

# Oh, for olives



*The humble olive has been consumed by humans for thousands of years – and across the Mediterranean and further afield, the growing, picking, pressing and eating of this versatile fruit is still a matter of wonder and delight*

'There are three pillars of Mediterranean cuisine – olives, wheat and grapes.' So says chef and food writer Letitia Clark, who lives on the Italian island of Sardinia. She dreams of one day growing and producing all three herself, but for now, she's content with helping her landlady harvest olives in exchange for a few bottles of oil.

Olive oil is a staple ingredient in Mediterranean cooking and was once so plentiful in southern Italy that it was used to fuel street lamps. The olive tree has been harvested for its oil for millennia, and the product is integral to Greek, Italian, Turkish and Spanish recipes: more than 3 million tonnes are produced worldwide each year, about 69 per cent of it in Europe. But the quality of olive oil varies hugely and can make or break a dish: a good one should smell fresh and peppery, a little like green grass.

As anyone lucky enough to have tried the gloriously bitter and verdant oil from the season's first-pressed olives can attest, it's one of life's simplest pleasures. It's bright green in colour, having not yet oxidised to become golden and clear. Mopped up with crusty bread and a sprinkling of salt, a good olive oil doesn't need anything else. The ritual of tasting the season's first bottle is a celebration at the end of the harvest, when friends and neighbours come together to help strip the trees of their fruit.

In many rural locations, the harvesting of olives has hardly changed since the early European civilisations started collecting them. Across the Mediterranean, nets are still threaded between the trees to catch the fruit. Friends and helpers come together, often in return for lunch and a couple of bottles. Giant forks are raked through the trees at just the right time of year, pulling the olives into the nets, ready for sorting and pressing. The key to making a good oil is to press the olives as quickly as possible, and ideally within a day or two, to preserve the freshness and avoid any rancid taints. In Italy and Greece, there are communal presses, where families can take their produce to have it ground and bottled.

Asimakis Chaniotis, executive chef of London restaurant Pied à Terre, recalls his childhood in Kefalonia, Greece, where



he'd help with the olive harvest: 'First, we'd pick the olives, then when they were all off the tree, we'd separate the branches and send the olives to the press. When the oil was ready, we all sat down on one long table and had a massive feast, with lamb on the spit and homemade wine – what memories!'

Olives have been harvested for oil since at least 6000BCE, as attested by its traces in some clay amphorae discovered near Galilee a few years ago. In ancient Rome, olive oil was imported by the crateload along the river Tiber, and the clay vessels dumped in a giant heap, which came to form the hill of modern-day Testaccio. Amazingly, one of the oldest living olive trees in the world can be found on the island of Crete – thought to be about 4,000 years old, it is still producing fruit.

## Nutritious and delicious

Throughout history, olive oil has been known for its various health benefits. Polyphenols, which give olive oil that bitter taste in the mouth, are key antioxidants, while oleic acid is anti-inflammatory. Professional olive-oil taster and sommelier Wilma van Grinsven-Padberg, author of *The Olive Oil Masterclass: Lessons from a Professional Olive Oil Sommelier*, shares her thoughts on the health properties of olives.

'One of the most special properties of olive oil is squalene, which gives oxygen to your veins. Squalene is something that's only found in olive oil and deep-sea shark liver. If you have a very expensive face cream, it usually contains some squalene because, by giving oxygen to your veins, it helps to get moisture to your body. Artisanal olive oil still has a bit of squalene in it, but many large companies take the squalene out and sell it for cosmetics. Finally, the fat itself is very good for your body. Every human being needs fat, and olive oil is the healthiest fat that exists. It's clean, and it's a gift of nature. People often say it's a healthy fat, and this is true if you have virgin olive oil, because it's unrefined, and all the healthy compounds are left in.'

Outside of olive-growing countries, however, olive oil is relatively new to the kitchen table. Elizabeth David wrote





beautifully in 1950s England of how it could be purchased from the pharmacy in glass bottles with pipettes, since after the war it was more commonly used in Britain for unblocking waxy ears. Through her evocative writing, Elizabeth's recipes ignited a passion for Mediterranean food in post-war Britain. Olive oil remained the preserve of the middle classes for decades, however, mainly sold in upmarket delicatessens.

#### Olive oil on tap

Having first developed a love for olive oil while working in an Italian restaurant, Letitia is another devotee to the liquid-gold product: 'I didn't grow up with olive oil at all,' she says. 'My mum is quite a traditional cook and uses lard and beef dripping. It was never a part of my cooking heritage. The first time I knew I'd tried proper olive oil was cooking at the [London restaurant] Dock Kitchen, with Stevie Parle. We had this incredible oil on tap from a giant container and great artisanal Italian bread. I'd take a glass bowl and all the ends of bread from service and get through so much. It was the kind of oil that catches in your throat and makes you cough slightly. I was addicted from then on.'

Letitia's love for olive oil has only increased since moving to Sardinia: 'Now I can't cook without it, can't eat without it,' she says. 'I love it on a ball of mozzarella, ricotta, salad, vegetables and also in baking.' In her new recipe book, *La Vita è Dolce*, several dessert recipes incorporate olive oil in a way that might feel outlandish to someone not accustomed to using it in sweet dishes. Letitia explains that 'olive oil helps cakes to stay moist because it's liquid at room temperature. Butter is

actually quite sweet, whereas olive oil is a little peppery and savoury, so it's a nice balance to use both.'

So, don't just pop them into a martini or serve them as antipasti. Instead, place your olives centre stage.

Words: Phoebe Hunt

See opposite and over for some of Letitia's dishes

### Top ways to enjoy olives

**Tapenade:** blend black olives (stones removed) with varying quantities of capers, anchovies, olive oil and herbs.

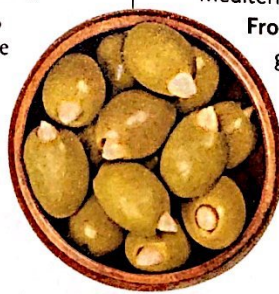
**Cooked:** chicken braised in white wine with lemon and olives.

**Stuffed:** with garlic, anchovies, red peppers, almonds, jalapeños, blue cheese and all manner of flavours.

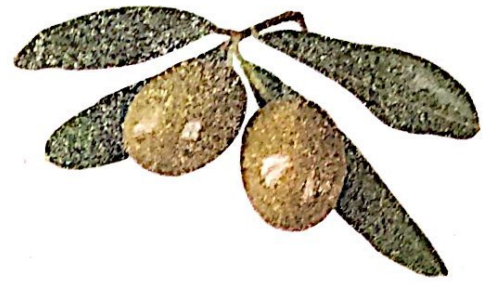
**Baked:** into focaccia, or other herby and Mediterranean-inspired loaves, or into sweet treats.

**Frozen:** as the creamy basis for a sophisticated gelato or ice cream.

**Pasta:** stir in, with crumbled feta and fresh tomatoes.



PHOTOGRAPHY: SHUTTERSTOCK.COM



# From tree to table

*Green, black, big or small, every olive will bring its own unique flavour to a dish. Here are just a few of the ways Letitia uses them in her cooking*

## Olive oil ice cream with Seville orange zest

My love of olive oil knows no bounds, it's true, but this is utter genius. The oil lends a rounded lusciousness to the ice cream and, as olive oil goes well with chocolate, nuts and fruit, this goes beautifully with puddings based around any of these. Here, I've paired it with the aromatic zest of Seville oranges. If you can't get hold of any (they're in season in January, but freeze well) use a mandarin.

SERVES 6

- 4 egg yolks
- 200g caster sugar
- 500ml double cream
- 250ml full-fat milk
- Pinch sea salt
- 60ml best quality, fruity olive oil, plus extra to serve
- Zest of 1 Seville orange

1. Using an electric whisk, mix the egg yolks with the sugar, until pale and mousse-like.
2. In a saucepan, over a medium heat, warm the cream and milk until they just come to a simmer, then pour over the yolks in a steady stream, whisking all the time.
3. Return the mixture to a clean pan and cook over a low heat, stirring continuously, until the custard begins to thicken, enough to coat the back of a wooden spoon. If you like, you can use a thermometer to check this. It should read around 72C/162F.
4. Add the pinch of salt, then strain the custard through a fine sieve into a wide bowl and chill for at least 4 hours, but preferably overnight.
5. When chilled, remove from the fridge and whisk in the olive oil (I use a stick blender for this), until completely emulsified.
6. Churn in an ice-cream machine and freeze.
7. Serve with freshly grated Seville orange zest and an extra drizzle of oil.

*Turn the page to discover more of Letitia's olive-inspired recipes*



## Artichokes braised with sage, lemon, fennel and olives, with saffron aioli



Based on a lovely vegetarian dish we made at Spring, where I worked for a time before leaving London, this dish is a sort-of Mediterranean medley, with echoes of North Africa, Italy and southern France. It feels like a fitting reflection of Sardinia's many culinary influences and makes the perfect vegetarian main course.

While mayonnaise is common in Sardinian cooking, aioli doesn't seem to have made its way to this part of the Mediterranean yet. As the name derives from the Catalan for garlic and oil and there is plenty of Catalan heritage here (most specifically the former Catalan colony of Alghero), it feels right to include it. The tyranny of staying true to a recipe's origins should never come between you and a good thing.

SERVES 4-6

### For the artichokes

- 6-8 whole artichokes (see right for prepping instructions)
- 5 tbsp olive oil
- 2 garlic cloves, sliced
- 3 large fennel bulbs, topped, tailed and cut into eighths lengthways
- 2 dried red chillies
- 1 tsp fennel seeds
- 10 sage leaves
- 500g tomatoes, chopped (or tinned)
- 120ml white wine
- 3 strips lemon zest
- 100g purple or small black olives
- 5 fresh bay leaves
- ¼ lemon, segmented and chopped
- Sea salt
- Pinch caster sugar
- 1 bunch parsley, chopped

### For the saffron aioli

- 2 egg yolks
- ¼ tsp saffron strands, soaked in 2 tbsp hot water
- 1 scant tsp sea salt
- 1 tsp mustard (optional)
- 2 garlic cloves, minced
- 200ml best-quality extra virgin olive oil
- 100ml neutral oil, such as sunflower
- 2 tbsp lemon juice

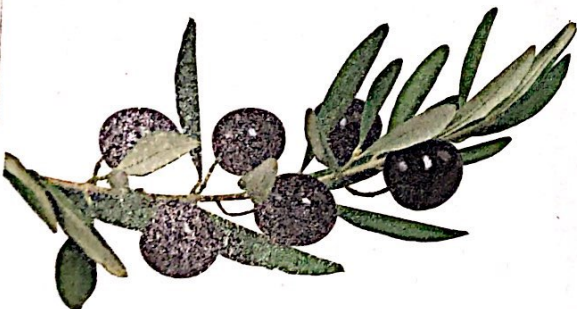
1. Start by preparing your artichokes. Fill a large, deep bowl with cold water and squeeze the juice of two lemons into it (you can also leave the squeezed lemon halves in the bowl).
2. Take the artichoke and begin to rip away the outer leaves. Discard about two full layers of outer petals, until you can see a greater deal of the yellow inner petals, closed tightly in a bud.
3. Using a swivel peeler, peel away the coarser outside of the base and stem, until the paler, smoother flesh is exposed.
4. Using a sharp knife, cut off the top of the artichoke, aiming about halfway down. Discard these tips.
5. Now, cut the artichoke in half lengthways and, using a teaspoon, scoop out the fluffy choke and discard.
6. Place the halves in the acidulated water, until ready to cook.
7. In a wide, lidded frying pan, heat the oil. Cook the garlic until fragrant, then add the fennel eighths, chilli and fennel seeds.
8. Cook over a medium heat until the fennel just begins to catch and take colour (about 5 minutes) then add the sage leaves.
9. Cook for another minute or two, stirring, then add the prepped artichokes.
10. Stir everything until it is coated with the oil and cook for a few minutes, until the artichokes begin to turn light golden.
11. Add the tomatoes, wine and strips of lemon zest. Cover and cook over a low heat for 40 minutes, until the fennel and artichokes are tender and the tomatoes and wine have formed a thick sauce.
12. Add the olives, bay leaves and lemon segments, followed by the salt and sugar, to taste. Stir and simmer for another 5 minutes, then stir in the chopped parsley, before serving with a spoonful of aioli on top.

### To prepare the saffron aioli

1. Place the egg yolks and the saffron with its soaking water into a small bowl or the jug of a blender. Add the salt, mustard (if using) and garlic and start whisking.
2. Drizzle the oil in drop by drop until it is emulsified, blitzing or whisking vigorously all the while.
3. Add the lemon. Mix and taste for seasoning. Add more lemon or salt according to your preference. If you like, dilute with a little cold water to make it runnier.

*Edited extract from Bitter Honey by Letitia Clark, published by Hardie Grant, £26.*

*Turn the page for another of Letitia's favourite dishes*







## Yossy's olive oil, rosemary and yoghurt cake

The brilliant baker Yossy Arefi made this cake when we worked together at Mèlisses, on the Greek island of Andros, and it fast became a staple back home in Italy. She gave me a wonderful charlotte tin, too, which I always bake it in. I couldn't make it any other way now. The inclusion of olive oil, rosemary and lemon zest makes it easily at home on an Italian breakfast or tea table. It's a light, delicate cake with a tender crumb and a lovely fresh, herby flavour. The perfect thing to serve with some poached fruit and an extra dollop of yoghurt.

SERVES 8-10

- 55g butter, melted, plus extra for greasing
- 225g 00 or plain (all-purpose) flour, plus extra for dusting
- 2 tsp finely chopped fresh rosemary
- Grated zest of 1 lemon
- 200g sugar
- 175ml olive oil
- 4 large eggs
- 24ml natural yoghurt
- 2 tsp baking powder
- Pinch salt
- Icing sugar, for dusting



1. Preheat the oven to 180C/350F/Gas 4. Using a pastry brush, grease a 23cm cake or bundt tin with butter and dust it lightly with flour.
2. Mix the rosemary, lemon zest and sugar together in a mixing bowl.
3. Whisk in the olive oil and the melted butter.
4. Add the eggs and whisk for 30 more seconds.
5. Whisk in the yoghurt and then fold in the flour, baking powder and salt.
6. Pour the batter into the prepared tin and level the top.
7. Bake for 45 minutes, using a skewer or spaghetti strand to check that it's done (it should come out clean, although a few crumbs are okay). Allow to cool in the tin for 10 minutes before turning out on a wire rack to cool completely.
8. Dust with icing sugar before serving.

*Edited extract from La Vita è Dolce by Letitia Clark, published by Hardie Grant, £26.*