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'Liquid Gold' Should be Included in Easter Traditions

Friday, April 14, 2006

By [Marty Cheek](#)

With all the traditions of Easter, such as bunnies, eggs, the holy cross and sunrise services - it's interesting that olive oil isn't really considered all that important of a symbol during the holiday. And yet without olive oil, we would have no Easter celebration this weekend.

I learned this fact last year at Gilroy's Barnes & Nobles bookstore when I met Carol Firenze, the author of "The Passionate Olive: 101 Things to Do with Olive Oil." At her book signing, we got to talking about how olive oil has played a major role in human history - including the religious traditions of Judaism, Islam and Christianity.

From Firenze's entertaining book (which I highly recommend to olive oil fanatics), I learned that olive trees evolved in Asia Minor in probably the Caucasus Mountain region. These tough trees are exceptionally hearty and can live up to 3,000 years, surviving in even semi-arid climates and shallow soil.

In what is now Syria, olive trees were first cultivated by humans around 6,000 B.C. Over the next three millenniums, the trees and their oil spread throughout the diverse Mediterranean cultures.

As olive oil became a precious commodity and a source of great wealth in the ancient world, the "liquid gold" was esteemed as something sacred. At the first Olympic Games in 776 B.C., instead of a gold medal and mass-market endorsement opportunities, athlete winners received an olive branch and olive oil as their prizes.

Legend says the Greek goddess Athena presented the people of Athens with the gift of the olive tree. In thanks, they named their city after her. The Athenian olive oil industry made the city extremely wealthy and politically powerful, allowing its citizens the free time to develop the concept of democracy.

So vital was the olive to Athens that the ruler Solon in 620 B.C. passed the "Olive Protection Law." It decreed anyone found guilty of uprooting or destroying the sacred tree faced a death sentence - a hefty punishment indeed.

Olive oil also played an important role in the trading economics of the Roman Empire. At the bottom of the Mediterranean, maritime scientist Robert Ballard found the remains of Roman sea-trading vessels strewn with thousands of amphora containers used to ship olive oil.

The Spanish explorers and missionaries brought olive oil to the New World to use in the Catholic Mass and also for activities such as cooking, lamps and medicine. They planted the first olive tree in Mexico in 1524.

By the late 1700s, the Franciscans padres planted olive trees in 19 of the 21 California missions. South Valley's Mission San Juan Bautista and the Mission Santa Clara were two sites to receive this horticultural largess.

By 1870, commercial olive oil production began in California. The Mediterranean-like climate served as an ideal spot for the trees and they flourished here. And although production here is not as extensive as in Greece and Crete - which have had a several-thousand-year head-start - California's olive oil product is rapidly gaining international acclaim for its exceptional quality.

In fact, here in the South Valley, hidden in the hills south of Hollister, the Pietra Santa Winery produces an excellent extra-virgin olive oil that has won several prestigious awards, including a gold medal for its 2001 oil at the Los Angeles County Fair.

Part of the recent surge in olive oil usage can be attributed to the national focus on health and nutrition. The oil has been claimed to help improve cardiovascular conditions and other ailments. But the growing interest in the culinary arts - as seen at the famous Gilroy Garlic Festival - has also contributed to olive oil's recent success in the American food market. Good quality olive oil can make a huge difference in the outcome of a dish's flavor.

Considering the history of the olive tree and olive oil, it's no wonder that it has become the symbol of abundance, peace, longevity and wisdom. But religiously speaking, it's also a symbol for immortality - for eternal life. And that's where Easter comes into the story.

Ancient people noted that if an olive tree "died," budding shoots would begin to sprout off of its base trunk and the tree would eventually grow back to life again. To the Greeks, Egyptians and Romans, this horticultural phenomenon took on mythical importance, adding to the mystique of the olive tree and its oil.

The Bible makes more than 140 references to olive oil and hundreds more to the olive tree itself - even describing it as "the king of all trees." After the flood in Genesis, Noah receives an olive branch from a dove, a symbolic promise of peace. And in Exodus, God gives Moses a recipe to make anointing oil out of spices and olive oil to sanctify his half-brother Aaron as head priest.

Today, Christian churches as well as the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints occasionally use olive oil as an anointing fluid signifying God's blessing. It is believed by some that people anointed in church with olive oil are opened to the channels of holy power.

Now here's where things get really interesting religiously speaking. Jesus is considered by Christians to be "the Messiah" or "the Christ." That term is literally translated as "the Anointed One." And what the Prince of Peace was anointed with was - you guessed it - olive oil.

In the book of Matthew in the Bible, Christians have the story of the unnamed woman who did the anointing. (Tradition holds that it was Mary Magdalene.) Jesus proclaims to his disciples: "In pouring this ointment on my body, she has done it to prepare me for burial. Truly, I say to you, wherever this Gospel is preached in the whole world, what she has done will be told in memory of her."

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Sports Reader Poll

Which Gilroy High senior female should be named high school Athlete of the Year?

- Kristen Campos, basketball/golf
- Katherine Hussey, basketball/volleyball
- Karlie Sandoval, field hockey
- Sarah Villar, softball

This poll is closed.

Total Votes: 288

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So there you have it - the olive oil-Easter connection. That's why I'm proposing that olive oil should be considered a vitally important Easter symbol - up there with crazy-colored eggs, chocolate bunnies and those marshmallow Peeps I simply can't stop eating.



Marty Cheek

Marty Cheek is the author of ['The Silicon Valley Handbook.'](#) His column appears every Friday of the month. You can email him at martyc@gilroydispatch.com

