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Oil boom — Americans catching on to health ingredient's benefits, versatility

By **Valerie Phillips**

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Olive oil has become the fat of choice for health-conscious cooks. Long a staple in Mediterranean countries, Americans are catching on to the fact that olive oil is more versatile than salad dressing and bread-dipping.

Canned tuna, when packed in olive oil, has elevated its prestige among foodies. And on the baking front, olive oil has found its way into cakes, cookies and pies. Utahn Micki Sannar of Highland recently self-published a book called "Olive Oil Desserts," which contains 52 recipes with favorites such as chocolate chip cookies, cheesecake and brownies.

Sannar said she started baking with olive oil for her family about five years ago, when she and her husband were diagnosed with high LDL (low-density lipoprotein, or "bad") cholesterol. Switching from butter, margarine and shortening to olive oil is part of what she calls "stealth nutrition."

"When people have to change their diets, it's easier to just change it slightly," she said. "People still want dessert. If the taste and texture is off, nobody is going to eat it."

She credits the monounsaturated fat in olive oil for lowering her LDL cholesterol and raising her HDL (high-density lipoprotein, or "good") cholesterol. Butter contains saturated fat, and margarine and shortening contain hydrogenated oils, or trans fats, which studies have linked to added risk of heart disease.

In addition to the monounsaturated fat, numerous studies have lauded the health benefits of antioxidants and phenolic compounds found in olive oil.

Sannar's recipes required some experimentation, because butter or shortening give baked goods a tender and flaky texture. Sannar found you need one-fourth to one-third less olive oil than shortening or butter, "Otherwise the recipe will be too greasy," she said. She was also able to adapt many recipes to whole-wheat pastry flour, another nutrition bonus.

Still, one should keep in mind that these desserts are not fat- or calorie-free.

Olive oil — like all oils — has 120 calories per tablespoon (butter and regular margarine have 100 calories per tablespoon).

However, many of the cakes in the cookbook are unfrosted, because "They're so rich and good they don't need frosting. I just do a dusting with powdered sugar or a glaze. That cuts a lot of calories. I tried to cut back on sugar, but I had to use enough to keep the taste and texture. It's still dessert, and you need those fats and sugar to fix the cravings," Sannar said.

"The biggest challenge I had was getting a pie crust," she said. "I thought I wouldn't be able to get a pie crust in my cookbook because it was so hard. But I finally got it, and the texture is amazing. It really is flaky. One of the secrets is that I use buttermilk in it."

When she decided to publish her book, she invited friends and neighbors to a tasting of 26 recipes. "Anything rated below an 8 was taken out," she said. "I had such great reviews on the pie crust, and people were surprised that it all tasted so good."

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Then there's the tuna-in-olive-oil phenomenon. Long a staple in Mediterranean countries, tuna packed in olive oil now has Americans coughing up as much as \$10 for a 7-ounce jar. Why? Connoisseurs

say the tuna has a better flavor and texture when packed in olive oil.

"Olive oil is a better preservative, due to all the polyphenols it contains," said Matt Caputo of Caputo's Market & Deli, where the demand for the tuna has surged over the past five years. "But it's also better for you, and it's a nicer flavor."

But don't forget the fat and calories. A 2-ounce serving of oil-packed Genoa tuna, drained, is 130 calories, with 70 of those calories coming from fat. By comparison, a 2-ounce serving of water-packed tuna is 70 calories, with five of those calories from fat. Most people don't drain off the olive oil that's in the can; they toss it in with the pasta or use it in a salad instead of adding extra oil for a dressing. (Considering the price, this tuna isn't really meant for cream-of-mushroom soup casseroles.)

"The most common use is to take nice greens, squeeze a little lemon juice over it and top it with tuna, right out of the can," said Caputo.

Kalyn Denny, a West Bountiful schoolteacher who writes a food blog called Kalyn's Kitchen, got wind of the trend while reading other food blogs.

"It made me realize there was a whole world of tuna I didn't know about," she wrote in her blog. "Did I love the Italian tuna packed in olive oil, even though it was a lot more expensive than the cans I usually buy at Costco? My wallet is sorry to report that I took one bite and never looked back."

"We've carried this product in a variety of brands and sizes for a long time, and we have a strong demand for it in our retail markets," said Alan Marshall, warehouse manager at Granato's Importing Co.

In the United States, most of the oil-packed tuna contains soybean or vegetable oil. But to keep up with the trend, Chicken of the Sea sells an olive-oil packed, premium yellowfin tuna under the label Genova. The name, as well as the packaging, gives the false impression that it just came off the boat from Italy. But, on the bright side, the Genova product is priced at a more reasonable \$2.49 per 6-ounce can.

One brand, Angelo Parodi, enjoyed an almost cult-like following. "But the demand became so high that they have stopped shipping to America anymore, because there's not enough fish to meet the demand," said Caputo, who still has a few cans hidden away. "They said they are going to take care of their European market first."

Caputo said the Angelo Parodi label was prized because it only contained ventresca, the meat from the center of the tuna's belly, which is considered the best. Other factors that are likely to raise the price: if the tuna is yellowfin or white meat; if the tuna is in large, solid strips rather than chunks; and if it was caught by the hook-and-line method instead of with a net.

"The common method for harvesting is with a net, so the fish get a lot of lactic acid buildup and the flesh is more acidic," Caputo said. "If it's hook-and-line-caught, the flesh is also supposed to be softer."

For instance, the 7-ounce, \$9.95 glass jar of Callipo's solid light yellowfin tuna from Italy has four large, chunky strips of meat and is certified to be hook-and-line-caught. Spain's Ormaza brand Bonito del Norte, which features solid chunks of white meat tuna, runs around \$4.49 for a 2-ounce can.

"When people ask if they're insane to spend \$4 on a can of tuna, we tell them if you don't think it's worth it, we'll give you your money back," said Caputo. "And then they come back and fill up a whole cart full of it. I have been really surprised at what the Salt Lake market will support."

MACADAMIA CRUNCHERS

2/3 cup pure or light olive oil

1 1/2 cups powdered sugar

2/3 cup brown sugar, packed

3 tablespoons milk

1 large egg

- 2 large egg whites
- 1 1/2 teaspoons pure vanilla extract
- 1 teaspoon butter extract
- 2 cups flour
- 1/2 teaspoon baking powder
- 1 teaspoon baking soda
- 1/2 teaspoon salt
- 3/4 cup macadamia nuts, chopped
- 1 cup crispy rice cereal
- 1 cup vanilla baking chips

Preheat oven to 375 degrees. Coat cookie sheet with olive oil cooking spray.

In a mixing bowl, add olive oil, powdered sugar, brown sugar, milk, egg, egg whites, vanilla and butter extracts. Blend on high speed 2 minutes. Add flour, baking powder, baking soda and salt. Blend well. Fold in macadamia nuts, crispy rice cereal and vanilla chips.

Drop by teaspoonfuls or small cookie scoop onto prepared baking sheet. Bake 8-10 minutes or until cookies are light brown. — "Olive Oil Desserts," by Micki Sannar. "Olive Oil Desserts" is available on Amazon.com and Oliveoildesserts.com.

PINEAPPLE COCONUT CAKE

- 3/4 cup pure or light olive oil
- 2 teaspoons lemon zest
- 1 cup granulated sugar
- 2 large eggs
- 1 large egg white
- 1 teaspoon pure vanilla extract
- 3/4 cup pineapple juice
- 1/2 cup coconut
- 2 cups flour
- 3 teaspoons baking powder
- 1 teaspoon salt

Pineapple Frosting:

- 1/4 cup pure or light olive oil
- 3 cups powdered sugar
- 1 teaspoon pure vanilla extract
- 1/3 cup pineapple juice

Preheat oven to 350 degrees. Coat one 9-by-9-inch pan with olive oil cooking spray.

In a mixer bowl, add olive oil, lemon zest, sugar, eggs and egg white. Beat on medium speed for 1

minute. Add vanilla, pineapple juice and coconut, and mix until well-blended. Add flour baking powder and salt. Blend until just mixed.

Pour into prepared pan. Bake 35-40 minutes or until top turns brown and a knife inserted into the center comes out clean. Cool completely and frost.

To make frosting, combine olive oil, powdered sugar, vanilla and pineapple juice in a mixer bowl and blend until smooth. Frost cake. — "Olive Oil Desserts," by Micki Sannar. "Olive Oil Desserts" is available on Amazon.com and Oliveoildesserts.com.

WHITE BEAN TUNA SALAD

1 can white beans, rinsed and drained well

1 can Italian tuna in olive oil (or any tuna packed in oil will work)

1 cup chopped curly parsley (or less if you don't love parsley like I do)

1/4 cup finely diced red onion

Dressing:

3 tablespoons good quality extra-virgin olive oil

2 tablespoons fresh lemon juice

Black pepper and sea salt to taste

Put beans in colander and rinse well with cold water, until no more foam appears. Let drain, then pat dry with paper towels. Drain oil from tuna and discard; put tuna in mixing bowl. Add beans, chopped parsley and diced onion, and gently combine. (Don't overstir, you want the tuna to stay a bit chunky.)

In small bowl, whisk olive oil and lemon juice. Gently mix dressing into salad. If you prefer your salads on the dry side, you may not want all the dressing. Season to taste with fresh ground black pepper and sea salt and serve.

This will stay good in the refrigerator for at least a day or two, but it probably won't last that long. Makes 2-3 servings. — Kalyn Denny, Kalynskitchen.com

TUNA & TOMATO PASTA SALAD

1/2 pound dried pasta

1/3 cup chopped oil-packed sun-dried tomatoes, plus 1/3 cup of the oil from the jar

1/4 cup lemon juice

1/2 cup chopped red bell pepper

1/2 cup chopped onions

3 cloves garlic, finely minced (about 1 tablespoon)

1/4 cup chopped fresh basil

1/4 cup chopped fresh parsley

2 6-ounce cans olive-oil packed tuna (do not drain)

1/2 cup pitted kalamata olives (or more if desired)

1 to 2 cups grape tomatoes

Salt and pepper to taste

Cook pasta to package directions. Drain pasta and toss with sun-dried tomatoes, oil, lemon juice, pepper, onions, garlic, basil and parsley. Fold in tuna, olives and tomatoes. Add salt and pepper to

taste. Serves 4-6.

Options: Add chopped celery, peas or other favorite veggies. — Valerie Phillips

TUNA SANDWICH

1/4 of white onion, thinly sliced

1/8 of a small red onion, thinly sliced

2 tablespoons extra-virgin olive oil, plus additional for drizzling

1 tablespoon red-wine vinegar, plus additional to taste

1/4 teaspoon salt, plus additional to taste

Black pepper to taste

1 6-ounce can tuna packed in olive oil, including olive oil

Lemon juice to taste

2 kaiser rolls, plain

Lettuce leaves, combination of Boston, green-leaf or other green leafy lettuce

8 tomato slices

6-8 hard-boiled eggs slices

4 anchovy fillets, drained

Olives

Scallions, chopped, for garnish

Radishes, sliced, for garnish

In a bowl, combine the red and white onion with extra-virgin olive oil, red-wine vinegar, salt and several grinds of black pepper.

Using your hands, mix and squeeze everything together for 5 minutes. (Don't rush through this part; the onions need time to release their juices and mellow.)

Add the tuna, including the oil. Season with the fresh lemon juice and add more pepper to taste.

Cut kaiser rolls in half crosswise and spread each bottom half with lettuce leaves. Use a couple of varieties for the difference in texture.

On top of each lettuce layer, arrange 4 tomato slices. Then add about half the tuna mixture and 3 to 4 slices of hard-boiled egg.

Crisscross each sandwich with two drained anchovy fillets and strew with olives, chopped scallion greens, and sliced radishes. Then drizzle generously with more olive oil and top with the remaining kaiser halves, pressing gently but firmly. — Gourmet, February 2001

E-mail: vphillips@desnews.com

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