

At Peace with the Olive Branch  
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“Do you want to try my olives?” I was talking to an elderly member of our family. “No, there are olive trees over at the Smith’s place. I tried one once. Didn’t like it.” There was no way that I could convince him that my olives did not taste like the one he had tasted right off the tree.

Olives are bitter, and need to be debittered before eating. This is called curing. Green, ripe olives are ready when you see some just starting to get a little blush. These may be lye cured; four tablespoons of lye to one gallon of water. Always add lye to water. Never water to lye. If you add water to lye any splashing will be highly concentrated and could cause burns. I repeat, only add lye to water. This is a very diluted concentration of lye water. Wear gloves. If you get any on you it can be neutralized by using vinegar or lemon juice. The curing time depends on the olive type.

Water cured olives are cut or cracked and then soaked in fresh water, changed daily for a week or more. They will still have some bitterness. This is desirable in some styles of olives. The black ripe olives you buy in the store are green ripe olives that have been exposed to oxygen during lye curing.

Olives and olive oil have been commercially grown, processed and used for over 5000 years. They have been used for food and pressed for oil that has been used as fuel for lamps, for cooking, and as medicine, salve, soap, and food. The Spanish monks brought olives to California, where they thrive because of our Mediterranean climate.

Olives are high in monounsaturated fat and other compounds that act as antioxidants. Olives are a low acid food and must be pressure canned, pickled, heavy salt brined, dry salted, dried or frozen.

There are about as many styles of olives as there are countries in the Mediterranean area. Here are a few descriptions:

Kalamata Style-ripe, fully colored olives, water cured, pickled with salt, water and red wine vinegar.

Mediterranean style-green ripe olives, water cured, pickled with salt, water and white wine vinegar.

Spanish style-lye cured then fermented.

Greek Style-black olives in brine.

Fully ripe olives fermented in salt brine that is changed periodically may take six months or more to cure. Olives may be preserved in heavy salt brine. These olives need to be desalted in fresh water before using. U.C. Publication 8267, Olives: Safe Methods for Home Pickling is available on the ANR communications web site at <http://anrcatalog.ucdavis.edu> . This publication has instructions for all of the above and more. It is a free download. Please take time to attend one of the free public classes on

Olives, offered on October 19 and October 23. All classes are from 10 a.m. to noon in the Bethell-Delfino Agriculture Building at 311 Fair Lane in Placerville. Master Food Preservers are also available to answer home food preservation questions; leave a message at (530) 621-5506. For more information about the public education classes and activities, go to the Master Food Preserver website at [http://ceeldorado.ucdavis.edu/Master\\_Food\\_Preservers/](http://ceeldorado.ucdavis.edu/Master_Food_Preservers/).