



## The Olive

*Katherine Golden Bitting M.S.*

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There is no tree nor fruit which offers more in interest than the olive tree and its fruit. To obtain anything approaching an idea of its many-sidedness, it is necessary to become acquainted with the life and legends of ancient peoples, in which it entered as sustenance and as symbol; to know something of art, as the olive has furnished the motif for much decoration, both symbolic and purely esthetic; to know something of botany and horticulture, to appreciate its parts and to understand their structure and development; something of chemistry and physics, to understand its various constituents and their intelligent treatment; something of the culinary art, to understand its value and its varied uses as a food and condiment; of medicine, to appreciate the many virtues ascribed to it as a healing agent; and of cosmetics, to believe all that is claimed for it as a cleanser and beautifier. Each phase offers many fascinating possibilities, revealed through the most ancient as well as the most recent literature, for with time the olive has gained both in interest and value.

It would seem that the olive is rightly and appropriately called the “Tree of Abundance,” for all parts of it have been used, and to the ancients, even with their limited cuisine as compared with that of today, it was a symbol of plenty, witness the apostrophe of King Sennacherib, made centuries before the Christian era, who called Assyria “A land of corn and wine; a land of bread and vineyards; a land of oil, olives, and honey.”

Among the ancient Jews the oil was considered indispensable and as necessary as bread. An abundance of oil was looked upon as a blessing from God. Vast public storehouses were constructed to hold it for the scarce years. To the Greeks the three indispensable foods were oil, grains, and wine, the oil entering into most of their dishes. The Romans had a large trade in the oil, and it was also used, to a large extent, in their domestic cooking. In Italy and Spain street vendors fry fritters in the oil and sell them while hot. It has considerable use in conserving fish, particularly sardines. The higher grades of French, Spanish, Norwegian, and American sardines are packed in olive oil. This use has been extended in recent years to the packing of tuna fish.

In medicine it has been and is still used extensively. The ancients rubbed it on their bodies to make the muscles supple and to cleanse and protect the skin, particularly after bathing, and it still functions for these purposes. It was used to heal wounds, in liniments, and as a mild laxative. At present it is a constituent of liniments, ointments, cerates, and plasters. The people who are habitual patrons of the olive and its oil are noted for their smooth, beautiful complexions. It is said “the warm rosy complexion of the Italian and Sicilian women is due to the free use of olive oil as much as to the air and climate of their country.”

The residue or marc which remains after the oil is extracted is used as a food for sheep and hogs, for fertilizer, and for fuel, and there is obtained from it a clear, illuminating gas.

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