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Jewish Holidays

Go On, Let That Oil Shine

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For an item so essential, oil has received little of my attention. I just automatically reach for my trusty extra-virgin olive oil for most of my Jewish and Italian cooking—frying meatballs, dressing salads,

Recipe from this story:

- [Spaghetti Aglio e Olio](#)
[\(https://web.archive.org/web/20160426041058/http://jewishfoodexperience.com/recipe/spaghetti-aglio-e-olio/\)](https://web.archive.org/web/20160426041058/http://jewishfoodexperience.com/recipe/spaghetti-aglio-e-olio/)

balls. And at Chanukah, generous amounts of oil are just something my latkes and other fried delicacies pass through on the way to deliciousness.

However, oil, particularly olive oil, is fundamental not only to the flavor of my cooking, but also to Mediterranean cuisine, Israel's diet and economy and Jewish history. It's an ingredient that ties together the Jewish heritage I adopted when I converted and the Italian heritage I was born with. Appreciating such connections always make my food endeavors more rewarding. And what better time of year to take a closer look at oil than Chanukah, during which we celebrate a story of a small vial of oil creating light for eight miraculous nights?

Of course, that first oil was olive oil. Archeological evidence suggests people in Israel were processing olive oil more than 6,500 years ago. The Mediterranean climate of Israel, Italy and Greece suits olive trees well, and they have thrived there. Furthermore, olive oil is one of the seven species for which the land of Israel is praised. Interestingly, although used for everything from cosmetics to medicine, olive oil didn't become truly popular for cooking among Israeli Jews until the late 1980s, when it resurged along with a passion for Italian cooking.

Today, of course, extra-virgin olive oil is used all over the world. It is a healthful fat in moderation and can be surprisingly delicious and nuanced if we seek out good-quality products. But there's the rub. To learn more about this, I met with Cary Kelly, owner of and visionary behind [Ah Love Oil & Vinegar](#) (<https://web.archive.org/web/20160426041058/http://www.ahloveoilandvinegar.com/>)—two stores in Virginia and one in DC. She fell in love with olive oil after traveling through Europe post-college and seeing and tasting how it could transform food.

Kelly scared me at first by pointing out that as much as 90 percent of the olive oil Americans buy in our supermarkets features chemicals, impurities or rancid flavors. So most of us don't know what true extra-virgin olive oil—which should be from the first pressing, low in acidity and absent of any solvents—tastes like. You get even farther away from good flavor with oils labeled "pure" and "light," which are lower in quality and can feature chemicals and other additives.

Good olive oil is like wine in that its flavor varies by climate, soil, type of olive and when and how the olives are processed, noted Kelly. The earlier in the season the olives are harvested and pressed, the greener and more bitter the oil. Kelly's stores offer the chance to explore, learn and discover the tastes of authentic extra-virgin olive oils and find

flavors that complement your palate and cooking style.



At the end of our conversation, Kelly said something I'd like to share with you. She said she wanted to add a different type of dish to my Jewish-Italian Chanukah repertoire. "We need to think differently about olive oil. Rather than a cooking utility, consider using it to enhance dishes the same way you would use herbs and spices."

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So—on to a dish that celebrates the richness, taste and elegance of the oil itself. I turned to an Italian classic in which oil shares top billing: *spaghetti aglio e olio* (pronounced AH-I'yoh eh OH-I'yoh). Unlike many Chanukah recipes that will keep you busy in the kitchen for hours, this flavorful preparation of pasta, garlic and oil, plus chili pepper and parsley, comes together in less than 30 minutes.

A smooth, well-balanced extra-virgin olive oil makes an ideal base for the garlic and pepper. I particularly liked using the organic and kosher Makura brand, made from Souri olives indigenous to Israel (the current bottling is nicely smooth).

But the other ingredients make the recipe a good fit as well. Garlic has been key in much of both Italian and Jewish cuisine (and some Jews historically believed garlic protected against the evil eye). The hot red pepper gives just a little fire, reminiscent of the flame that lights the festival.

Remembering Kelly's advice to think of olive oil more as an herb or spice, for a final (albeit nontraditional) touch, I drizzle a finishing extra-virgin olive oil—one with exquisite flavor meant to be used for dressings or drizzling over food—over the tossed pasta. Along with a sprinkle of sea salt, it gives the final dish a beautiful, sophisticated flavor. Both robust fruity oils as well as roasted chili oil worked beautifully.

Moreover, using a few drops of my most precious oil nicely symbolizes that little bit of oil that lasted eight nights. And that's what I love—when elements of recipes unite and enhance the celebration of holidays, history and heritage. That meaningfulness makes the food taste even better.

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