





# Olives and Oil

## A love story

BY CARLIE FISHGOLD

**B**eneath an olive tree, I sat in the backstreet cobble of the Gran Via district in Madrid, amused by tourists scarfing burgers and shakes in the window of something like a Johnny Rockets. I popped the olive my husband picked into my mouth. Bitter, a juice that made my tongue trawl up against the pucker of a cheek as the pit met my teeth. I spat. It tasted poisonous. How could this be? I love olives! My hands filled with five fat, black pearls or, better, emerald cabochons on each finger. Those hands are mine at any party with a bowl of briny olives.

Javier, my Bostonian friend who grew up in Spain, laughed at me the next day. “They’re cured with lye after they’re picked,” he said. “You can’t just eat them off the tree.”

Oleuropein and phenolic compounds make the fruit revolting until leached out in the curing or brining process. Like all things good, bacteria, salt, and yeast

make table olives a treat. And oil? When you think of olive oil, where do you go in the existential world map of your mind? Italy, right? Maybe Spain if you’re a part-time gourmand. Persia and Mesopotamia are probably the origin of the evergreen olive tree. Like rune stones in their pockets, Phoenician and Greek colonizers’ olive pits spurred cultivation from Iberia to North Africa and as far as Asia Minor during widespread campaigns a half millennium BCE. King Tut even had an olive branch or two in his tomb.

Today, Spain is the number one producer and processor of olive oil in the world followed by Italy and Greece, but imports to the United States are, in order, Italy, Spain, and then Turkey. California dominates the domestic production, and the remaining five percent yield is coming from Texas, Arizona, and Georgia.