



# VIRGIN TERRITORY

EXPLORING THE WORLD OF OLIVE OIL



WITH  
MORE THAN 100  
MEDITERRANEAN  
RECIPES

NANCY HARMON JENKINS

PHOTOGRAPHY BY PENNY DE LOS SANTOS

# VIRGIN TERRITORY

EXPLORING THE WORLD OF OLIVE OIL

Nancy Harmon Jenkins

Photography by Penny De Los Santos



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For Nadir, Neviyat, and Tsega



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# Olives

Sometimes a craving comes for salt, not sweet,  
For fruits that you can eat  
Only if pickled in a vat of tears—  
A rich and dark and indehiscent meat  
Clinging tightly to the pit—on spears  
Of toothpicks, maybe, drowned beneath a tide  
Of vodka and vermouth,  
Rocking at the bottom of a wide,  
Shallow, long-stemmed glass, and gentrified;  
Or rustic, on a plate cracked like a tooth—  
A miscellany of the humble hues  
Eponymously drab—  
Brown greens and purple browns, the blacks and blues  
That chart the slow chromatics of a bruise—  
Washed down with swigs of barrel wine that stab  
The palate with pine-sharpness. They recall  
The harvest and its toil,  
The nets spread under silver trees that foil  
The blue glass of the heavens in the fall—  
Daylight packed in treasuries of oil,  
Paradigmatic summers that decline  
Like singular archaic nouns, the troops  
Of hours in retreat. These fruits are mine—  
Small bitter drupes  
Full of the golden past and cured in brine.

A. E. Stallings

*The New Criterion*, June 2006

# INTRODUCTION

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I fell in love with olive oil almost by accident, but I fell hard. Forty years ago, I bought an abandoned farm, 25 acres high up in the hills of eastern Tuscany, hard by the border with Umbria. A dozen or so olive trees came with the property, all of them overgrown and neglected, scarcely discernible amid the tangle of blackberries and wild gorse that infested the terraces below the tumbledown stone farmhouse. Over the years, those olive trees began to fascinate me, even as they led me to wonder: Who planted them? When? And why? Twelve olive trees would not provide enough oil for an individual, let alone the fairly sizable family that had last inhabited and farmed Pian d'Arcello some eight or ten years earlier. And those decrepit trees scarcely bore any fruit at all.

*Virgin Territory* is in part the story of that fascination and of how it led me on an unending and predictably futile search to find the world's greatest olive oil, a search that led to agronomists and nutritionists, to great research institutions, to small family farms in out-of-the-way corners of the Mediterranean and to vast estates where olives marched in regimented rows to the horizon, and finally back to our own farm, where I eventually added 150 young trees to the collection and where we now make our own superb (if I say so myself) green-gold, Tuscan extra-virgin. It has been a continuing process of education as I have studied and questioned, and as I began to grasp how and why things were done the way they were—and just as important, how and why things began to change.

But something else also happened as I pursued my olive oil education. That was the discovery, beginning in the 1960s, of the “Mediterranean diet,” or rather the Mediterranean way of eating. Diet implies a regimen, a strict adherence to an eating plan with the goal of losing or, more rarely, gaining weight. But the Mediterranean way of eating—with its emphasis on healthful habits based on the consumption of fresh vegetables and fruits, legumes and complex carbohydrates, not much meat, quite a lot of seafood, and above all else the use of extra-virgin olive oil as the principal fat—is less a regime than it is a totally joyful approach to the kitchen and to the table.

As a founder of Oldways Preservation and Exchange Trust, the Boston food-issue think tank that was primarily responsible for educating Americans about the Mediterranean diet, I played a small but gratifying role in the propagation of this great development. Over several decades at Oldways, with my colleagues Greer Drescher and Dun Gifford, we brought together time and again journalists

scientists, nutritionists, educators, and the general public, organized in forums and conferences in the United States and abroad, where we jointly explored what exactly a healthful diet might be and how it might be made more widely available to Americans.

With Oldways and also on my own, I traveled to many parts of the Mediterranean, revisiting places like Spain, France, Cyprus, and Lebanon where I had once lived, and discovering places, like the North African Maghreb, that were entirely new to me. I visited bakers and cheese makers, wineries and markets, all around the Inner Sea. I talked with farmers and chefs and home cooks, with fishermen and market gardeners and commodity grain growers. I stuck my nose into kitchens of all shapes and sizes, and sampled from the cooking pots and the bake ovens. And of course, always and everywhere, I stopped in olive groves, some as ancient as the millenarian trees of Puglia, some as young as the vast new high-density plantations in Andalusia (and in California and Chile, two places that often look Mediterranean even though they are far distant). I visited olive mills, in season and out, to see and taste firsthand what the best producers were doing and how they managed to achieve their quality. And I tasted plenty of rancid, fusty, musty oil at the same time—all to further a deeper understanding. I learned about the different types of olive oil (extra-virgin, virgin, pure, light, flavored), though it took me—and the rest of the world, too, frankly—a long time to understand that high-quality extra-virgin is unique among all types of olive oil for its remarkable health benefits.

Eventually, as the word has spread about olive oil, so too has the cultivation of the olive. In parts of the world with a Mediterranean type of climate, immigrants and colonists planted olive groves, most of them originally no doubt intended for religious uses of the oil. In California, the first olive trees were set out by Spanish mission priests, who needed oil for baptism, unction, and other rituals. Later, Italian immigrants, especially those who came from Liguria, contributed their own varieties and their own techniques. But olives were not a very important crop in California, and table olives were always more important than olives for oil, a situation that has only recently begun to change. In an old issue of *National Geographic* from the early 1940s, I came across a couple of black-and-white photographs of a California olive mill and of ranks of barrels filled, according to the caption, with olive oil and ready for shipment. Another caption praised local olive producers for gearing up to overcome the oil shortfall from the Mediterranean, cut off by war.

Nowadays, olive cultivation has expanded dramatically in Chile, Argentina



Australia, New Zealand, South Africa, and also California; it is spreading even to what would have seemed, just a dozen or more years ago, extremely unlikely parts of the world—China, India, Pakistan—even the U.S. state of Georgia! Why? Because of the health message, because of olive oil's emergence as a must-have item in sophisticated kitchens, because of the market demand that is a result. If most of the world is not yet suffering—and may never suffer—from a glut of high-quality olive oil (we can't seem to get enough of it, in fact), Spanish producers of less-than-top-quality oils are currently suffering the anguish brought on by overproduction. But the rest of the world continues avidly growing, producing, and consuming what many, myself included, believe to be one of nature's most perfect foods.

Olive oil, especially extra-virgin olive oil, is not without its critics, however. Much of the criticism is justified. Prices for extra-virgin are high, especially if consumers can be persuaded that the oil on the shelf, whether in the local supermarket, low-cost chain, or gourmet products store, is genuinely extra-virgin and worth the asking price. And that's where the problem lies. Because, as has been pointed out over and over again, much of what is labeled as extra-virgin in fact is not; sometimes it is not olive oil—or not entirely olive oil—at all. Olive oil is not the only food product, by any means, that is tainted with fraud, but it is the product that at the moment is most questionable in the public mind. Entirely laudable attempts to explain how the fraud occurs have had the unfortunate effect of stigmatizing all olive oil, especially all Italian olive oil.<sup>[1]</sup> Gresham's Law—bad money drives out good—operates here, as with other products: Cheap, badly made, badly handled, or outright and-out duplicitous olive oils, labeled extra-virgin, are driving the truly excellent oils—and there are many of them, from many different parts of the olive oil world—off the market shelves and out of business.

Now more than ever, with all of this oil from likely and unlikely sources circulating in our markets, it seemed to me important for cooks and consumers to understand what exactly extra-virgin olive oil is, to get a good handle on what determines its quality, and to grasp how to tell good oil from bad. So *Virgin Territory* is also a cookbook and a guide, for beginners and experts alike. Each of the 100 or so recipes included herein uses extra-virgin olive oil, sometimes as a cooking medium, sometimes as a key ingredient, sometimes as a condiment or garnish for the plate—and often as all three of these. Above all, whether you're a chef, a cook, or a garden-variety consumer, I hope you'll find in this book a compendium of invaluable information about olive oil in general and extra-virgin olive oil in particular—how to select it, how to use it at the table, and how and why to make it a part of your

cooking, your diet, and your life.

Crusty old Tuscan peasant farmers have come a long way in recent decades, but so too have Americans in their appreciation of olive oil. As recently as 1988, a correspondent in *The New Yorker*'s "Talk of the Town" section could write about the "extremely low cholesterol level" of an extra-virgin olive oil sold at Macy's. The oil was made, surprisingly, by then-Chrysler head Lee Iacocca on his Tuscan farm, but if it had any kind of cholesterol level at all, it wasn't olive oil, which, because it's entirely plant-based, could never be a source of cholesterol in any case. Such was the state of knowledge a mere quarter of a century ago, even at a magazine famed for the rigor of its fact-checking department.

That was the same year in which I first published a story about olive oil, an article in *The New York Times* that asked the perennial olive oil questions, still being asked today: "Is it worth the price?" and "What are consumers getting when they buy extra-virgin olive oil?"<sup>[2]</sup> In the previous year, Americans had imported 51,000 metric tons of olive oil, only about 5 percent of which was extra-virgin. In 2013, we imported more than 290,000 tons, and 65 percent of that was "virgin"—an astonishing increase in that period of time.

Part of the increase was the result of an aggressive marketing campaign by the International Olive Oil Council (now called the International Olive Council or IOC) in the 1980s and 1990s, but part also was certainly traceable to the growing awareness among scientists, researchers, public health authorities, and consumers at all levels of the benefits that olive oil provides as part of a healthful diet. At the same time, in the United States our own homegrown olive industry has burgeoned, mostly in California but with a few outreaches in places as likely as southern Oregon, Texas, and New Mexico and as unlikely as Georgia and Washington State. And uncomfortable, even disquieting questions have been raised constantly about the quality of what is labeled extra-virgin olive oil, especially extra-virgin olive oil imported from the traditional Mediterranean producing regions, Spain and Italy. Mediterranean extra-virgin ought to be the finest kind, but, as almost anyone who has had the misfortune to sample a bottle of standard supermarket extra-virgin knows, too often it is not. Even when it costs a lot.

The demand is greater, much greater, than it was just 10 or 15 years ago, but the knowledge about quality continues to be abysmal, and the knowledge of what quality actually tastes like, what the flavor characteristics are of the best extra-virgin olive oils, remains, for most consumers in the United States and elsewhere, shockingly low. How did we get to a state of affairs where we understand so little

about and treat so badly an ingredient that is not only precious but also honored and lauded as the very symbol of Mediterranean food, a substance that is not only beyond any doubts healthful but also delicious, adding immeasurably to the overall pleasure of the food on our plates? How can we begin to understand what makes *premium* extra-virgin olive oil, and how can we choose it in the marketplace and use it with confidence in our kitchens and on our tables?

I offer this book to try to help answer these questions. Of course it's important to be aware of fraudulent practices in the olive oil industry—just as it is important to be aware of fraud and deception in milk and honey, two other products that are frequent victims of malpractice—and I deal with that misfortune in many places in this book. But it's also important to understand that there is plenty of excellent extra-virgin olive oil available for mindful and attentive chefs, cooks, diners, and food lovers alike. Once you have trained your palate to recognize excellence, you will easily be able to avoid the false, the counterfeit, and the outdated. And by buying only the best, all of us together, we may even come to put the least out of business entirely. Fortunately, training your palate to recognize great, honestly made oil is an easy task—and very agreeable, too. And if you are a chef or a cook, you will quickly come to understand how the myriad flavors of olive oils can be put to use in the kitchen to enhance every dish in which they are used.

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1. Reviewers of a book by journalist Tom Mueller, *Extra-Virginity*, published in 2011, often make claims like the following: “Most of what we eat today on the cheap is actually lampante.” That was in *The Observer* in January 2012. Actually, although he is deeply critical of fraudulent practices, nowhere in the book does Mueller make that claim.

2. As far as I can tell, this was the first-ever major *New York Times* story about olive oil in the food section's entire history.

# Spaghetti Ajo-Ojo-Peperoncino

This is the simplest pasta recipe in the world, one that Italian cooks always turn to when “there’s nothing to eat in the house,” or after a long night of partying when a little sustenance is needed to revive the spirits. To make it, you simply boil up the pasta (which could be spaghetti, linguine, or any other long skinny pasta shape) and dress it with about half a cup of olive oil in which you have heated 4 or more chopped cloves of garlic and a small dried hot red chile pepper broken into 3 or 4 pieces—or a quarter teaspoon or so of hot red pepper flakes. Note that the garlic should be softened but not browned and the chile should be simmered but never left to blacken. Some cooks like to melt a couple of chopped salted anchovies in the oil as well, and a sprinkle of minced parsley at the end adds a nice color contrast. But the trick is to keep it fast and keep it simple—and restrict the ingredients to what every good cook has, or ought to have, in the larder: oil, garlic, dried chile peppers, pasta—*e basta!*





# HOW I TUMBLED (*or stumbled*) INTO OLIVE OIL

I DIDN'T WORRY ABOUT THE TREES AT FIRST. In fact, to be perfectly honest, I hardly noticed that there were a dozen or so scraggly olive trees on the terrace below the crumbling stone structure, all that remained of the farmhouse we had just purchased in what seemed, on reflection, to have been an outbreak of lunacy. It was back in the early 1970s and, after years of wandering, I was bent on investing a very small and unexpected bequest, preferably in land, anywhere in the world or at least anywhere in Europe. As it happened, the land we found, a farm called Pian d'Arcello, was in the hills of eastern Tuscany, as far from the Anglican grandeurs of Chiantishire as the rustic hollows of Appalachia are from the Hamptons or Northeast Harbor.

To dignify it with the word *farmhouse* may be going too far. This place had started its life as what in Tuscany is called a *casa dei contadini* or a *casa colonica*, a humble dwelling with surrounding fields that was part of a larger—sometimes much larger—domain. But the *contadini*, the sharecroppers who had once lived at Pian d'Arcello, had departed some time ago—three years earlier, said Gianfranco, the *padrone*, who was anxious to sell the property in order to finance a scientific pig operation on his own land higher up the mountain; others said it had been at least a decade since

anyone had inhabited the place and worked the land. I could believe the latter more than the former because the house was in such ruinous shape that it was scary even to contemplate camping out under the gaping holes of the roof, much less actually spending time in the place.

There was no running water and no electricity, and the cart track that ambled down the mountainside for a kilometer or so before reaching the house was exactly that—a track for carts but not for cars. Along with dust and spiders, there were scorpions inside the house and vipers outside; wild stinging nettles and brambles overwhelmed what passed for a dooryard, and the terraces with their scattering of olive trees were thoroughly grown up with gorse, broom, heather, more brambles, and a persistent variety of low-growing and scraggly oak that, even when apparently eliminated, still crops up time and again in half a dozen places. The olive trees were strangled, unable to compete with the menace of the *macchia* (the Italian name for this type of Mediterranean scrubland). So it's no wonder I didn't pay attention to them, either then or for some time afterward as, over the next four or five years, the rude stone walls were dismantled and rebuilt, expanding and opening the house in a style that owed more to California than to the rugged hill country of the *montagne cortonesi*, the range east of Cortona that separates Tuscany from Umbria. Gradually, however, once the house neared completion, we began to clear the land, step by step, and the olive trees emerged, twisted, gnarled, spindly, looking like relics from the Late Neolithic—when indeed they might have last borne fruit.

The temptation was to chop them down and start over again. But I have a psychological aversion to cutting down anything with a history that has its roots that deep in the ground. Olive trees are notoriously long-lived. Local boosters and tourist guides alike tout the Galilean olive under which Jesus preached the Sermon on the Mount, or, somewhat more remotely, the tree in Lebanon from which Noah's dove plucked the olive branch to take back to the Ark. Apocryphal as these tales are, there do exist all around the Mediterranean some incredibly old specimens of olive trees, at least a thousand years old or even more. One of these is a Sardinian giant that locals have dubbed *Ozzastru*, an honorific title. According to Jean-Marie Baldassari, a French olive expert who has studied the tree, it may be as much as 3,000 years old—a good deal older than the Sermon on the Mount if not quite as old as Noah. Quite possibly it was planted by Phoenician explorers who settled Sardinia in the eighth century BCE, bringing with them from the shores of Lebanon olive trees and the whole culture of olive oil. This great old survivor has even created its own specific environmental niche, Jean-Marie pointed out to me, like an open-air

terrarium if you will, made up of the tree and its fruits as well as the underground root structure, which is fully as complex and monumental as what we see above ground, along with all the insects, fungi, mosses, parasites, and subsidiary plants, as well as the small animals and birds that inhabit its biosphere. Ozzastru, he said, even has its own weather system.

A tree like that you don't chop down casually, although I'm told that landscapers and their nouveau riche clients will happily pay as much as €18,000 (about \$23,000) for a handsome thousand-year-old specimen of Spanish olive tree, to be excavated from its birthplace and transplanted to a classy golf course or perhaps the entrance to a posh estate. The bedraggled trees on our terraces would not have won any beauty contests, nor could even the most profligate rich man have been persuaded to part with money for one of our survivors. But I am loath to uproot anything that has managed to overcome such adversity, to struggle through generations of human activity, or inactivity in this case. So I did the opposite of cutting them down: I planted a few more. And that was just the beginning.



I GREW UP IN THE KIND OF CLASSIC NEW ENGLAND FAMILY where olive oil was kept in the medicine chest and brought out to rub on the baby's scalp for something called cradle cap, a sort of infant dandruff. It never appeared on the table, not even in salad dressings, which mostly came ready-mixed in bottles marked Thousand Island or Blue Cheese and at best were made, according to the ingredients list, with



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