

Preface

The origin of the cultivated olive tree lies rooted to legend and tradition. It started about 5000–6000 years ago within a wide strip of land by the eastern Mediterranean Sea. The oldest reference to the olive tree in the Bible occurs in its first book, Genesis, where the flight of the dove with the olive branch announcing the end of the flood is described. Numerous Mediterranean civilisations – Phoenicians, Greeks, Hebrews and Romans – contributed to expand olive tree cultivation all around the Mediterranean Sea.

Myths, legends, customs, history, literature, cuisine, medicine and economy have always been related to the sacred tree of the Mediterranean. Greek and Spanish cultures were especially linked to it and many published references to the olive tree well illustrate these ties. The National Archaeological Museum in Madrid has a Greek vase dated circa 350 BC, on which is depicted the dispute between Pallas Athene and Poseidon over the name that should be given to what was to become Athens. The goddess made an olive tree sprout from the earth, winning from Poseidon the right to give her name to the recently founded colony of Attica. The olive tree was cultivated in the Guadalquivir Valley by pre-Roman people. Strabo writes that the olive plantations of the Baetica (the actual Andalusia) were admirably tended. The oldest written reference on how to prepare table olives is from the first century text by Lucius Junius Moderatus Columela (42 BC), *De re rustica*. The book is a detailed report on agricultural practices and food processing, and describes various methods of preparing olives for eating. His instructions give an idea of just how old the tradition is in Andalusia: ‘Throw into a modius of olives a sextary of mature aniseed and mastic-tree oil and three cyati of fennel seed; in default of this last, the amount of chopped fennel that seems sufficient. Then mix with each modius of olives three heminae of ungrounded toasted salt, place the olives in amphoras and cover them with fennel.’ The tradition has continued for centuries and Seville is the largest table olive producer in the world.

During the 15th and 16th centuries, Spanish colonisers spread olive plantings to the New World (South and North America). A book, dated 1530, tells that all ships bound for the Indies should transport at least a few olive samplings: ‘Henceforth all ships’ captains travelling to the Indies shall take in their vessels the amount of wine and olive plants they see fit, but none shall leave without at least some on board.’ Spain was thus contributing to the universal fate of olive culture. The olive tree was introduced to Australia at the beginning of the 19th century.

Myths and pagan or religious customs are also tied to the olive tree and to the oil that oozes from its fruit. The olive was the traditional food of Mediterraneans, and, according to Ovid in his *Metamorphoses*, was also the food of gods. Baucis prepared a meal based on