

GUIDE TO OLIVES

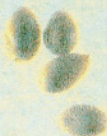
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Food Section

BY CAROLYN ZEJIMA
Special to the Chronicle

TART GREEN OLIVES

PICHOINE ▶

Description: This brined French olive is small, pointed and medium green.
Texture and flavor: Smooth, relatively crisp; mild, buttery, lightly salted.
Uses: Versatile. Fine eaten alone; good in cooking — pairs well with rabbit, nice in stews. Also good in spreads and sandwiches.



LUCQUE ▶

Description: This brined French olive has a medium size, curvy shape; it's bright green.
Texture and flavor: Salty, acidic, nutty, somewhat bitter.
Uses: A good aperitif olive; also takes well to marinades; good in chicken dishes.



ASCOLANE ▶

Description: This brined Italian olive is large, round and bright green.
Texture and flavor: Soft outside, hard inside. Gentle flavor; a bit salty with an herbal aftertaste.
Uses: Good for eating out of hand; nice in pastas and sandwiches.



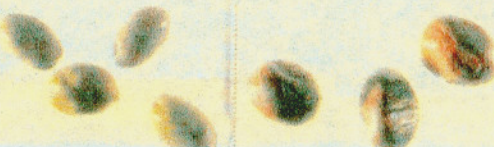
In the past decade, Mediterranean-style olives have poured into the California market. These days, with very little searching, you can find more than a dozen varieties — often at supermarkets, nearly always at specialty grocers and upscale delis.

When shopping, keep in mind that labeling is often a hit-or-miss affair; the same olive may be marketed under several names. Only the French Nyons — grown for more than 2,000 years and known as the king of olives — has a legally defined name; like French wine grapes, it's cultivated and marketed under strict regulations.

If you're not sure, just keep looking and tasting until you find olives that you consistently like, both for eating and cooking. Here's a general guide to the Mediterranean imports.

Attorney Carolyn Zejima is a student at the California Culinary Academy.

PHOTOS BY JAY SQUIRE FOR THE CHRONICLE



▲ IONIAN

Description: This brined Greek olive is medium-large, round and bright green.
Texture and flavor: Firm, crisp; salty and buttery.
Uses: Marinate for aperitif olives; nice accent for seafood salads.

▲ AMFISSA

Description: This brined Greek olive is large, round and black-purple.
Texture and flavor: Thick skin, meaty texture; full, fruity flavor.
Uses: Good in pastes and spreads, antipasti; marinate in oil and herbs for an aperitif, cook into lamb dishes.

▲ KALAMATA

Description: This brined Greek olive is medium-size, black-purple and almond-shaped. It's usually slit and cured in brine.
Texture and flavor: Smooth, firm texture; fruity but tart.
Uses: Great in Greek salads, olive pastes and sandwiches; also with lamb or fish.

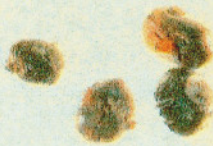
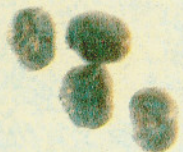
▲ GAETA

Description: This brined Italian olive is medium-small, brown-purple, round and slinky.
Texture and flavor: Firm and fleshy; rich and strong with tannic or smoky overtones.
Uses: Excellent in antipasti salads; also pasta sauces with tomatoes and garlic.

DRY-CURED BLACK

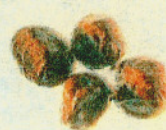
▲ MOROCCO

Description: This dry-cured black olive is medium-large and inky-black with wrinkled skin.
Texture and flavor: Semi-soft, meaty; highly salty and bitter.
Uses: Nice in olive pastes and spreads; good in fish stews.



▲ FRENCH DRY-CURED

Description: This dry-cured olive is often imported from Morocco and is similar in style to the Morocco olive. Dark and wrinkly, it's often cured with herbes de Provence.
Texture and flavor: Semi-soft and salty; somewhat bitter with an herbal flavor.
Uses: Excellent in olive pastes and spreads, fish stews, pizza.



▲ GROSSANE

Description: This dry-cured black olive from the South of France is medium-size and purple-black. After dry-curing, it's often soaked in a pepper marinade.
Texture and flavor: Soft flesh, large pit; moist, juicy mouth-feel, with perfumed floral aroma and flavor.
Uses: Try in antipasti, pizza, pasta sauces with cream.

Still More Ideas

Here are some quick ways to enjoy the richly complex flavors of commonly available Mediterranean olives:

▶ **Tapenade.** This Provençal classic consists of black olives, anchovies, capers, lemon juice, olive oil and sometimes tuna. Tapenade is easy to make in a food processor, and you can adjust the anchovies and capers to suit your taste. Spread the puree on grilled swordfish, use *crudités*, or use a dollop on grilled swordfish. Many good tapenades are available commercially.

▶ **Marinated, spiced olives.** These are easy to buy these days, but Maggie Klein, owner of Oliveto restaurant in Oakland and author of "The Feast of the Olive," likes making her own. Flavoring ideas: olive oil with herbs (thyme or oregano) and red chile flakes; a

weeklong soak in lemon juice, minced garlic and lots of black pepper. Experiment to find combinations you like.

▶ **Pasta puttanesca.** This nippy pasta sauce with a colorful history (the name roughly translates as "whore's pasta") combines olives such as Kalamata, Nicoise or Gaeta with tomatoes, capers, anchovies, minced garlic and chile flakes.

▶ **Red pepper antipasto.** Pair dry-cured black olives with roasted red peppers (bottled is fine, homemade is better), and drizzle with extra virgin olive oil and assertive herbs such as oregano or thyme.

▶ **Pasta with feta and olives.** Maggie

Klein tosses the peppery Grossane olive (pitted and roughly chopped) with feta cheese, heavy cream and fresh basil for a fast pasta sauce. Just before serving, sprinkle on some freshly ground black pepper to accentuate the flavor of the olive.

▶ **Olive sandwiches.** These can be addictive. Try that Cajun classic, the muffaletta, by combining cheese, cold cuts and a "salad" of minced tart olives, garlic, herbs, olive oil and vinegar. Or try the *patafio* — a hollowed-out baguette spread with a mixture of olive oil, assorted brine-cured olives, tomatoes, garlic, red peppers, purple onions and capers. Even something as simple as chopped black olives combined with a little mayonnaise makes a

great spread for a slice of rustic artisan bread.

▶ **Watercress olive salad.** Klein favors the Nicoise olive for a composed salad of sliced pears, watercress and olives; drizzle with a vinaigrette of olive oil and fragrant Meyer lemon juice just before serving.

▶ **Olive butter.** Mix finely chopped Kalamatas with softened butter as a topping for fish.

▶ **All alone.** Even olive experts admit they love to simply eat them out of hand. Linda Sokorski, manager of the Pasta Shop at the Market Hall in Oakland's Rockridge district, says the Italian Ascolane is ideal. And Klein touts the Picholine as the perfect eating olive — with figs and a crisp, dry white wine.