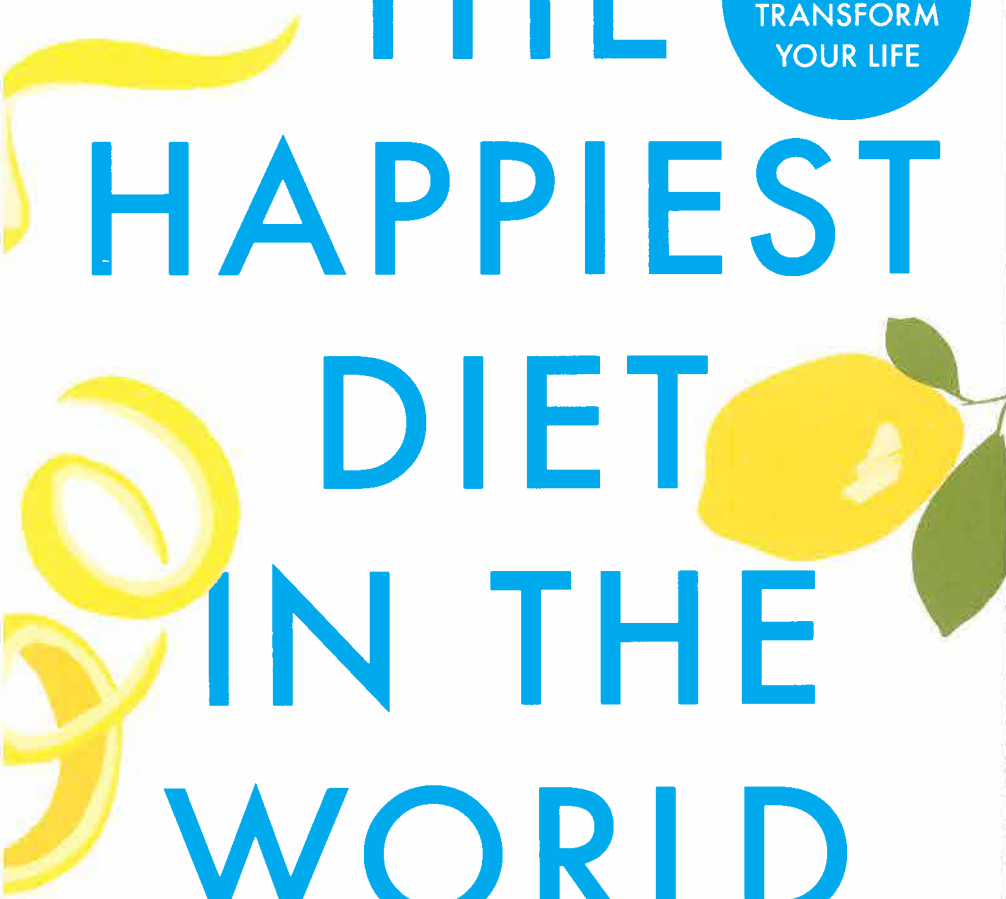


GIULIA CROUCH

WITH DELICIOUS
RECIPES

BLUE ZONE
WISDOM TO
TRANSFORM
YOUR LIFE

THE
HAPPIEST
DIET
IN THE
WORLD



How to eat like the healthiest
people on earth

“A wonderful book about the food I grew up with. Fantastico!”

GENNARO CONTALDO



But don't they make you fat?

The biggest barrier to people eating nuts is a belief that they're high in calories, and while it is true that they're relatively energy-dense, numerous randomised controlled trials have found that eating nuts, even in large quantities, does not cause weight gain. In fact, the opposite has been found. All calories are not equal, as we shall discover later. And nuts have been linked to increased satiety and therefore reduce overall food intake, which actually helps with weight loss. I'm glad that my fiendish peanut butter habit (the stuff that's just whizzed-up peanuts and salt, not a sugary, palm oil nut paste) is now condoned by science.⁸⁴

Liquid gold

There are no superfoods, no superhero ingredients that can swoop in and save the day (your health) all on their own. But... scientists agree that there is something special about olive oil.

Olive oil, called "liquid gold" by Homer in the *Iliad*, has held an important place in world culture for thousands of years. What's thought to be the oldest olive tree in the world stands proudly on the Greek island of Crete, gnarly with the passing of what experts believe to be at least 2,000 years. Remarkably, it still bears fruit to this day. Could it be true that the fruit of this long-living tree extends its longevity to those that eat it?

Olive oil's usefulness has been understood and recognised for a long time. Greek mythology tells how it was Athena,

the goddess of wisdom, who brought the fruitful tree to the world. She was in a contest with Poseidon, the god of the sea, to become the protector of a great new city: whichever deity could offer the citizens a more precious gift would win. In a huge and mighty gesture, Poseidon struck the earth with his trident, causing a salt water stream to appear in its place – impressive but not that useful as the water was undrinkable. Athena knelt gently and planted a tree, the olive tree, providing the people with shade, food, fuel and medicine. She won and the great city was named Athens. Since then, the olive tree has gone on to symbolise many things: success, vitality, friendship, peace and longevity.

Of its many associations, the foremost is health. The Greeks and the Romans certainly believed in the medicinal properties of olive oil. Hippocrates called it “the great healer” and wrote at length about the various ailments it could cure, from burns to cuts and infections. The golden liquid has had many uses throughout history. The Romans massaged it into their hair and skin as a conditioner; ancient Greek athletes rubbed it over their bodies to warm up their muscles pre-competition and provide them with an attractive glow; the living and the dead were anointed with it in ceremonies; excess supply that was no good for eating was used to fuel lamps; and in the 1950s, when my nonna arrived in the UK, it wasn’t sold in the food section of shops but at the chemist as a treatment for ear issues and indigestion.

To this day, we still have a belief that olive oil is good for us and now science is starting to back up this ancient wisdom. Across all the blue zones it is the oil that is most commonly used, especially in Sardinia, Ikaria and Loma Linda.

What does "extra virgin" mean and why does it matter?

If you want to access the health benefits of olive oil you must buy "extra virgin". This is the unadulterated product – essentially olive juice – and denotes that it's been cold-pressed, which means it retains its nutrients and flavour. Anything that is not labelled "extra-virgin" has been treated with heat, which strips it of its health-promoting properties and wonderful taste.

"Extra virgin" also means the oil must be no more than 0.8 per cent acidity, a stipulation which ensures it hasn't oxidised, which would change the nature of the fatty acids and compromise the beneficial components of the oil; and that it has been subjected to rigorous taste tests by a panel of experts to check it's of the right quality. When it comes to buying olive oil, only the real deal will do.

I use extra-virgin in nearly all of my cooking. When I want to fry at a really high heat, which can evaporate some of the flavour compounds, or when the dish I'm making won't work with its distinct flavour, I opt for something else such as cold-pressed rapeseed oil or sesame oil.

You might balk at the expense of extra-virgin olive oil. A litre should cost no less than £12 and if it does you should be suspicious. Olive oil is expensive because making it involves a long, laborious, manual process. I witnessed it first hand on a stay at a Tuscan farm, Fattoria La Violla, one summer. First, you have to climb ladders and rake trees by hand with giant plastic combs; rather like detangling particularly thick and matted hair. You let the olives drop gently onto huge nets, which are later scooped up with great care so as to not

bruise any of the delicate fruits, which would affect the flavour of the oil. Timing is of the essence. The olives must be washed and crushed within 12 to 24 hours of being harvested to retain their quality. As the olive paste is separated from the oil, both must be protected from oxygen and kept under 27 degrees Celsius throughout the whole process, including bottling. It's hard work but worth it. When considering the price, don't compare it to other oils like vegetable or sunflower – it is a very different product.

A complex flavour to rival wine

I adore quality olive oil and eat it every day. I put it on ripe, sliced tomatoes in summer with some crunchy sea salt and dip bread into the pool left on the plate at the end; I drizzle it on all of my pasta and vegetables and sometimes enjoy it on vanilla ice cream – trust me, it's a taste sensation.

I even had an olive oil cocktail recently at a restaurant in London, which blew me away.

For me, olive oil is a unique ingredient because there's so much complexity to it. There's the mouthfeel of the fat, which is nourishing and comforting, alongside the cough-inducing spice you get from a quality product. Then comes a tantalising tickle of bitter with this incredible freshness of grass and a subtle sweetness. Depending on where the oil is from and the season in which the olives were picked, there will be varying notes and sensations from artichoke to black pepper.

It sounds like I'm describing wine and that's because they are similar: single ingredients that offer huge breadths of flavour. Furthermore, thrillingly, scientists are now starting to

discover that Athena was wise and Hippocrates was on to something: olive oil really is *astoundingly* good for you.

Midway between food and medicine

“It’s a ‘nutraceutical’ product,” explains Bandino Lo Franco, one of three brothers who owns Fattoria La Vialla. “That’s to say it is midway between food and medicine.” This might seem strange, considering it’s a liquid fat (98 per cent fat) but Bandino recommends daily consumption, because the lipids, or fatty compounds, in it are of the healthiest kind: a monounsaturated fat called oleic acid makes up 73 per cent of olive oil, polyunsaturated fat, such as omega-6 and omega-3 fatty acids, make up 11 per cent, and the rest is saturated fat. Studies suggest that oleic acid, the main component of olive oil, is helpful in reducing inflammation.⁸⁵ In fact, the anti-inflammatory quality of olive oil has been found to be so potent that it works strikingly similarly to the drug ibuprofen.⁸⁶

Though small, the rest of olive oil’s make-up should not be disregarded, says Bandino. “The remaining part of its content, between 1 and 2 per cent, is composed of approximately 220 secondary metabolites of the plant and its fruits. They’re minor but extremely significant components. Particularly worthy of mention are the high content of vitamins A and E (tocopherol) and the numerous families of polyphenols, among which are hydroxytyrosol and oleuropein.”

As we know, polyphenols feed our good gut bacteria, helping them to grow, and have an antioxidant (protective) effect in the body.

Interestingly, polyphenols can communicate their pres-

ence via taste. “That spicy, tingly sensation on the tongue when you try olive oil isn’t a defect,” says Bandino. “Quite the contrary: it’s a sign of quality, which is more evident in oils that have been pressed recently, and doesn’t depend on acidity but on the presence of polyphenols, tocopherols and, to a lesser extent, terpenes. These precious elements are natural antioxidants; they protect the plant and fruit and, at the same time, are a panacea for our diet. As the months go by, the bitter and pungent notes progressively diminish.”

As a general rule of thumb, the higher the polyphenol content, the more bitter and pungent the taste of the oil. The Italian chef Francesco Mazzei has this trick for identifying a decent olive oil: “If it makes you cough when you drink it, that means it’s very good. If it just slips down like nothing, it’s bad.”

And what about longevity?

Never mind which component of olive oil does what – the overall effect is a good one, a very good one. A Harvard study published in the *Journal of the American College of Cardiology* in 2022 found that out of 92,000 people followed over 28 years, those who consumed the most olive oil (a tad more than half a tablespoon a day) were 19 per cent less likely to die from any cause compared to those who infrequently or never consumed olive oil.⁸⁷

It reduced the risk of dying from neurodegenerative disorders such as Alzheimer’s disease and Parkinson’s disease by 29 per cent, from cardiovascular disease by 19 per cent and from cancer by 17 per cent. The study also found that swapping fat such as butter, mayonnaise and margarine for olive

oil was associated with a lower risk of mortality.

“What was surprising were the benefits for diseases other than cardiovascular disease, which is already well documented,” the author of the study, Marta Guasch-Ferré, told *The Times*. “And the fact that relatively large gains came with small increases in consumption.”

At Fattoria La Violla, Bandino’s great-grandmother, Nonna Caterina, used to drink olive water, “*acqua mora*” (dark water), a very bitter by-product of oil-making, a couple of times a day during pressing season. She lived to be 98 and swore it was the reason for her vitality into old age. Since then, scientists have discovered that this waste product is overflowing with polyphenols; it contains 20 times the amount of olive oil itself. As Bandino puts it: “As often happens, our elders were right about things which modern times have relegated to the category of curiosities or superstitions.” If you’re interested, the farm now sells the olive water for customers to the public.

It can be difficult, as consumers these days, to know what to believe, with the hyping of particular foods (blueberries, quinoa, kale). However, the exceptional nature of extra-virgin olive oil is hard to deny, especially in comparison to other oils, so adding this ancient nutraceutical to your diet is a wise move.

What’s the deal with dairy?

The scientists who researched the blue zones reported two points of interest about the inhabitants’ approach to dairy. First, that goat’s and sheep’s milk is more common in their