

A Beginner's Guide to Olives

By Leah Favela

“Except the vine, there is no plant which bears a fruit of as great importance as the olive.”- Pliny the Elder, 1 CE

The olive has been a part of the human diet long before people were sipping on martinis or biting into pieces of pizza. Ancient tombs scattered with olive pits and writing tablets praising this little stone fruit show that humans have eaten olives for somewhere around 5,000 to 6,000 years. And to stretch it back a bit further, it's thought the olive tree was first cultivated for use some 7,000 years ago.

Olives have both culinary and historical importance. They were grown commercially as far back as 3,000 BCE and were the source of wealth and commerce for many Mediterranean civilizations. In places such as Egypt, olive oil was an essential ingredient used by priests in sacred rites and burial rituals.

Today, olives are grown for both the fruit and the oil. Olive oil can be found in most well-stocked kitchens around the world. With over 2,000 varieties of olive, the fruit itself is remarkably diverse. The olive can be thrown into salads or on top of pizzas, simmered in sauces, plopped into adult beverages, or eaten plain as a delightful little snack.

Yet many people don't know much about olives or their varieties beyond some absolute basics; they're salty, some have pits, some are wrinkled, some are green.

But there's so much more to know!

This article is going to teach you a little more about the olive. And even introduce you to some delicious varieties we think you should know about. Because whether you're an amateur cook or a professional chef, olives should be a part of your culinary arsenal.

What are Olives?

The olive is a drupe, a stone fruit like cherries or peaches, in which the flesh surrounds the pit which encases the seed. At 30%, the olive has such an impressively high oil content that the English word for oil comes from the Greek word “elaia”, which means olive.

The olive tree (*Olea europaea*) is an evergreen tree, short and squat, with a gnarly twisted trunk and branches. Olive trees grow slowly and require meticulous cultivation. Yet despite needing large amounts of tender care, olive trees are quite hardy and live very long lives.

The Olive Tree of Vouves, located on the island of Crete, is over 3,000 years old and is thought to be the oldest olive tree still bearing fruit. The olives taken from its branches are still eaten today.

Where Do Olives Grow?

Archaeological evidence shows that the olive tree was probably first cultivated on the border between Syria and Turkey. Credit goes to the Assyrians for discovering that a flavorful oil could be pressed from the small drupes, and it was their civilization that first cultivated and harvested the trees.

Olive trees thrive in subtropical zones, particularly areas close to the sea with rocky soil. Today olives are produced throughout the Mediterranean and other subtropical zones including Latin America, the United States, and Japan.

Today, most global olives come from Spain, while over 95% of American olives come from California, where the coastal areas boast a climate very similar to the Mediterranean.

How Are Olives Harvested and Processed?

If you were exploring Crete and happened to wander upon an olive tree, you might think the ultimate Grecian experience would be to pop a fresh olive into your mouth then and there.

Don't!

Unlike most stone fruits, olives are inedible straight from the branch. They're chockful of the compound oleuropein, which gives the olives an intensely bitter flavor. So, though a sun-warmed olive plucked straight from the branch may sound delicious, your taste buds won't be pleased.

So what makes an olive edible? Careful harvesting and a time-consuming curing process.

Some olives are harvested using sticks or machines which shake the ripe fruits from the trees. Other methods allow the olive to ripen on its own and fall to the ground naturally. However, shaking a tree means you'll probably get a mix of ripe and unripe olives, and falling to the ground can bruise and damage these delicate little drupes.

The best olive growers pick the olives by hand at precisely the right moment. This means the olives are undamaged and perfectly ripe. But picking by hand is a time-consuming method, so hand-picked olives may be the best, but they'll also be the most expensive.

Thanks to the bitter presence of oleuropein, which is perfectly safe though highly unpalatable, olives need to go through a curing process before they're ready to eat. The curing process turns the olive's natural sugars into lactic acid, leaching out oleuropein and phenols through five different processes.

1) Brine-curing: Fully ripened olives are slowly fermented in salt water, a lengthy process that can take up to a year. Brine-cured olives are sweet, and the brine intensifies the fruit's natural flavors.

2) Dry-curing: Packed in salt for a month or more, these olives have all their bitterness and moisture leached out. The salt is removed, and the olives sometimes get an oil wash which keeps them juicy and soft. Olives cured in this process have a wrinkly appearance.

3) Lye-curing: Invented in Spain, this process immerses raw olives in large vats of lye solution. Large commercial producers often use this method because it's time- and cost-effective. However, this fast-acting process can also strip the olive of its flavor and leave behind a chemical aftertaste.

4) Sun/air curing: This is a rare method, though still sometimes done in areas such as Crete and France. The olives remain on the branch allowing them to overripen or are left to sit in the sun after they are harvested. This method uses a natural fermentation process but can leave the olives tasting bitter.

5) Water-curing: This process involves soaking and rinsing the olives in plain water over and over again, a process that takes a considerable amount of time and is quite rare.

What Are the Different Types of Olives?

Olives get their unique qualities from their region and terroir, how they are harvested and cured, and their genetic makeup. The IOC, International Olive Council (yes, it exists!) estimates there are over 2,000 varieties of olives, but only around 150 of them are table or oil olives.

Out of the hundreds of types, we've picked 6 to tell you about. But don't hesitate to dive deeper into the olive world and learn about all the others.

Kalamata: A large, brownish-purple table olive with an almond shape. These olives are usually preserved in olive oil or red wine vinegar and have a rich meaty, and smoky flavor. These olives make a fantastic tapenade, can be thrown in a bowl with some nuts to create a quick and easy hors d'oeuvres, and certainly shouldn't be left off a pizza.

Nicoise: A French favorite, this ripe olive ranges in hue from deep brown to black and has a mildly bitter flavor with notes of almond and hazelnut. It's used in the classic Nicoise salad but is also delicious in tapenades or eaten plain.

Picholine: Originally from France, these crispy and crunchy olives are now found all over the world. Known as the "cocktail olive", they are the preferred olive for many martini aficionados.

Castelvetrano: Hailing from Sicily, this is Italy's most popular snack olive. These bright green olives are sweet and buttery. Try chopping these olives up with garlic, basil, lemon juice, and oil to make a simple yet delicious pasta sauce.

Cerignola: Crisp and wonderfully buttery, these large Italian olives are great for stuffing with garlic or peppers and have even been known to be breaded and fried.

Mission: Cultivated in California by Spanish missions along El Camino Real, this variety is usually used for olive oil. However, oil-cured and brine-cured olives have a mild grassy flavor that makes an excellent snack or topping to a pizza or pasta.

Are Olives Healthy?

Whole olives are low in calories but high in antioxidants and healthy fats. They do tend to be high in sodium, so make sure you consume them with moderation and mindfulness like most delicious things in life.

The nutrition facts for 3.5 ounces of ripe, canned olives are:

Calories: 115

Water: 80%

Protein: 0.8 grams

Carbs: 6.3 grams

Sugar: 0 grams

Fiber: 3.2 grams

Fat: 10.7 gram

Saturated: 1.42 grams

Monounsaturated: 7.89 grams

Polyunsaturated: 0.91 grams

Olives are low in cholesterol and are a good source of dietary fiber, which the body needs for gut health. The American Heart Foundation states that foods with high amounts of monounsaturated fats, such as the olive, can positively affect heart health.

It's recommended to limit your olive intake to 2 to 3 ounces a day, that's about 16 to 24 small to medium-sized olives. More than enough to allow you to savor their wonderful flavor and just the right amount to allow you to reap the heart-healthy benefits!