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## The Skinny on Fats

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**As we savor the images of our beaming Olympic gold medallists** being crowned with wreaths of olive branches, we are witnessing an ancient ritual of classical Greece, where the olive tree was a symbol of peace, glory and abundance, and the oil of its fruit not just food but sacrament and sacred ointment.

The cultivation of oil producing plants is intimately connected with the evolution of human societies, for whom the harvesting of plant oils provided food, medicine and fuel for lamps. Much is known about the early peoples inhabiting the “Fertile Crescent” (the region of the Middle East), where ideal conditions existed for the domestication of animals and the cultivation of various crops, and whose sophisticated culture and traditions spread throughout the Mediterranean region and beyond. The cultivation of olive trees in Crete began as early as 5000 B.C., with evidence of ancient groves all over the Mediterranean. For example, engravings of olive branches can be found on the bas-reliefs of the temple of Ramses II in Egypt (built in the 13th century B.C.).

**It is no coincidence that the oil of olives** has been considered an elixir of good health for thousands of years. Easy to digest, olive oil has a beneficial effect on the stomach and digestive system, and its high content of simple, unsaturated fats (“monounsaturated”) and antioxidant properties are believed to protect against numerous health challenges, among them circulatory problems and heart disease.

Top quality olive oils – which are also the most expensive - come from hand picked olives. “Extra virgin” denotes oils of the first pressing of the olives, with strict regulations regarding acidity (which must be less than one percent). The price of extra virgin oils varies according to where the olives are grown and how they are harvested. Olive trees planted near the sea (e.g. regions in southern Italy) can yield up to 20 times more fruit than those planted inland, making their oil less expensive. Extra virgin oils are ideal for dressings, like the exotic *agrodolce* dressing (recipe below), and are best used raw, adding that characteristic olive flavor to favorite foods.

Oils of the second and third pressings are labeled “virgin” and can be used for cooking (moderate temperature); I do not recommend buying olive oils of lower quality (i.e., those not designated “virgin” or “extra virgin”). Because olive oil is sensitive to heat, light, air and moisture, it should be kept in dark glass bottles and stored in a cool place. Stay away from olive oils in plastic containers, as they often absorb the carcinogenic polymers found in plastics.

After a bad rap – and the disastrous low fat/high carbohydrate movement that preceded our unprecedented obesity rates – dietary fats and oils are finally reclaiming their rightful place at



our tables. They are essential to our health. Because of their different properties (e.g., chemical structure), different oils are suited to different uses. High quality cooking and salad oils are available in a great variety in local supermarkets and specialty shops – here is a thumbnail sketch of what to look for.

**Cooking oils.** Oils used for cooking need to have a high “smoking” point, which means that their chemical structure is not damaged by the heating to create unhealthy substances (trans-fats or hydrogenated fats). The rule of thumb is this: refined oils (oils which have been processed and filtered) generally have higher smoking points than unrefined oils and lend themselves well to frying at moderately high temperatures. Good cooking oils are the following: refined safflower oil, peanut oil and light sesame oil (toasted sesame oil should be used as a condiment only, not for cooking). The olive oil known as “pomace” (lowest grade olive oil) has a moderately high smoking point and can be used for frying, however, because of the extraction method of the oil (by the use of solvents), I do not consider it desirable as a cooking oil.

**Oils for sautéing and frying.** So-called saturated fats are great for sautéing and frying; they are easy to identify, because they are solid at room temperature. Examples of saturated fats are coconut oil and butter. Because of their role in increasing LDLs (low density lipids or “bad” cholesterol), saturated fats should be used sparingly, but by no means avoided. Butter, unless “clarified”, will start burning except at very low temperatures, as it still contains milk solids. Once these have been removed – through heating at low temperature and skimming off the foamy stuff - butter is a good fat for cooking at moderately high temperatures. Clarified butter is available as “ghee” in Asian and specialty stores; it can be stored in an airtight container at room temperature and keeps for a good length of time. A caveat about coconut oil: look for virgin, unprocessed, organic varieties available in health food stores.

**Mono- and polyunsaturated oils.** Polyunsaturated oils were once touted as elixirs of good health, but monounsaturated oils have more recently been discovered to offer superior health benefits. Polyunsaturated oils are excellent as salad oils, but they should not be used for cooking (cooking these oils creates unhealthy trans-fats). Corn, grapeseed, high oleic safflower and soybean oils are examples of polyunsaturates; their relatively bland flavor makes them ideal for dishes where you want the flavor of the oil to take backstage. I generally stay away from corn and canola oils – for various reasons – and never ever buy oils labeled “vegetable oil” (usually very low quality oils).

**Back to olive oil:** it is “monounsaturated” and one of the healthiest oils you can buy. Its virtues have been extolled for millennia and its praises are being sung in medical journals and health newsletters (it helps to lower “bad” cholesterol). Like any other food, oils are to be explored and experimented with. Olive oils come in a huge variety, from different parts of the world, and there are some excellent California oils. Talk to your favorite grocer, ask questions, plan an olive oil tasting with friends (lots of fun!). There are a number of fabulous infused olive oils available in specialty shops (infused with the flavors of other foods and spices), which can be used as condiments, sprinkled on pasta, toast or a slice of ripe goat’s cheese.

It has been said that we need to return to some of the simpler eating habits of our ancestors . . . this is a good place to start.