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Olives

The Life and Lore of a Noble Fruit

By Mort Rosenblum

Chapter One

"... I like them all, but especially the olive. For what it symbolizes, first of all-- peace with its leaves and joy with its golden oil." --Aldous Huxley

"The olive tree is surely the richest gift of Heaven." --Thomas Jefferson

An olive, to many, is no more than a humble lump at the bottom of a martini. Yet a closer look reveals a portrait in miniature of the richest parts of our world. Olives have oiled the wheels of civilization since Jericho built walls and ancient Greece was the morning news. From the first Egyptians, they have symbolized everything happy and holy in the Mediterranean. But it is simpler than all that. Next time the sun is bright and the tomatoes are ripe, take a hunk of bread, sprinkle it with fresh thyme, and think about where to dunk it. I rest my case.

Unforeseen circumstances pulled me into olivedom, and my conversion was swift and surprising. Olives had meant nothing to me. Olive oil was an overpriced, hyperpungent, pretentiously packaged fluid you dribbled into pasta sauce when in an ebullient mood. I figured green olives grew on one kind of tree and black on another.

Then, in 1986, I bought a pile of rocks and five acres of Provence life worth living. But you can't see by the light of burning wine, or massage a friend's temples in grape juice, or heat a house with vines.

Olives have permeated every Mediterranean culture from prehistory to last week. Aristotle philosophized about them, and Leonardo invented a modern way to press them. Egyptian pharaohs were sealed into pyramids with golden carvings of olives. Greeks used so much oil to lubricate their athletes that they devised a curved blade, the strigil, to scrape it off. The earliest Olympic flame was a burning olive bough. Rome had a separate stock market and merchant marine for oil. And conquering gladiators, like the Roman emperors, were honored with olives.

Olives were domesticated before anyone devised words to record the fact. They were around when the Bible was a rough draft scrawled on papyrus. Later wisdom was written and read by the clear gleam of olive-oil lamps. Long before it was food, olive oil beautified the body, cured ills, and fed the soul. For a time in Greece, only virgins and young men sworn to chastity were allowed to harvest the trees. When Odysseus finally came home, he collapsed into the marriage bed he had made Penelope from a massive olive trunk.

Saul, the first King of Israel, was crowned by rubbing oil into his forehead. In Hebrew, the root word for "messiah" comes from "unguent"; if one ever appears, he--possibly she--will be slathered in oil. The doors of Solomon's temple, and its huge four-faced winged cherubs, were carved in olive wood.

When the Jews declared the miracle of Hanukkah because their eternal flame flickered eight days on empty, their fuel was olive oil. The boiling oil that Galileans poured on Roman legions to repel their sieges was pressed from olives. It is a safe bet that the Three Wise Men came to the holy manger with cold-pressed virgin in their luggage. Today, still, a Hebrew idiom for a good man is "pure olive oil."

To Christians, the olive was equally sacred. Clovis, first King of the Franks, was crowned only because a dove from heaven appeared in the nick of time, reportedly, with a flask of oil for the holy rites. That was in 481; the

pear-shaped vial, kept in the Basilica at Saint-Remy, was used to similarly oil thirty-four more French monarchs. The Bible's two testaments refer to olive oil 140 times and to the olive tree nearly one hundred.

The Prophet Muhammad likened the holy light of Allah's being to brush and turning the earth. The air was heady with the scent of oleander, rosemary, lavender. In neighboring groves I heard the comforting growl of mototillers, chain saws, and weed whackers. With a little help from the industrial age, men with faces as weathered as their trees were doing what olive growers had done a millennium earlier. This was a subject to pursue.

Olives appeared in unlikely places. One friend, half Greek, told me about Soula. In prewar Athens, fathers gave their pubescent sons a handful of drachma, a condom, and the address of a good-hearted prostitute. My friend's father went to see Soula. Having no diaphragm, she relied on an alternative protection from pregnancy: a fat Kalamata olive.

Unexpected passions caught me off guard. I mentioned olives to James Lemoyne, a Miami-dwelling bon vivant with Latin American tastes, and he sat bolt upright. "I eat thirty to forty a day," he declaimed. "When I ate my first olive, I knew instinctively I was tasting the heart of the world. When I first tasted extra-virgin oil, I drank it down straight from the bottle. It felt like the very blood of the warm, rich earth."

My friend Chris Dickey, a Middle East and Mediterranean specialist for Newsweek, turned out to be a closet olive loony. The subject began to fascinate him years earlier in Andalusia; a priest could not explain why despondent youths preferred to end their lives by hanging from an olive tree. That, he knew, was how Marcel Pagnol's Ugolin exits the scene in *Manon des Sources*.

The Christopher Dickey Theory of Olive Politics neatly explains why much of the world took the shape that it did. He traced the olive's civilizing--and destabilizing--influence around the Mediterranean rim. The Middle East oil boom began not in 1973 but rather a thousand years before Christ, when Philistines controlled exports. From Phoenicians to Venetians, the oil trade was a key to power. Frederick II, the last great Hohenstaufen and Holy Roman Emperor of the thirteenth century, was a Teutonic tyrant born among the olives in Italy. He conquered Sicily and, in the Crusades, crowned himself King of Jerusalem.

For Dickey, the Olive Line explains why Arabs have never managed to make peace among themselves. Beyond the Jordan River, the desert starts, and Bedouin mentalities shift like the sands. In Palestine and the Levant, it is different. "Without our olives, we feel like a paper in the wind," a merchant in Jenin told him once. "The olive tree, it means the land. If you live twenty, thirty years in a place, you feel that in your breast, in your body. We take our own shape from our trees."

Your basic olive is an *Olea europaea*, a member of the only family in a small order of flowering plants called Oleales. The jasmine and lilac are blood relatives. So are ashes, hardwood trees of decidedly different haunts and habits. Naturalists can only guess at the olive's origins. Sir David Attenborough's account in *The First Eden* is as likely as any. Millions of years ago, the Mediterranean disappeared. Land shifts closed off Gibraltar, and the sea evaporated. Then, mysteriously, the straits burst open again and water came flooding back. Among the foliage on the islands and shores of the eastern Mediterranean wild olives appeared. Who knows when. Fossilized leaves dating from 37,000 years B.C. were found on the Aegean island of Santorini. Those scrubby oleasters still abound.

Around 6000 B.C., perhaps later, farmers in Asia Minor discovered that wild olive shoots could be grafted, replanted, and domesticated. Greek islanders also tamed the tree. Egyptians revered the olive, and one theory places its first roots in the Nile Delta, where it used to flourish. No one is certain. A few old legends trace the olive tree back to Adam.

But if science does not pinpoint the origin of the olive, mythology has its own explanation. When Zeus sought a deity to rule over Attica where the Acropolis would stand, he devised a contest. The god who gave mankind its most valuable gift would win. Poseidon struck his trident on a rock. A rearing horse emerged, capable of carrying people long distances, of winning wars, of hauling heavy loads. Athena produced an olive tree.

There is another version. Hercules (Herakles), son of Zeus and symbol of everything Mediterranean, thrust his staff into the bare ground. From it, olive leaves grew. "The upright Aitolian judge of the Greeks, obeying Herakles' ancient laws, loops the gray glory of the olive over the hero's brow and locks," Pindar wrote five centuries before Christ. "Long ago Herakles carried the silver olive tree from the shadowy spring of the Danube to make it the handsomest symbol of the Olympian games."

Willis Barnstone, who translated that piece of Pindar, is a friend who settled in to teach at Indiana University after half a lifetime around olives in Greece, Spain, and North Africa. He offered a few lines of his own on their origins: "God, needing a word to speak the cosmos into being, first created the alphabet. In those days he worked in Hebrew. Liking the shapes of those letters, he turned them into olive trees. Today, if you wish to read the mystery of creation, look deep at the calligraphy of an olive branch."

As time went on, olives were crucial to civilizations spreading from the Near East and around Crete. They were the currency of the Inner Sea, a cultural inspiration for its great empires: Assyrian, Egyptian, Greek, Persian, Roman. Among the most breathtaking relics of antiquity are olive objects: Grecian jars, Minoan frescoes, Egyptian bas-reliefs, Roman carved silver vases, Carthaginian mosaics. Motifs show harvesters in their trees, wielding thin rods, just as olives are often collected today.

During the Peloponnesian Wars, the olive trees that were a symbol of peace reshaped the style of battle. Towns grew behind impregnable walls. Attacking armies could lay siege and demoralize entrapped populations only by destroying their source of food. But, historian John Keegan notes, they were stymied by the olive groves. Scorched trees threw out fresh buds the following season. That meant digging out trees by the roots. Spartan invaders were warriors, not farmers, and refused to spend months with a shovel. And defenders, far from demoralized, burst forth in fury to protect their beloved olives. In the end, Attica fell only when its olives were finally devastated.

Greek colonizers brought the olive to Sicily between the eighth and fifth centuries B.C., using wealth from oil and wine to build the great city of Syracuse. They took olives across the turbulent strait between the monsters Scylla and Charybdis to the Italian mainland. Developing trade routes, Greeks and Phoenicians took the olive west to France, on to Spain and to Tunisia, on opposite shores of the Mediterranean.

The Latin *olea* took root from the Greek *elea*. The Romans planted huge groves in North Africa and France. In Spain, they hardly had to bother. When Caesar's legions assaulted Seville, their horses could barely make it through the olive trees ringing the city. But Moorish invaders brought so many more seedlings to Spain that the Spanish words for olive and oil--*aceituna* and *aceite*--derive from Arabic.

By the tenth century, groves fringed the Mediterranean across southern Europe and northern Africa, and they covered its islands. Spanish missionaries brought trees to the New World in the 1500s, behind the conquistadores. Then Italian immigrants carried the olive to South America, Australia, and southern Africa.

Today, there are about 800 million olive trees in the world. China has 20 million, four times as many as France. Small stands grow in Angola, in darkest Africa. They are found on six continents, but 90 percent of them fringe the Mediterranean. Italy springs to mind at the mention of olive oil, but Spain has more trees--a lot more, if you deduct the fictitious groves Italians report to collect European Union subsidies--and oil labeled as Italian is often from Spain, Greece, Turkey, or Tunisia.

Olives account for at least 200 million workdays a year, and perhaps 7 million families grow them for harvest. Many are weekend farmers who tend their great-grandfathers' trees for the love of it. Others might own a hundred thousand trees. Worldwide, the oil and olive business adds up to a turnover that approaches \$10 billion.

Each year, the world consumes nearly 2 million metric tons of olive oil. In Greece, every man, woman, and infant averages five gallons. Elsewhere, the numbers are climbing fast, as more people acquire the taste; in America, the recent annual increase has averaged 12 percent.

With each new survey doctors are more enthusiastic about the nutritional value of olive oil. Monounsaturated, it drives off the bad cholesterol without reducing the good. Unlike animal fat, it does not linger in the body as a cancer risk; evidence shows it wards off certain cancers. It aids digestion, helps children grow, and retards aging in the bones, joints, and skin. Although experts quibble, all say that olives are good for health. The only question is how good.

Encouraged by the new popularity of olive oil, small independents joined the multinationals and the Mafia to expand the market. Designer bottles sprouted everywhere. Suddenly a new breed of connoisseurs could shop for new nectars to keep in reserve, waiting for the perfect tomato.

Used alone, the word "olive" is hardly more specific than "grape," and olive oil is as nuanced as wine. The *Olea europaea* comes in at least seven hundred cultivated varieties, or cultivars, and each produces a different sort of fruit. Tough little Cypriot strains cling to rocky hills like petrified wood with leather leaves. Our delicate *caillet roux*, *la plante de Figaniere*, dips like a willow. Its olives hang low in thick bunches, red as cherries, until ready for picking.

The best oil producers blend varieties to capture a distinctive flavor, but even that is no guarantee. It all depends on the rains, the pests, the time of harvest, the pressing process, and how the oil is stored. Unlike wine, oil does not improve with age. It tends to be sharp when fresh. Within a few months it has pleasurably mellowed. After a year, many oils edge toward rancid. A few, like the Spanish *picual*, last a few years longer, but only when absolutely pure and kept away from light and heat.

Once, in Spain, I asked an olive expert which was the best oil. "What is the best cheese?" he replied. It is all a matter of taste, and no broad categories apply. "Italian" oil ranges from syrupy yellow southern oils to thin green Tuscan *crus* with a "peppery" (that can mean bitter) afterbite that may last through a long siesta. In an hour's drive, you can go from the sweet, buttery oils of Liguria, past the green and fruity *Luccas*, to the sharp elixirs of high Chianti. Fanatics might keep a dozen oils in their kitchens, from Cretan to Californian.

A basic set of standards guides the consumer. Extra-virgin oil means that the amount of free fatty acids--mostly oleic acid--is below 1 percent. Also, the organoleptic properties--taste, aroma, feel on the tongue--must rate high. Virgin oil, rarely found on the market, can have up to 2 percent acidity. Both are freshly squeezed by one of several processes known as "first-press" or "cold-press."

Plain olive oil, often marked "pure," is refined inferior stuff best kept for frying. It is "rectified" with steam and chemicals and then mixed with better oil for a little flavor and aroma. Pomace oil comes from the first-press leavings, refined to bring it below the 3.5 percent acidity level that designates lamp oil. These rules were established by the International Olive Oil Council, a Madrid-based agency backed by the United Nations. They apply only if what is on the label is in the bottle.

Like grapes, there are olives for pressing and for eating. Unlike grapes, you cannot put fresh-picked olives on the table unless you are troubled with sadism; they are excruciatingly bitter. It can take months to prepare an olive properly, and therein lies its richness. The industrial method produces those canned "black ripe" globules, graded from huge to humongous. Doused in caustic soda for a quick cure, and bubbled with an iron compound for color, little remains of taste or texture.

Every culture cures olives differently. The Moroccans alone have a hundred ways to do it. For an idea of the range, drop by any weekly market in southern France. To taste chewy black olives in *herbes de Provence*, or cracked green *picholines* in chilies and lemon, or tart little *Nicoise*, is to understand why the blessed tree has fumed so many heads since history began.

In the sixth century B.C., the poetess Sappho was already inspired by the voluptuous little fruit at her academy for young women on the island of Lesbos. Two and a half millennia later, Lord Byron exalted Grecian groves, not far away. Olives have inspired literary flights from Azerbaijan to Andalusia. "Black angels were flying through the sunset wind," Federico Garcia Lorca wrote early this century: "Angels with long braids and hearts of olive oil."

Most early literature touched on the technical. "The olive has spread even across the Alps and into the heart of Gaul and Spain," Pliny the Elder recorded in *Natural History*, in A.D. 50, summing up data that had emerged since the Philistines, two thousand years before him. Pliny quoted a report from 581 B.C. which said there were then no olives in Italy, Spain, or Africa. A century later, Theophrastus, the Greek, observed--wrongly--that the olive grew no farther than forty miles from the sea.

Pliny was a devotee of sensible Mediterranean behavior: sip the wine and splash the oil. "Age imparts an unpleasant taste to oil, which is not the case with wine, and after a year it is old," he wrote. "Nature shows forethought in this, if one chooses to interpret it this way, since it is not necessary to use up wine which is produced for getting merry; indeed, the pleasant overripeness that comes with maturity encourages us to keep it. She did not, however, wish us to be niggardly with oil, and has made its use widespread, even among the masses, because of the need to use it up quickly."

The ancients liked their oil green, from olives picked just after the grape harvest. "The riper the berry the more greasy and less pleasant is the flavor of the oil," Pliny wrote. "The best time for gathering olives, striking a balance between quality and quantity, is when the berries begin to turn dark--locals call these druppae, the Greeks, drypetides." In much of the world, this guideline is still the fashion.

Cato's instructions, as relayed by Pliny, might have been written today. He expounded on planting, pruning, pressing, down to a hundred uses for the black vegetable water that separates from pure oil. The trees those old Romans left behind have inspired every generation since.

In Spain, under the Romans, Lucius Columella called the olive the Queen of Trees, an apt title not only for its practical uses but also for the symbols it conveys in literature. Ever since a dove brought an olive sprig back to Noah's Ark, it has meant peace. It stands for strength: Hercules' staff was an olive trunk. And sacrifice: Christ was seized on the Mount of Olives and nailed to an olive-wood cross. Olympic victors wore olive wreaths and were rewarded with oil from sacred trees; this symbolized victory and wealth. It signifies the transfer of power. Kings and emperors were anointed with oil. And, from Athena, it means fertility.

Today, every olive society has its classic reference works. Deep within the French *Bibliothèque Nationale*, for instance, is A. Coutance's *L'Olivier*, published in 1877. It is thick with religious symbolism and ancient anecdotes. Coutance recounts the founding of Athens and adds the sequel. When Xerxes attacked from Persia, he destroyed the Acropolis and burned Athena's tree. The Greeks returned to find only rubble on their holy hilltop. But rain had washed ashes from the sacred roots, which sprouted again. This, Coutance said, was yet another symbol: resurrection. Only olive trees do that.

At the Carli Fratelli olive museum at Imperia, between Genoa and Nice, cracked leather tomes from the 1700s nestle against leaflets on modern pest control. An old bibliography on oliviana covers 120 letter-size pages, in cramped, small type, with a list of works scattered around the world. And that is only up to 1943.

Cosimo Moschettini, in his 1794 masterwork, *Della Coltivazione degli Ulivi e della Manifattura dell'Olio*, probes with style and grace the olive's most intimate fertility secrets. He gives Virgil, Pliny, and Cato their untranslated say. Raffaello Pecori, in *La Cultura dell'Olivo in Italia* from 1891, covered the world olive economy: "Australia and California have embarked with faith and courage in the culture of this plant. The United States government is particularly anxious to support it."

Modern writers tend to be lighter-hearted or more romantic about the subject. The grand French historian Fernand Braudel defined the Mediterranean as "where olives grow," but a whimsical Ford Madox Ford was more specific: "Somewhere between Vienne and Valence, below Lyons on the Rhone, the sun is shining, and south of Valence [the] Provincia Romana, the Roman Province, lies beneath the sun. There is no more any evil, for there the apple will not flourish and the brussels sprout will not grow at all."

Provence is storybook olive country, and its authors can get a little carried away. Jean Giono, a late chronicler of Provençal life, wrote that the mere whiff of olive oil exempts one from reading Homer. In Noë, he exulted in the

joy of climbing high in his trees in a freezing December to imagine strange Odyssean landfalls from a wine-dark sea and to ponder the meaning of life.

There, I learn a serious lesson in greed [he wrote]. By nature, I'm not greedy. There are, on the contrary, a hundred thousand reasons why I am not. But I could be rent by the cold (I am rent by the cold), and yet not come down from my trees; I would not stop picking. My hands stick like glue to my olives. Should God suddenly close the world like a book and say: It is over; should the trumpet call the dead, I would appear for judgment caressing olives in my pocket; and, if I had no pocket, I'd caress olives in my hands; if I had no hands, I'd caress them with my bones, and if I had no bones, I'd find a way to caress them still, if only in spirit. If that is not greed, what is?

And the worst of it. If you say to me, give me a sack of olives, I would give two sacks. But if you say, "Let me climb that tree, let me pick that fruit, let me take it in my hands in your place," I would resist to the last Judgment, I would resist God Himself, and I am sure of finding, to resist Him, the force to triumph, to the point of becoming myself capable of a miracle. What a remarkable food!

Aldous Huxley's jewel of an essay, "The Olive Tree," was written in Provence in 1936. Developing the thesis that all cultures at one time worshipped trees, he wrote:

Solidified, a great fountain of life rises in the trunk, spreads in the branches, scatters in a spray of leaves and flowers and fruits. With a slow, silent ferocity the roots go burrowing down into the earth. Tender, yet irresistible, life battles with the unliving stones and has the mastery. Half hidden in the darkness, half displayed in the air of heaven, the tree stands there, magnificent, a manifest god ... I like them all, but especially the olive. For what it symbolizes, first of all--peace with its leaves and joy with its golden oil.

It matters little that what the olive stood for frequently meant only "the peace of victory, the peace which is too often only the tranquillity of exhaustion or complete annihilation," he wrote. What we remember is that Roman conquerors faced their ovations in a crown of olive leaves. So did the Greeks.

Huxley thought too little attention was paid to the role olives played among the ancient Hebrews, who attached religious, social, and sensuous significance to glistening fat. It anointed their kings. But their thin pastures could not support cows to produce butter and suet. "Only the sheep and olive remained as sources of that physiologically necessary and therefore delicious fat in which the Hebrew soul took such delight."

The olive, Huxley concludes, is the painter's tree. "Under a polished sky the olives state their aesthetic case without the qualifications of mist, of shifting lights, of atmospheric perspective, which give to the English landscape their subtle and melancholy beauty ... [The olive] does not need to be transposed into another key, and it can be rendered completely in terms of pigment that are as old as the art of painting."

But olives humbled the painters, and they terrified some. Vincent van Gogh traveled south and wrote to his brother in 1889: "Ah, my dear Theo, if you could see the olives at this moment ... The old silver foliage and the silver-green against the blue. And the orange-hued turned earth. They are totally different from what one thinks in the north ... The murmur of an olive grove has something very intimate, immensely old. It is too beautiful for me to try to conceive of it or dare to paint it."

Van Gogh painted eighteen canvases of noble olives, in blues and deep greens. Cezanne did them from a distance, garnish to his beloved Mont Sainte-Victoire. But Huxley named Renoir, whose paintings at Cagnes gave the gray trees shadows of cadmium green and a suffused glow of pink.

Renoir, in fact, only rarely painted his olives. Like Van Gogh, he found them overpowering. The slightest breeze caught their glimmering leaves, constantly changing their shape and color. "Look at the light on the olives," the aging Impressionist wrote one afternoon. "It sparkles like diamonds. It is pink, it is blue, and the sky that plays across them is enough to drive you mad."

Instead, at Cagnes Renoir stayed indoors in his spare, narrow wheelchair, brush held in an arthritic hand as gnarled as an olive whorl. His trees were for inspiration and contemplation.

Renoir visited Cagnes at the turn of the century and found impending calamity. A merchant of Nice had acquired an old grove at the edge of town and was about to sell its majestic trees for charcoal. Renoir bought it. Having left his beloved Seine, he found a winter place where the sun would warm his aching joints. Mostly, however, he wanted to save the olives. They're still there, badly in need of a good pruning, but healthy, living monuments to themselves.

Other groves fared badly. "During the last few years there has been a steady destruction of olive orchards," Huxley wrote. "Magnificent old trees are being cut, their wood sold for firing and the land they occupied planted with vines. Fifty years from now, it may be, the olive tree will almost have disappeared from southern France, and Provence will wear another aspect."

Twenty years after Huxley wrote those lines, Lawrence Durrell moved to southern France and found the olive trees in serious trouble. Looking for a place to nest, Durrell settled in a stone house by a village in the Drome. He had a hundred old trees. Nearly all their trunks were dead, split open in the winter that froze Provence. But Durrell arrived in 1957, a year after the freeze, and these were olive trees. Already, healthy green shoots sprouted from the roots. If tended, they would produce olives within four years. Within a decade they would be respectable trees, ready for another five centuries.

Durrell's taste for olives developed early, when his mother brought the family to Corfu for a long season. He spent most of his life in the Mediterranean landscapes, which kept drawing him back. His characters nap against olive boles. In *Panic Spring*, olives come alive, "moaning and dragging at their roots."

His shabby romantic in *Justine* brings warmth to a cold day in Alexandria with a small can of olives, spotted in a grocer's window, and bought with his last few coins: "... sitting down at a marble table in that gruesome light I began to eat Italy, its dark scorched flesh, hand-modelled spring soil, dedicated vines." Justine arrived, and he gave her an olive.

Late in life, in *Spirit of Place*, Durrell describes his pilgrimage to Corfu to bring his own green oil to Saint Arsenius in a rock niche on the rugged coast "The silver olives slide breathlessly down in groves below one as if to plunge into it and to swim for dear life out into the blue ... Yes, it was in this landscape that I reamed many important lessons: the kind you cannot put into words. Even the driver had fallen silent now as we traversed these long, silent groves of ancient olive trees."

And, in *Prospero's Cell*, he explains why he was moved to such trouble: "The whole Mediterranean, the sculpture, the palms, the gold beads, the bearded heroes, the wine, the ideas, the ships, the moonlight, the winged gorgons, the bronze men, the philosophers--all of it seems to rise in the sour, pungent taste of these black olives between the teeth. A taste older than meat, older than wine. A taste as old as cold water."

Americans, by and large, have a different view of the olive. This disturbs Willis Barnstone, whose forty books touch regularly on the Mediterranean soul. Olives are often on his mind. "If there are four elements in the world--earth, water, fire, air--then the olive has to be the fifth," he said. Willis has a liquid laugh that lightens everything he says. One never knows when he is toying with hyperbole. On this subject, he is not.

"People who know olive trees revere them, like angels that spring from the earth," he said. "They live off them in the best way. The olive is to the Mediterranean what the camel is to the desert. Every tree is an individual, anarchic, a struggling survivor. To Americans, the olive is just a crop, and it is grown that way. Only Americans could name a silly cartoon character after the olive. No reverence."

It is not just any character. Olive Oyl, created in 1919 for the Thimble Theater, is the grande dame of cartoons. She is older than Minnie Mouse. Her brother, Castor Oyl, has slipped from memory, but Olive is as well known as Popeye. E. C. Segar, her creator, died in 1938, and I could not find anyone who knew why he gave her that name. But Willis was right. The Spanish cannot bear to translate Olive Oyl. They call her Rosario.

Still, Americans earned their place in olivedom. By some accounts, this traces back to an evening in 1870 when a California bartender named Julio Richelieu wanted to satisfy a miner who demanded something unusual for his gold nugget. He mixed gin with an aromatized white wine and ceremoniously plopped in an olive. His bar was in Martinez, so he called it the Martinez cocktail.

Or perhaps the honors go to a bartender at the Knickerbocker Hotel, who made a concoction in 1910 for John D. Rockefeller, with a twist of lemon and an olive. His name was Martini di Arona di Taggia; fortunately, only the first part stuck.

By 1943, everyone knew about the drink. When Franklin D. Roosevelt met with Winston Churchill and Joseph Stalin in Tehran, he offered each a "dirty martini": two parts gin, one part vermouth, and a dose of olive brine. Roosevelt also mixed one for Stalin's foreign minister, Vyacheslav Molotov, who apparently was not impressed. He devised his own cocktail, of greater potency.

Like the olive itself, the martini's true origins are lost in history. But so what? After eight thousand years of healing, illuminating, nourishing, enriching, and inspiring, the olive's place at the bottom of a glass is no bit part. Without its ennobling presence, a martini is no more than gin and vermouth.

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