

the olive branch

From martinis to tapenade – where would we be without nature's most versatile fruit. **Text:** Roberta Muir

from a symbol of peace and source of sacred oil to the cornerstone of the Mediterranean diet and preferred martini garnish, the fruit of the olive tree has provided much throughout the 5,000 years it's been cultivated. Originating in the Eastern Mediterranean, this long-lived evergreen with silver green/grey leaves is related to oleaster (wild olives), privet, jasmine and lilac. All olives start out as hard green, unripe fruit, slowly lightening in colour to a greeny yellow, then bronze and violet before fully ripening and becoming dark purple/black. Regardless of colour, they need to be cured to remove their bitterness. This is done by steeping them in lye or lime (the quickest but least flavourful method), water (most common in France but least effective), brine (which contributes a sour taste due to partial lactic-acid fermentation), oil (the slowest method) or salt ('Greek-style', producing delicious chewy, wrinkled, 'dried' olives). Avoid small, very black olives in brine as these are usually green olives cured in lye and dyed black – they're very hard and flavourless.

Manzanilla

From Andalucia in Spain (the world's largest olive producing region), these pale green olives have a fine texture and delicate taste. They're often pitted and stuffed with anchovy, pimenton (a mild Spanish chilli) or almonds.

Serve them at home: The perfect garnish for a martini.

Eat them at: Emmilou, 413 Bourke Street, Surry Hills, 02 9360 6991 (Papas con Bacalao y Aceitunas – Potato Crisps with Salt Cod, Ham Hock and Green Manzanilla Olives)

Gordal

These classic 'olive green' Spanish olives, also called Sevillano or 'queen olive' (perhaps because of their size), are dark green with a lot of firm flesh.

Serve them at home: Slice 'cheeks' of flesh off the olive, mix with extra virgin olive oil, slivers of preserved lemon skin, chopped garlic, red chilli and flat-leaf parsley and toss through freshly cooked spaghetti.

Eat them at: harbourkitchen&bar, 7 Hickson Road, The Rocks, 02 9256 1661 (Crumbed green Gordal stuffed with feta)

Sicilian Green

These large bright green olives are popular for their striking colour, crisp texture and mild taste. Sold by region rather than varietal name, they're actually Nocellara del Belice, from the Belice Valley in north-western Sicily. They're also used for oil and have protected designation of origin (DOP) status.

Serve them at home: Pack into a sterilised jar with some cracked coriander and fennel seeds, garlic and dried chillies. Cover with extra virgin olive oil and store in a cool place for several weeks before serving with pre-dinner drinks.

Eat them at: A Tavola, 348 Victoria Street, Darlinghurst, 02 9331 7871 (Gnocchi con pesce e olive verde – Potato gnocchi with blue eye, Sicilian green olives and tomato)

Kalamata

Perhaps the most widely known black olive in Australia, these purple-black, almond-shaped Greek olives usually have a slit down one side to allow the brine in which they're cured to penetrate the flesh.

Serve them at home: Make a Greek salad by tossing chopped tomatoes, capsicum, cucumber and red onion, cubed fetta, anchovy fillets and Kalamata olives with olive oil, lemon juice and a sprinkle of dried oregano.

Eat them at: Aperitif, 7 Kellet Street, Potts Point, 02 9357 4729 (Grain-fed aged onglet steak grilled with jus corsé and Australian Kalamata olives)

Empeltre

These soft, meaty, almond-shaped black olives hail from southern Spain and have a rich oily taste. Similar to Kalamata, but smaller and softer, their flesh is easy to separate from the stone.

Serve them at home: Stone 500g olives and puree with 1 tablespoon rinsed capers, 6 anchovy fillets and a clove

of garlic. Serve this tapenade with croutons as part of an antipasto. Store any leftover in the fridge covered with a thin layer of olive oil.

Eat them at: Sydney Seafood School, Sydney Fish Market, Bank Street, Pyrmont, 02 9004 1111 (in their tapas cooking class)

Ligurian

A name commonly used to refer to very small, brownish purple, brine-cured olives with a poor ratio of flesh to stone, though the flavour more than compensates. The variety is often called Taggiasca, known as Niçoise in neighbouring France.

Serve them at home: Make a Salade Niçoise by tossing steamed green beans and potato chunks, tinned tuna drained of its oil, and chopped tomatoes, with a white wine vinaigrette; serve on a bed of green leaves and garnish with sliced anchovy fillets, quartered boiled eggs and Ligurian olives.

Eat them at: Bistro Moncur, 116 Queen Street, Woollahra, 02 9327 9713 (Vine-ripened tomato salad with Ligurian olives, extra-virgin olive oil and balsamic)

Arbequiña

From northern Spain, these small, light brown olives have a slightly smoky flavour and are one of the few table olives that also produce top quality oil.

Serve them at home: Cook sliced white onions in olive oil till soft. Spread thickly on puff pastry. Lay diagonal strips of anchovies to form diamond shapes, place an olive inside each diamond, drizzle with olive oil and bake in a 200°C oven for 20 minutes, until crisp. This pisaaladière is the Niçoise version of pizza.

Eat them at: Astral, Star City, 80 Pyrmont Street, Pyrmont, 02 9657 8767 (Heirloom tomato salad with goats curd, basil and Arbequiña olive cheeks)



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