

# THE PASSIONATE OLIVE

101 THINGS TO DO  
WITH OLIVE OIL

CAROL FIRENZE



BALLANTINE BOOKS

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*The  
Passionate  
Olive*

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*Carol Firenze*



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*Victoria, Evan,*

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*Isabella, and Christiana*

*with Love ... and Olive Oil*

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An Excerpt from *A Thousand Days in Tuscany* by Marlena De Blasi

In her memoir *A Thousand Days in Venice*, Marlena De Blasi arrives in Italy as an American tourist, marries the man of her dreams, and makes Venice her new home. In the sequel, *A Thousand Days in Tuscany*, she and her husband pursue the country life in a small Tuscan village. Here they attend the annual olive harvest, experience firsthand one of Italy's most beautiful and sacred traditions, and passionately discuss the elixir of the gods.

And now, plumped three meters up into the saddle of a hundred-year-old tree, my bundle torso pitched about in the gasping breath of early December, my wish is granted. I'm harvesting olives.

Ears tingling under my old felt cloche, my fingertips are white with cold as they slide and out of Barlozzo's gloves.... My nose runs. And all I do is send curses upon Athena. It was she who, posturing with Poseidon for dominion, sprung the first olive tree from the stones of the Acropolis, proclaiming it the fruit of civility. A fruit like no other. She said the flesh of an olive was bitter as hate and scant as true love, that it asked work to soften it, to squeeze the golden-green blood from it. The olive was like life and that the fight for it made its oil sacred that it would soothe and feed a man from birth until death. And the goddess's oil became an elixir. Soft, slow drops of it nourished ewe's milk cheese; a ladle of it strengthened wild onions stewed over a twig fire. Burned in a clay lamp, oil illuminated the night, and warmed in the hands of a healer, it caressed the skin of a tired man and a birthing woman. Even now when a baby is born in the Tuscan hills, he is washed in olive oil, modest doses burnished into every crease and crevice of him. On his deathbed, a man is anointed with the same oil, cleansing him in yet another way. And after he dies, a candle is lit and oil is warmed and kneaded over him, a farewell bath—the oil having accompanied him on all his journeys, just as Athena had promised....

The olive mill is small, servicing only the local farmers or *padroni*, each of whom might have three or four hundred trees, less, perhaps, as Barlozzo's family does. The farmers often help each other to harvest, but there the sharing stops. Every farmer wants to be assured his olives—coddled and cared for better than anyone else's olives, harvested only at the moment of perfection—are pressed and returned to him as the jade fortune he deserves more than his neighbors do.... During what can be hours and hours of waiting for his own moments at the crusher, *il frantolano*, the olive mill owner, ministers to his clients. The mill is built for business: cement blocks and corrugated roofing, a dirt floor in part, smooth white tiles paving the machinery areas. Yet, in the end farthest from the fray, there is a great fireplace.... The farmers keep watch over their waiting olives, breaking the vigil with ritual refreshment. One whacks off a hunk of bread, roasts it on both sides over the embers, rubs it then with the garlic-rosemary branch, carries it, in his hand and with some ceremony, to the grunting press and holds it under the spigot for a few seconds to let drip a thick sort of cream composed of the crushed but not yet pressed fruit. One carries his treasure back to the fire, to the demijohn, filling his tumbler with the thick, chewy wine of the countryside....

And so we sit together, the farmers and their families and I, as if in the waiting room of a wizard. And all we talk of is olive oil....

At one point, looking to build a bridge between the old world and the new, I open

discourse about America, saying that the medical community advises the consumption of extra virgin olive oil to help lower the evil side of blood cholesterol. To a person, the circle looks at me with something near to mercy, and so I scurry on with the news of the American posture that touts the Mediterranean diet. “Constructed as it is of the freshest fruits and vegetables, complex carbohydrates, freshwater fish, sea fish, and a modicum of animal flesh—all of it laced with generous pourings of just-pressed olive oil and honest red wine—many American doctors call it the earth’s healthiest eating plan.”

Under darting gazes and fidgeting hands, I continue. “Of course, everyone knows that eating this way discourages heart disease and obesity, chases free radicals, and promotes longevity,” I say, but there is no one even pretending to hear me....

The mill owner has wandered over to the fire and caught the last of my feeble delivery. “*Ah, signora. Magari se tutto il mondo era d’accordo con noi.* How I wish that all the world agreed with us. Here people die of heart attacks, but most often in their beds and long past their nintieth birthdays.”

Chuckles bustle through the crowd. “But you have some experience with olive oil. I can see it,” he says.

In reflex, my hand reaches up to touch my face. Are there telltale marks of last evening’s supper?

“No, no, *signora,*” says a man, perhaps the oldest one among the group. “There is no stain. He refers to your complexion. You have what we call here *pelle di luna*, skin like the moon. Your skin is illuminated. *È abbastanza comune qui,* it’s fairly common here among the country women. It’s the light that comes from eating olive oil all one’s life. But is there olive oil in America?”





# *Olive Oil Milestones*

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Around this time ... this happened

- 6000 BC Olive cultivation first appears in Syria
- 3000 BC Knowledge and cultivation spreads in the Mediterranean area from east to west
- 2500 BC Earthenware tablets in Crete reference olive oil and its uses
- 2000 BC Ancient Israelites use precious olive oil for anointing priests and kings and to burn in temple lamps
- 1780 BC The Code of Hammurabi states that, under penalty of death, no one can prune an olive tree more than two feet per year
- 1500 BC Olive oil appears as a major commercial product in Crete and is sold in Egypt for use in cosmetics
- 1000 BC The exceptional culinary aspects of olive oil are noted in Greece
- 776 BC First Olympic Games take place where an olive branch and olive oil are awarded to the winners
- 620 BC Solon's Olive Protection Law declares that anyone found guilty of uprooting or destroying an olive tree would be sentenced to death
- 100 BC Greek and Roman literature reference olive trees, olives, and olive oil
- 100 AD Romans develop several classifications of olive oil

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Under the reign of Constantine, 2,300 oil distributors in the capital of the

325 AD Empire supply citizens with olive oil for cooking, cosmetics, massage, body care, lamps, and other uses

1000 AD Olive oil becomes rare and is sometimes used as cash, but most of all is used for religious rituals

1500–1600 AD Spanish explorers and missionaries carry the olive to the New World

1524 AD The first olive trees are planted in New Spain (Mexico)

late 1700–EARLY Franciscan missionaries plant olive trees at nineteen of the twenty-one missions along 600 miles of the California coast

1800 AD

1870 AD Commercial olive oil production begins in California

1900 AD King Umberto I of Italy prohibits the felling of olive trees on Italian land—a law that still exists today in parts of Italy

1920 AD European immigrants to the United States begin to spread the use of olive oil into American cooking

1980 to present Knowledge of olive oil expands worldwide as numerous books on health and cooking with olive oil are published

2005 AD *The Passionate Olive* touts the many uses of our magical, mystical, precious “liquid gold”





## *Liquid Gold*

OLIVE OIL ... I JUST LOVE IT! I always have. I adore everything about it: the color, the feel, the taste, the texture, the variety, the mystique, the smell—the possibilities. I think my love of olive oil must be hereditary. Ever since I was a child growing up in an Italian American family, olives and olive oil have fascinated me. I remember opening a can of olives, draining the liquid, and putting whole pitted olives on my fingers and popping them in my mouth sequentially and eating them with complete delight. I also reminisce about my early childhood friends being shocked at our family's use of olive oil instead of the vegetable oils used in their homes, and their surprised faces as I dipped bread into oil rather than spreading it with butter. Even then I was trying to convert people to the magical world of olive oil.

All of my ancestors came from the region of Liguria, an area of Italy known for its light, flavorful, and delicate oils. I remember savoring the exquisite tastes of my grandmother cooking and hearing the stories about how my grandfathers saved money for several weeks to purchase the precious oil; it was a household priority and a staple and necessary for food as well as for many other practical things.

Throughout history there have been many people who have been completely amazed by the merits of olive oil. Although treating leprosy, massaging the skin of elephants, or boiling it to pour over castle walls onto attackers may not be counted among our current everyday uses for olive oil, its uses are not only infinite but also legendary. Homer was right when he named this precious oil *liquid gold* and sang praises to the olive tree in his epic poems.

While most people think of olive oil mainly as a culinary condiment, people of the ancient Mediterranean burned olive oil for illumination or applied it topically to the body. From ancient times to the present, people have used it for medicine, for magic, and as part of their everyday beauty rituals. Olive oil has always been more than a basic food to the people of the Mediterranean; it's been the Mediterranean's lifeblood and has illuminated history since the beginning of humanity.

Olive oil's mystical glow has been a magical ingredient in religious and spiritual rituals and a therapeutic resource to cure ailments and diseases. It was used to anoint kings (often poured directly on their heads), and it became a "monarch" itself when it became known as the king of all oils. In ancient Greece, athletes ritualistically smeared it all over their bodies before engaging in physical exercise, and winners were crowned with olive branch wreaths. In Rome, gladiators oiled their bodies as they prepared for competition. Celebrated physician and Father of Medicine Hippocrates recommended the use of olive oil for curing ulcers, cholera, and muscular pain. Drops were (and still are) trickled through holes in the tombs of saints to pay homage to them. Olive oil perhaps is the missing piece used in building one of the engineering wonders of the world, answering the question scholars have posed for centuries: *What else could have helped ease the movement of the great stones to build the pyramids of Egypt?*

The history of the olive culture mirrors the history of Western civilization. Although scholars disagree as to the actual specific location, the olive tree most likely originated in Asia Minor, probably in the Caucasus Mountains. What is known is that the first cultivated

olive trees appeared around 6,000 BC in the area of Syria. They then spread to Crete, Palestine, and Israel. Much as precious petroleum oil is used as a basis for today's economy, back then the economy was based on the production and sale of grain, wine, and olive oil. As trading moved out into other regions, this commercial network spread the knowledge and cultivation to what is now Turkey, Cyprus, Egypt, and Greece.

By the seventh century BC, olive trees were well established in Greece. The olive tree was considered so sacred that legislation was written to prohibit the cutting down of one. Known as Solon's Olive Protection Law, and written by the statesman Solon, the law stated that anyone who uprooted or destroyed an olive tree would be judged in court and, if found guilty, sentenced to death. In fact, the olive culture was so highly valued and the fruit from trees considered so sacred and revered that only chaste men and virgins were authorized to pick the fruit. (*I wonder what kind of workforce we could gather today based on those stringent guidelines?*)

The Romans planted olive groves and extended olive cultivation throughout their ever-growing empire. They improved oil-production techniques by inventing what was to be the prototype of the modern lever press. Populations conquered by the Romans were often ordered to pay taxes in the form of olive oil. Why, you may ask? As great consumers of oil, the Romans could not feed their own citizens with local oil output (a situation that still exists in Italy today). As documented in the Museo dell'Olivo (the Carli Olive Tree Museum in Imperia, Italy), it has been estimated that adult citizens going to public gymnasiums used as much as 55 liters (14.3 gallons) of olive oil annually for personal hygiene, for consumption as a lubricant, for lighting, for rituals, and as a medicament. That is a lot of olive oil!

The valuable oil played an important role in the development of the Mediterranean economy. Under Roman rule, the Mediterranean region was divided according to olive oil markets, and olive oil trading was as hot a commodity as was dot-com stock in its heyday. Two notable differences between the dot-com peak and the olive oil peak: First of all, according to the historian Pliny, by the first century AD, Rome had excellent oil that was so good "at reasonable prices." Second, olive oil is a trend that has lasted.

Advanced ships were built for the purpose of transporting oils a great distance. Hispania (that portion of the Roman Empire encompassing most of present-day Spain and Portugal) was the largest supplier of this precious liquid, and its olive oils were considered the holy grail of oils and thought to have the finest quality. The oil was shipped in terra-cotta amphoras (large, two-handled jars with narrow necks). Often carrying up to seventy kilos of olive oil, these amphoras could be used only once for three major reasons: olive oil permeated the porous terra-cotta causing rancidity if used again; they often became damaged during the voyage; and cleaning and recycling the amphoras was unprofitable. The number of discarded amphoras is staggering. In fact, there is a mountain in Rome called Mt. Testaccio—forty-nine meters high and one kilometer wide—that is made entirely of methodical broken, discarded, and stacked amphoras.

The citizens of Rome and other parts of this vast empire consumed great quantities of Hispania's wonderful oil. Even the oldest cookbook (that we know about), written by Apicius in the first century AD and entitled *De Re Coquinaria* ("On Cookery"), included many recipes using Hispania's oil.

Olive cultivation declined during the barbarian invasions. It became rare and valuable

during the Middle Ages, where it was chiefly used for religious purposes. Religious orders owned a great share of the cultivated olive trees, and behind monastic walls the precious oil could be found at the tables of churchmen.

The history of olive cultivation in the New World can be traced to missionaries traveling with Spanish explorers and conquistadors who carried the olive to Mexico (New Spain), Caribbean settlements, then to the mainland of South America (Peru, Paraguay, Argentina, Chile), and, at last, to what is now California. As early as 1524, Franciscan missionaries planted olive trees in New Spain. As they prepared for new settlements (in Baja California) they would take pot cuttings (or seeds) from existing orchards to their new outposts.

Sailing in the name of Spain, Italian explorer Christopher Columbus, while not involved in olive agriculture, noted the importance of olive oil during his journey to the New World. He is said to have allotted a daily ration of a quarter liter of olive oil (about 1 cup) to each sailor aboard ship.

The early history of olive cultivation in present-day California revolves around the Franciscan fathers. During the second half of the eighteenth century and early nineteenth century, olive groves were established at nineteen of the twenty-one California missions beginning with San Diego de Alcalá and ending with San Francisco Solano Mission in Sonoma. Only the missions at San Francisco and Carmel do not have suitable climates for growing olive trees.

Historically, the original purpose of growing olives in California was for the making of oil, with the first oil produced in 1803. By the mid-nineteenth century, olive oil was a thriving industry, but then it languished. Its popularity was cyclical, and, by the end of the nineteenth century, table olives became the primary products from the fruit of the tree (and still are). However, in recent years, a number of Californians are planting olive trees and harvesting the fruit to make exceptional olive oil.

Since 1985, the use of olive oil in the United States has grown exponentially with the importing of excellent European oils, the availability of award-winning California oils, the national focus on health and nutrition, and the growing interest in culinary arts. But not too many people know that the olive tree itself has always been a symbol of abundance, peace, longevity, and wisdom.

Capable of living up to three thousand years, this hardy and undemanding tree can survive semi-arid climates, shallow soil, and decapitation. Should a tree die, shoots will begin to grow from the base. Because of its immortal nature, the tree and the oil produced from it have developed magical auras and are referenced in numerous legends, stories, and myths.

### *Mythical, Mystical, and Legendary*

The olive tree has inspired myths and legends and has enjoyed an unrivaled degree of fame (well, with perhaps the possible exception of the grapevine). It was especially lauded during the Greek, Egyptian, and Roman eras. In Greece, the history of olive oil is as old as the gods of Olympus. One Greek legend accounts for the very origin of the olive and associates it with the founding of the city of Athens. According to the legend, a contest was held in Greece to see which god or goddess would be the patron of the new Greek city. Athena, goddess of wisdom, was challenged by Poseidon, god of the sea and horses, to provide the Greeks with the most useful, divine gift. Poseidon produced the horse; however, Athena was chosen because she provided the olive tree.

Zeus as the winner of the contest because she provided the most useful gift—the olive tree—noted for its oil, fruit, and wood and as the symbol of peace, wisdom, and prosperity. Even today, an olive tree stands where the story of this legendary competition is said to have taken place. The myth lives on; it is said that all the olive trees in Athens were descended from the first olive tree offered by Athena.

Throughout Greece, competitions were held in close connection with the olive tree. The Olympic Games, held in honor of Zeus, are where Olympic athletes (massaged with olive oil) believed that wisdom, power, and strength would be bestowed upon them. It was also believed that if one polished a statue of Zeus with olive oil, he would be so honored that he would bring the statue owner a long and happy life.

In Egypt, the kingdom that worshiped its pharaohs in life as well as death, crowns of olive branches were ritually offered and placed in tombs. Olive oil, mixed with sesame and pistachio oils, was applied prior to the linen wrapping of a mummy. The ancient Egyptians, who also used olive oil for cosmetics and medicine, believed the olive tree to be a gift from the gods that would bestow beauty, power, and love to its users. They also believed that Isis, goddess of fertility and wife of Osiris, a supreme god of the Egyptians, was responsible for teaching man how to extract oil from olives.

However, always competitive, the Romans credit the olive tree and its oil to their goddess of wisdom, technical skill, and invention—Minerva—who, according to legend, gave the Romans the art of cultivating the olive tree. The legendary founders of Rome—the twins Romulus and Remus—were believed to have been born under an olive tree. Another legend attributes the wild olive tree to Hercules, who struck the ground with his mighty club, which then took root. Whatever the legends, the *civilized* Romans, to this day, are credited with saying: “*Partes humani cultus necessariae vinum ... atque oleum olivarum*”—“The necessary ingredients of civilization are wine and ... olive oil.”

### *Moses, Christ, and Muhammad Have One Thing in Common*

Olive oil occupies a central place in all of the religions associated with the Mediterranean and the Middle East. The oil has been used for lamps in temples and for anointing rituals since time immemorial. Olive oil was sacred to Moses, Christ, and Muhammad.

Olive oil is referenced more than 140 times in the Bible, and the olive tree, considered the king of all trees, is mentioned over one hundred times. In Genesis, an olive branch was returned to Noah on the ark by a dove, signaling the end of the great flood. Since then, the olive branch has been viewed as a symbol of life and peace. The greatest religious significance of olive oil is documented in the book of Exodus, where the Lord tells Moses how to make an anointing oil of spices and olive oil. The olive tree and olive oil permeate different ancient psalms and prayers, many of which are recited today, including Psalm 23: “... you anoint my head with oil.”

For the Jewish people, having a plentiful supply of oil, along with wine, was a symbol of God’s favor. Oil was, and still is, a sign of God’s blessing because it represents all that is best in life and God’s generosity to the people he loves.

In the Christian churches, both Western (Roman Catholic and Protestant) and Eastern (Orthodox), olive oil is the symbol of God’s boundless generosity toward humankind and of his never-ending love. Christ (Christós) means the anointed one, that is, anointed with (olive

oil. When it is used to anoint people in church, it becomes one of the channels through which God's power comes into the world and by which he blesses Christians with his Holy Spirit.

The olive and its oil hold a special position in the Greek Orthodox religion. As a symbol of love and peace, olive oil is an essential part of several solemn rites, including baptism. It is also used to light the oil lamps in churches and the small shrines in many Greek households. In fact, the Greek word for olive, *elaía*, is thought to be derived from the noun *eleos*, which has many meanings, including mercy and compassion. In the Eastern Church, as well as in the Western Church, a prayer that is continuously offered is “*Kyrie eleison*,” Greek for “Lord have mercy.” The verb *eleison* is related to *eleos* (mercy and compassion) and to *elaion* (olive oil). This relationship suggests that—at a deeper level of meaning—olive oil is a material manifestation of Christ's blessing.

In Islam, the olive tree is a symbol of Muhammad's presence, and, through the oil, divine light brings men closer to Allah. In the Koran (Qur'an) and in the Hadiths (sayings of the Prophet) there are many references to olive oil. Muhammad is said to have advised his followers to apply olive oil to their bodies and to “use olive oil as a food and ointment for it comes from a blessed tree” (Tirmidi). In one Hadith, the Prophet was said to have stated that olive oil has in it a cure for seventy diseases: “Eat the olive oil and apply it (locally), since there is cure for seventy diseases in it, one of them is Leprosy” (Abu Naim).

### *Virgin or Refined ... It's All About Culture*

The olive tree is an icon of beauty and resistance; in olive cultures one of the cruellest things you can say about someone is that he is the kind of person who would cut down an olive tree.

Looking at an olive tree with its silvery-green leaves, twisted trunk, and graceful branches gives one a feeling of peace and serenity. The gnarled and knotty trunk looks as old as humanity, yet the leaves represent youthful gentleness as they gracefully sway. The olive tree is perhaps the most favored of trees by artists. Fascinated by their beauty, Matisse, Renoir, Cézanne, and Dali have all painted olive trees. The master of them all was van Gogh, whose olive tree paintings number nineteen.

### *Get Healthy, Stay Young, and Enjoy*

Olive oil was first used *on* the body, not *in* it. For centuries, olive oil has been used to maintain the suppleness of skin, to heal abrasions, to soften the hair, to strengthen nails, to cure the effects of alcohol, and to relieve aching muscles. It wasn't until about 1,000 BC that the exceptional culinary benefits of olive oil were discovered.

Recent research has brought olive oil back into the health annals, making it a primary focus among health-conscious people as they rediscover its culinary, beauty, and health benefits. In addition to lending a distinctive taste to Mediterranean cuisine, this versatile fruit and its oil have been found to reduce cholesterol—a truly healthful benefit! Olive oil can also help prevent cardiac diseases, ease the pain of arthritis, and soothe intestinal disorders.

In addition, ingesting (in food) or drinking (by the spoonful or glass) olive oil, with its potent supply of vitamins A, D, K, and E, is thought to slow down the aging process. Olive oil contains antioxidants, which are powerful aids that can help keep the cardiovascular system

flowing and delay the aging of cells. Olive oil aids digestion and helps the body absorb calcium. It improves the appearance and texture of the skin ... all from the inside.

Now for the outside of the body: Just as the gladiators believed that using olive oil for massage maintained the elasticity of muscles and the soldiers of Greece oiled their skin to keep warm, applying olive oil to the skin has been shown to improve its appearance and texture.

So enjoy your olive oil, however you use it. Having the knowledge of its history and culture, its spiritual significance and infinite virtues, and its health and beauty benefits, you can now play with this “liquid gold” and know that in addition to its epicurean enjoyment it offers 101 ways to improve your life, love, and health.







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