

In praise of olive oil

By Angela Zivkovic , SPECIAL TO THE STAR
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What's so great about olive oil?

Everything! Olive oil has been prized for centuries for its delicate flavor and healthful properties. Not only does olive taste great in salad dressings, drizzled over pasta, or as a simple dip for fresh crusty bread with some garlic salt or balsamic vinegar, it is also great for light sauteeing and other cooking. This versatile oil is even good for moisturizing dry skin -- just massage a small amount onto your cuticles and the soles of your feet before bedtime for softer hands and feet in the morning.

Olive oil is a mainstay of the Mediterranean cultures, forming the basis of Italian, Greek, Spanish, and French Provençal cuisines. In the early 1970s the Seven Countries Study, a large multi-country epidemiological study, was the first to reveal a positive association between the consumption of what was named the Mediterranean diet and benefits for cardiovascular health. In fact, heart disease patients who consumed this diet -- which emphasizes fresh fruits, vegetables, nuts, legumes, moderate amounts of lean meats, seafood, and, of course, olive oil -- for 27 months, decreased their risk of cardiac death by over 70 percent compared to patients who consumed the "prudent" low-fat diet recommended by the American Heart Association.

Olive oils come in many different flavors and varieties as well as levels of quality. While light olive oil is more suitable for cooking, since it can better withstand heat, extra virgin olive oil's flavors and fragrance are better appreciated on salads, as dipping oils, and drizzled over already cooked foods.

Extra virgin olive oil comes from the first pressing of fresh olives and contains most of the healthy polyphenols and antioxidants that give this type of olive oil its distinctive dark golden/green color and herb-like flavor. Many small olive oil producers take extra care to extract these healthy components and that is why artisan extra virgin olive oils tend to be more expensive; but because of the proven benefits of these healthy compounds for cardiovascular health, the higher price is well worth it.

Light olive oil, on the other hand, has had most of these volatile components removed. However, it is still a healthy alternative to other cooking oils due to its high monounsaturated fat content. Monounsaturated fats have been found to have beneficial effects on blood lipids, arterial function, and may even reduce cancer risk. Most other cooking oils are high in polyunsaturated fats, which have more favorable effects on heart disease risk than do saturated fats from foods like butter, but which provide less overall cardiovascular benefit than do monounsaturated fats.

There are many different kinds of olive oils available right here in St. Helena. The St. Helena Olive Oil Company provides an array of locally-made specialty food products, including flavored extra virgin olive oils for dipping. Sunshine Foods offers a line of more than 30 different extra virgin and light olive oils at different prices, including imported and local artisan oils.

Summertime is the perfect time for simple, healthy dishes like caprese salad -- just one delicious way to enjoy the health benefits and delicate flavor of olive oil. Arrange slices of beautiful organic heirloom tomatoes and fresh mozzarella (choose the creamier, more flavorful mozzarella di buffala made from buffalo milk or use fresh mozzarella made from cow's milk) in alternating layers, top with strips of fresh basil, drizzle with extra virgin olive oil, and season with sea salt to taste. This delicious salad is easy to make and can be served as a salad course or stand alone as a light dinner with fresh bread. Buon appetito!

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