering the compounds in EVOO	108
Tasting the polyphenols of EVOO	111
Knowing Your Daily Intake	112
Increasing the Efficacy	113
Combining EVOO with other nutritional foods	113
Having a healthy gut	114
<b>PART 3: INCORPORATING OLIVE OIL INTO YOUR DAILY LIFE</b>	117
<b>CHAPTER 9: Tasting Olive Oil Properly</b>	119
Considering the Flavor Profiles	120
Enjoying the flavor	120
Understanding flavor features	121
Matching taste with health benefits	126
Working with the Best EVOO	127
Becoming a defect detective	128
Taking a deeper dive into EVOOs chemistry	128
<b>CHAPTER 10: Deciphering the Taste of Different Varieties</b>	131
Checking Out Varieties of Olive Oil	132
Discovering cultivars in different countries	133
Blending flavors	142
Considering total polyphenol levels	142
Beginning to Combine EVOOs with Foods	144
<b>CHAPTER 11: Pairing Extra-Virgin Olive Oil with Food and Wine</b>	147
Understanding How to Complement Flavors	148
Pairing EVOO with Food	148
Matching EVOOs with Wine	151

## **PART 4: CHOOSING EXTRA-VIRGIN OLIVE OIL . . . . . 157**

### **CHAPTER 12: Buying Extra-Virgin Olive Oil . . . . . 159**

Deciphering the Labels. . . . .	160
Nutrition labels . . . . .	160
Legal necessities . . . . .	162
Unnecessary or misleading phrases on labels . . . . .	163
Harvest and “best before” dates . . . . .	164
Acidity and other values . . . . .	165
Getting to Know Your EVOO . . . . .	167
Region of origin . . . . .	167
Telling the origin story . . . . .	167
Health claims on labels and advertising. . . . .	168

### **CHAPTER 13: Recognizing Proper Packaging and Storage . . . . . 171**

Recognizing a Good EVOO Label. . . . .	172
Looking out for quality indicators. . . . .	172
Having attractive presentations . . . . .	173
Maintaining EVOO’s Quality. . . . .	175
EVOO retail packaging. . . . .	176
Advances in EVOO packaging . . . . .	178
Maximizing storage at home . . . . .	179

### **CHAPTER 14: Purchasing, Price, and Affordability . . . . . 181**

Prioritizing the Purchase of EVOO . . . . .	182
Comparing affordability: Western diet versus Mediterranean-style diets . . . . .	182
Supporting the cost of EVOO. . . . .	183
Evaluating purchasing options . . . . .	184
Examining prices and value . . . . .	189
Choosing the quality of EVOO . . . . .	189
Understanding the EVOO market . . . . .	192
Getting the Most Out of Your EVOO. . . . .	193

## **PART 5: CREATING DISHES WITH EXTRA-VIRGIN OLIVE OIL. . . . . 195**

### **CHAPTER 15: Cooking, Frying, and Preserving with Extra-Virgin Olive Oil . . . . . 197**

Cooking with EVOO for Flavor and Nutrition . . . . .	198
Understanding the science. . . . .	199
Exploring the cooking methods. . . . .	200
Frying in EVOO. . . . .	202
Preserving Food in EVOO. . . . .	205

<b>CHAPTER 16: Baking and Pastry-Making with Extra-Virgin Olive Oil</b> .....	207
Swapping Out Butter for EVOO .....	208
Choosing EVOO for Breads and Sweet Treats .....	210

## **PART 6: COOKING WITH EXTRA-VIRGIN OLIVE OIL** .....

<b>CHAPTER 17: Base Recipes</b> .....	217
<b>CHAPTER 18: Breakfast and Brunch</b> .....	231
Starting Your Day with a Shot of EVOO .....	232
Working EVOO into Your Morning Routine .....	232
<b>CHAPTER 19: Appetizers</b> .....	243
<b>CHAPTER 20: First Courses</b> .....	255
<b>CHAPTER 21: Second Courses</b> .....	265
<b>CHAPTER 22: Desserts</b> .....	277

## **PART 7: DIVING DEEPER AND THE FUTURE FOR OLIVE OIL** .....

<b>CHAPTER 23: Enrolling in Tasting/Sommelier Classes and Oleo Tourism</b> .....	289
Tasting at a Whole New Level .....	290
Sampling olive oil in an informal setting .....	291
Approaching EVOO like a pro: sommelier training .....	291
The language of aroma and flavor .....	292
Discovering Oleo Tourism .....	293
Planning your visit to a grove .....	294
Combining travel experiences .....	295
Tasting at the mill .....	296
<b>CHAPTER 24: The Future of Olive Oil</b> .....	299
Cultivating Better Production and Quality .....	300
Identifying new innovations .....	300
Improving standards and traceability .....	301
Spreading the Great News of EVOO .....	302
Promoting the health benefits of EVOO .....	303
Creating opportunities for further education .....	304

<b>PART 8: THE PART OF TENS</b> .....	309
<b>CHAPTER 25: Ten Other Uses for Olive Oil</b> .....	311
Bathing in olive oil.....	313
Removing Makeup.....	313
Glossing and Nourishing Your Hair.....	314
Shaving Oil.....	314
Making Facial Masks.....	314
Treating Your Hair.....	316
Exfoliating Your Skin.....	316
Conditioning Your Hands.....	317
Moisturizing Your Skin.....	317
Cleansing Makeup Brushes.....	318
<b>CHAPTER 26: Ten Easy Ways to Consume More Extra-Virgin Olive Oil</b> .....	319
Cooking with EVOO.....	320
Drizzling for Added Flavor.....	320
Prioritizing Your Health.....	321
Eating More Vegetables and Salads.....	321
Consuming EVOO throughout the Day.....	322
Substituting with EVOO.....	322
Introducing Children to EVOO.....	323
Exploring New Tastes and Varieties.....	323
Redefining the Value of EVOO.....	324
Continuing Your Journey through Travel.....	324
<b>APPENDIX: METRIC CONVERSION GUIDE</b> .....	325
<b>INDEX</b> .....	327

# Introduction

*La produzione dell'olio non è solo un mestiere, è una tradizione. L'oliva non è solo un frutto: è una reliquia. (The production of olive oil isn't only a profession, it's a tradition, the olive isn't only a fruit: its an heirloom.)*

—PREDRAG MATVEJEVIC, BREVIARIO  
MEDITERRANEO (GARZANTI LIBRI)

**O**lives are the ingredient most commonly associated with the Mediterranean diet — and that's for a good reason! There are more than 950 million olive trees in the region, comprising the majority of the world's total. It is said that 25 to 40 percent of the daily caloric intake of people in the Mediterranean region has traditionally come from olive oil.

To us, olive oil is much more than a favorite culinary ingredient to savor and promote, it's truly liquid gold — brimming with tradition, history, lore, and nutrition. Olive oil is a common bond that unites the people of the entire Mediterranean region not only to each other, but also to the world at large. In addition to being the fat of choice that we use to cook with, good-quality extra-virgin olive oil is essential in our personal care and health rituals as well. Our shared passion for the olive fruit has given olive oil a starring role in both of our careers and led us to begin working together years ago. We've both written on the topic extensively in our previous works as well as our trilogy of diabetes books for the *For Dummies* series and are known as worldwide experts on the topic. (Additionally, Simon is an international authority, teacher, and medical consultant on olive oil; and Amy has her own brand of private label olive oil and co-leads cuisine and culture tours to olive-producing countries.)

Olive trees are an especially important form of cultural heritage which ties us to the land, our ancestors, and future generations while providing shade, beauty, industry, and good health. While giving a joint presentation on the role of extra-virgin olive oil

and the Mediterranean Diet in preventing and treating diabetes, we laid the foundation for a professional partnership that would allow us to discuss not only a favorite topic, but also the keys to cooking and living with both pleasure and health in mind.

## About This Book

People all over the world are beginning to value olive oil's unique and extraordinary place in the Mediterranean diet and embrace its exquisite flavors and powerful health benefits. According to data from the European Commission, the United States Department of Agriculture, and the International Olive Council, olive oil is one of the fastest growing global industries, and the United States is the second largest consumer in the world.

The key to getting the most from the juice of the fruit of this ancient tree is through understanding its past and learning about the extraordinary gifts of the most precious extra-virgin olive oils. Unfortunately, there are still a lot of myths and a shroud of mystery surrounding the consumption of olive oil and the industry at large. In *Olive Oil For Dummies*, we demystify recent clinical research about the nutritional properties of olive oil and clearly explain its ingredient-specific terminology as well as how to incorporate more of it into our daily meals and get the most nutritional value from it as possible.

Researchers are concluding that the most important and exciting health-giving constituents, found only in extra-virgin olive oil, are the unique and abundant antioxidant polyphenols of the olive fruit. These fascinating compounds, produced by the tree as defense in its challenging environment, also have profound protective effects on our health. In Chapter 6, we explore the story of polyphenols in depth, helping you to understand how to recognize and taste the power of polyphenols.

A few of the potential health benefits of consuming extra-virgin olive oil, as we explain in Part 2, include its association with:

- » Reducing the risk of heart attacks, strokes, diabetes, osteoporosis, rheumatoid arthritis; breast, colon, and

bowel cancer; and the incidence of melanoma, memory loss, and dementia in old age

- » Boosting the immune system against the negative effects of toxins, microorganisms, parasites, and other foreign substances
- » Increasing healthful gut bacteria and nutrient absorption in food

Nowadays, most people have a difficult time choosing which olive oil they should use. Complicated labelling terms, high prices, country of origin information, and lack of knowledge make it really difficult for consumers to make educated decisions. In Part 4, we discuss everything that you need to know to understand the labels, ensure proper packaging and storage, and make the best purchasing decisions for your health and wallet.

In *Olive Oil For Dummies*, you'll discover how to recreate crave-worthy olive oil-based dishes from morning to noon to night. Whether you're in the mood for breakfast, lunch, an appetizer, or a dessert, you'll enjoy delicious, time-honored tastes that are perfectly suited to the modern palate. Each of Amy's recipes offer pairings of delicious dishes with specific types of olive oil and wine. You'll also find wholesome and tasty base recipes that are rich in olive oil to elevate your daily cooking. With increasing amounts of great olive oils available around the world, it's the perfect time to share the tips that will enhance flavor, nutrition, and variety in our diets. We'll also show you how to properly taste and test olive oil to ensure quality, freshness, and flavor.

Ever wondered how quality olive oil is produced? We take you behind the scenes of the world's artisan producers so that you can learn classifications and definitions while appreciating the production process. *Olive Oil For Dummies* also demystifies how to decipher the appearance and taste of the most widely available types while explaining the importance of their *terroir* (the soil, environment, and climate where the olives are grown). Finally, you'll witness the life-affirming role that olive oil plays in the livelihood of its producers and native regions while being inspired to take full advantage of its bounty yourself.

# Foolish Assumptions

This book assumes that you know nothing about olive oil, nutrition, and cooking with it, so you won't have to face a term that you've never heard of before and that isn't explained. For those who already know a lot about olive oil, you can find more in-depth explanations in this book as well. You can pick and choose how much you want to know about a subject, but the key points are clearly marked. You may also assume that it will never be an easy task to select the best olive oil, get the most value for your money, and cook all sorts of new recipes with it. Each chapter will help you to find everything that you need to know in order to enjoy olive oil, prepare better tasting food, and discover optimal health.

## Icons Used in This Book

The icons alert you to information you must know, information you should know, and information you may find interesting but can live without.



REMEMBER

When you see this icon, it means the information is essential and you should be aware of it.



TIP

This icon marks important information that can save you time and energy.



FROM THE  
AUTHORS

We use this icon whenever we tell a story based on our personal experience.



FROM THE  
DOCTOR

This icon is used to help you with medical advice about the choices you have to optimize your treatment.



TECHNICAL  
STUFF

This icon gives you technical information or terminology that may be helpful, but not necessary, to your understanding of the topic.



WARNING

This icon warns against potential problems (for example, things to avoid when buying, purchasing, storing, or cooking with extra-virgin olive oil).

Finally, a little tomato icon (🍅) is used to highlight vegetarian recipes in the Recipes in This Chapter lists, as well as in the Recipes at a Glance at the front of this book.

## Beyond the Book

In addition to the content of this book, you can access some related material online. We've posted the Cheat Sheet at [www.dummies.com](http://www.dummies.com). It contains important information that you may want to refer to on a regular basis. To find the Cheat Sheet, simply visit [www.dummies.com](http://www.dummies.com) and search for **Olive Oil For Dummies cheat sheet**.

## Where to Go from Here

Where you go from here depends on your level of interest and passion. Personally speaking, we never tire of learning more about olive oil. If you already have basic knowledge of olive oil and want to know more about labeling regulations, go to Chapter 13. If you're a novice, start at Chapter 1. If you want to know more about how to cook with extra-virgin olive oil, go to Chapters 17 through 22. Chapter 14 helps you determine how to get the most value for your money. You may have specific interests at different times, so check the Table of Contents to find what you need rapidly.



REMEMBER

The wonderful world of olive oil is steeped in history, tradition, and lore as well as science, modern industry, and technology trends. Go at your own pace and enjoy the process. Remember that like extra-virgin olive oil, learning new information also helps to keep us healthy.



**1**

**Introduction  
to Olive Oil**

## **IN THIS PART . . .**

Discover the history of olive oil.

Examine olive oil classifications and standards.

See how the production process works.

Find out what makes a quality extra-virgin olive oil in order to avoid fraudulent or defective products.

#### IN THIS CHAPTER

- » Examining the ancient origins of olive oil
- » Discovering how olive oil has been used in food, medicine, spirituality, and culture
- » Understanding the evolution of olive oil in modern times

## Chapter **1**

# Exploring the Story of Olive Oil

**T**o understand what the olive tree and olive oil means to people who have grown up in its shade, it's important to know how the tree and its fruit have shaped the lives and cultural heritage of their ancestors. The olive tree is deeply rooted in the landscape and the traditions of the Mediterranean regions where it has flourished for millennia, and its history is deeply intertwined with the development of human civilization.

Throughout history, olive oil as a culinary ingredient was of great importance in cooking, and its health benefits were very much valued. In addition to olive oil, other olive products are also found in the entire region. Olives, olive wood, and olive pomace are used to make everything from food and furniture to fuel and soap.

This chapter journeys across time and continents to explore the history and significance of olive oil. It explains how olive oil has been used in food, medicine, and culture historically and in modern times.

# Defining the Olive Tree throughout its History

The history of the relationship between humankind and the olive tree stretches back many millennia. There is archaeological evidence suggesting that people in the countries of the Eastern Mediterranean consumed olives in neolithic times, as well as using the wood for fire. It's likely that curing or fermenting techniques to reduce the natural bitterness of olives would have been known to communities during this time. Though these processes would be refined and improved particularly in the Roman period, the use of wood ash with brine to cure the fruit to make them more palatable was widespread. By the fourth millennium BCE, there is evidence to show the systematic harvesting and crushing of olives for oil. And by the Bronze Age, this was a well-established technique to produce oil for food, cosmetics, and lamp fuel.

## From wilderness to farm

When humans started to farm rather than moving to hunt and gather food about 10,000 years ago, the wild olive tree, probably originating from Persia and Mesopotamia, was among the earliest plant species to be domesticated and planted in the so-called *fertile crescent*. The fertile crescent included lands that now span from Iran and Iraq to Syria, Jordan, Lebanon, Israel, and Palestine. Archeologists have found olive pits suggesting that the olive trees in those areas were first domesticated 8,000 years ago. Selective breeding ensured that the hardiest and most productive trees — *Olea europaea* — survived. Known as the common olive, it's a variety of an evergreen tree native to the Mediterranean region that is still growing today with its various subspecies and regional varieties.

Farming also allowed people to experiment with new agricultural techniques and improve milling to get the most oil from the olives. Olive presses were larger and became valued and protected resources near to the communities they served. Stone wheels often moved in circles by harnessed donkeys or mules became the most efficient way of crushing the olives ahead of “pressing” them and separating juice (or oil) from the flesh, pit,

and skin. Evidence of this method being used dates from 6,000 years ago and widely practiced until the early part of the last century. (An ancient press is shown in Figure 1-1.) Traditionally, each community had its own mill. Locals brought their recently harvested olives to their local mills for pressing. For this reason, there is a deep desire among people in the Mediterranean region to use “their own oil,” even today. People who live in olive-producing areas have long-lasting ties with a local, “trustworthy” mill. They bring their olives to that mill — often watching the oil being extracted — and later with their families enjoy the oil throughout the year. This way they ensure the best quality, flavors of choice, and freshest oil possible.



**FIGURE 1-1:**  
An ancient  
press in  
Volubilis,  
Morocco.



**TIP**

There are some olive oils that are still produced using ancient milling techniques. This can produce some good quality oils, but greater care needs to be taken to ensure that it is not spoiled. When visiting olive oil — producing countries, it can be a fun and informative experience to visit both modern and ancient mills. Modern methods of milling are generally much more efficient, protecting and preserving the flavor and health benefits of extra-virgin olive oil. This is discussed in greater detail in Chapter 3.

Olive trees can live for hundreds, and sometimes thousands of years. In each Mediterranean culture, the ancient trees are viewed with more prestige and importance. There are names in each language specifically dedicated to the trees that are

hundreds of years and thousands of years old. Oil that comes from those trees is extremely valuable culturally and commands higher prices when sold. In Italy, for example, *secolari* is the term used to describe trees that are hundreds of years old and *millenari* is the word used to describe trees that are thousands of years old. Olive trees are extraordinarily resilient, having adapted to thrive in harsh environments and can produce new shoots even after devastating droughts or fires. It's extraordinary to think that some trees are so ancient that they date back perhaps three thousand years. Their gnarled massive, beautiful forms are imposing and often are a symbol to local people of their own history and survival.

## From ship to shore

In the late Bronze Age, from around 1200 BCE, Phoenician sailors and traders from what is now Lebanon established colonies and trading posts throughout the Mediterranean to North Africa, Sicily, and the Iberian Peninsula. Historians believe they played an important role in expanding olive cultivation and milling across the Mediterranean. Archeologists often find evidence of olive oil production and typical storage jars called *amphorae* at sites and in cities that were founded by these masterful merchants and explorers. One of the recipes found in the jars was the now trendy aioli sauce, which Chef Amy teaches you how to make in Chapter 17.

Although they aren't talked about very often on a daily basis, the Phoenicians' legacy in spreading the olive tree and its cultivation practices is a testament to their role as key players in the agricultural and economic history of the Mediterranean. Many of the similarities in Mediterranean cuisine are a result of their commercial efforts.

## Shaping ancient empires

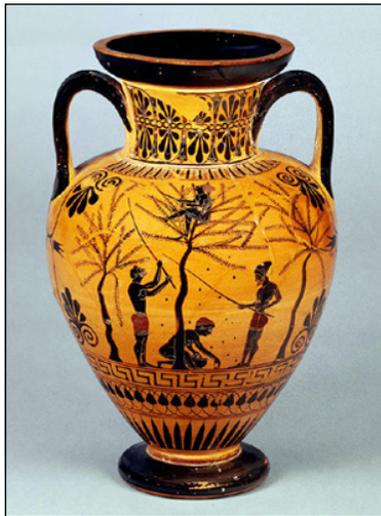
In cultures such as Ancient Persia, Egypt, Greece, and Magna Grecia in the fourth millennium BCE, olive oil played a vital role as a food and important source of nutrition. It was fundamental to the economy of the expanding empire and was not only a cornerstone of everyday life but also had profound religious and symbolic meaning.

## Ancient Egypt

By the fourth millennium BCE, the ancient Egyptians were using olive oil not only for culinary purposes, but also for cosmetics and perfumes. Since perfume making was so important to Mediterranean trade at that time, the role of olive oil in its production made olives an even more significant crop, surpassing even the grape in importance. According to the Egyptians it was the goddess Isis, sister and wife of Osiris, who taught humans how to grow olive trees and extract their oil. The ancient Egyptians cultivated many olive orchards. An inscription on a temple dedicated to the god Ra dating from the twelfth century BCE during the rule of Ramses II describes the olive orchards around the city of Heliopolis producing pure oil, the best quality in all of Egypt, for lighting the lamps in sacred places.

## Ancient Greece

During this time, the olive became a more important crop than the grape. Mycenaean tablets mentioning olive trees dating 3,500 years ago were found on the Greek island of Crete along with amphoras at the Palace of Knossos. An example of a Greek amphora is shown in Figure 1-2.



**FIGURE 1-2:**  
An Ancient  
Greek  
amphora  
depicting  
olive  
harvesting.

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REMEMBER

In the traditional diet of Crete, where scientists first described the Mediterranean diet, it is said that 70 percent of total fat consumption comes from olive oil. Mediterranean cuisine “swims” in olive oil. The culinary term *lathera*, translated as “the ones with oil,” is a traditional Greek cooking method and category of dishes. The dishes are integral to the Mediterranean diet and particularly the Cretan diet, being rich in olive oil, often with tomatoes, onions, beans, other vegetables, various herbs and spices, and bread for soaking up the oil. The olive oil not only serves as the cooking medium but also adds significant flavor and nutritional value to the dishes.

Athens was the birthplace for Greek olive oil. Olive tree depictions also decorated the walls of ancient Egyptian and Greek palaces. Olive oil during this time was used as fuel for lamps, to clean and moisturize the body, as well as for a balsam for wounds and in perfumes. Aristotle himself promoted the divine powers of olive oil, using it to anoint himself before he met with his disciples, believing that it would give him increased knowledge and confidence during debates. In Athens, the revered goddess Athena gave the founders of the city the fruit and oil of the olive tree to nourish and sustain them (see Figure 1-3), leading to the creation of an empire as well as the naming of the city.

Ever since, the olive tree was central to the genesis mythology of Athens and also featured large in other legends and tales. In 480 BCE following the battle of Salamis, the general Themistocles recaptured the Acropolis, which had been burned to the ground by the invading Persian army. A sacred tree atop the hill was said to have immediately grown healthy, fresh buds from its charred remains that represented fresh hope and the promise of a bright future to those who rebuilt the city. To the Greek poet Homer, olive oil was nothing less than “liquid gold.”

After thousands of years of promotion by philosophers, gods, goddesses, and demigods alike, olive oil continued to be highly valued and prized throughout the Mediterranean and Asia Minor. In its purest form, it was used as a medicine and food. It also provided health and cleansing of the skin, including bathing rituals of athletes, and could be used as oil for handheld clay lamps, a lubricant and even a base for paints. It was offered to the gods and was central to many religious ceremonies. Victorious Olympic athletes would be adorned with olive leaf wreaths and perhaps even more welcome was the prize of

quantities of olive oil worth a small fortune. Olive groves were a common sight in the Greek countryside, and laws were even enacted to protect these valuable trees. The olive branch remains a symbol of peace and prosperity, a legacy that can be traced back to its revered status in ancient Greece. It is extraordinary to think that the oldest living olive tree in Crete is estimated to predate the first ancient games.



**FIGURE 1-3:**  
Amy with  
“the sacred  
trees of  
Athena,”  
Acropolis,  
Athens.

Physicians and philosophers, including the “father of medicine” Hippocrates, knew of the contribution of olive oil to good nutrition and health, referring to it as “the great healer,” and it was regularly included in recipes and medicines used to cure ailments. Olive oil was also considered to sooth the spirit and calm the mind as well as treat earaches, hemorrhoids, and sunburn; reverse baldness; alleviate the bites of mythical or real sea creatures; and ward off evil spirits.

Aristotle contemporary and philosopher Theophrastus, born in Lesbos, was the first Greek author to write a treatise on the

“Maintenance of One’s Body” and in particular on the use of ointments and perfumes. He was the first to coin the term “botany” and understood it as a science that studies plants and their healing power. According to Theophrastus, the *unguentum*, an ancient Latin word for perfumed ointment, must be composed as follows: a fatty base of animal origin and one of vegetal origin (olive oil); the resin as a fixative; salts; and essences extracted from flower petals with the so-called “Enfleurance.”

Modern medicinal uses of olive oil are considered in Chapter 7.

## The Roman Empire

The Ancient Greeks were efficient at producing and using olive oil, but the Romans took it to the next level by increasing production and expanding its use to a much wider area. Feeding the vast empire relied on sophisticated logistics of production and transportation of important staples like grain, wine, and olive oil. In fact, those three items became the pantry staples of what would later become known as the Mediterranean diet. By combining freshly harvested local produce and dairy with grains, wine, and olive oil, the ancients laid the foundation for the world’s healthiest eating plan.

Following Julius Caesar’s return to Rome after defeating his enemies in modern-day Tunisia, the Greek philosopher Plutarch observed that Caesar’s first reaction was to make a speech to the people in order to impress them with his victory. Caesar claimed that he had conquered a country large enough to supply the public every year with 200,000 Attic bushels (an old measurement) of grain and three million pounds of olive oil. Olive oil production on a large scale could generate great wealth and political leverage in Roman times. There were significant advances in the technology of oil production with the emergence of screw presses, the mechanism of which increased pressure and improved yield.

During the latter half of the first century CE, Pedanius Dioscorides, a military physician under the Roman Emperor Nero, known as the “father of pharmacognosy,” (the study of medicines from natural sources), advocated the use of the early harvest, bitterest, “greenest” olive oil for conditions that may have had an inflammatory basis. This ancient doctor did not

apply modern medical methods to prove his beliefs, but it can be observed that his oil was likely to be richest in anti-inflammatory compounds, which is discussed in detail on Chapter 6.

The Romans were experts in agriculture and the writer Pliny the Elder in his book *Natural History* described the way in which olives should be grown and even categorized olive oil according to quality in a classification, which is quite similar to modern chemical and sensory grading. Coincidentally, the oldest preserved olive oil in the world, now in a museum on Naples, was discovered close to where the author met his death in the devastating eruption of Vesuvius at Pompeii in 79 CE.

At the time, the city of Naples was heavily influenced by Greek culture. Nero used to recite in Greek, not Latin, in Rome's amphitheaters, and writers of the time dubbed it as a city in which "one could live and die in the manner of the Greeks."

## Religious and culinary influences

In the Mediterranean, the ancient traditions of using olive oil as a healthy food continued alongside the symbolic and cultural importance of the olive tree in religion and culture. Olive oil and the olive tree had an important place in ceremonies and mythology, including giving the strength to Hercules, not least in his fearsome club of olive wood. The olive leaf and branch continued to have symbolic meaning, including signifying peace and hope.

The topic of the historical religious appreciation of olive oil deserves a book of its own, as olive oil has a revered position in three monotheistic faiths — Christianity, Judaism, and Islam — as well as in ancient worshipping traditions. The Bible refers to the olive tree as "the key of trees" and the "tree of life." It is mentioned on numerous occasions in the Qur'an and the Bible. From an olive branch brought by a dove as a sign of peace to Noah in the Old Testament, to events on the Mount of Olives in the New Testament, and the description of the olive representing the gifts of variety and abundance in the Qur'an, the olive tree has a special and sacred status to many people of faith.

The reason why olive branches were used as symbols of peace in the Mediterranean since antiquity is because it took 20 years for them to bear fruit. Olive trees weren't planted in areas where people couldn't establish long-term settlements (meaning areas of conflict). For this reason, olive trees became associated with peace from a practical sense as well as a spiritual one. Hanukkah commemorates the miracle of one day's worth of olive oil lasting eight nights as recorded in the Talmud. Christians use olive oil to consecrate crowned rulers and church dignitaries. According to Islamic tradition, the Prophet Muhammad is said to have proclaimed, "Take oil of olive and massage with it. It is a blessed tree." In antiquity, olive oil was coveted as an ointment, fragrance, and an essential element of religious ceremonies in addition to its flavor and nutritional uses.

## PROTECTING A CENTRAL MILL BEHIND STONEWALLS

The value of olive oil in antiquity can't be overstated. A few years ago, a local farmer in a remote part of Jordan was expanding his olive grove on a high plateau when he came across stonework, which was obviously of great historical importance. Archeologists from the capital Amman, in partnership with the British Museum, soon established this site to be a significant, heavily defended and protected structure dating back to the Bronze Age — 4,500 years ago. This seemed odd because it was known that at that point in history, raids by the Egyptians had decimated large settlements in the area, the result of which was "urban collapse" and the retreat of populations to rural areas.

Living in smaller, scattered locations reduced the likelihood of attack, so there was less need to build thick walls for defense. The walls here seemed to be different, and as the soil was carefully removed, it became apparent that this was an ancient olive press for the area. No doubt, bringing large quantities of harvested olives over the space of a few weeks to a central mill for the production of valuable olive oil made it a very real target for attack. It's easy to imagine people in those ancient times bringing their precious fruit to a place of safety for the production of olive oil, reassured as they made their way up the hill past heavily armed guards and the solid walls of the olive mill.