

Olive Oil gets a Desi Twist

Kavitha Srinivasa, *Bangalore*



Binging on Indian junk food is now guilt-free eating, thanks to olive oil, which keeps it light and healthy. It's a slim chance of adding kilos

Sample this. At the Leela Palace Bangalore, one of their fast selling items on the Indian menu is made with olive oil. The kitchen brigade arrived at the dish because they wanted to make health-centric Indian dishes. With some experiments, the team zeroed in on Bharta Zaitooni. For the uninitiated, it is Baingan ka Bharta, brinjal/aubergine roasted and mashed, made with olive oil and garnished with black olives. “We didn’t have to tweak the recipe, but replaced oil and ghee with olive oil. It made a world of a difference. We use 200 ml olive oil for 3,000 gm of large brinjals, in place of 300 gm of ghee. Even for the roasting, raw brinjal is brushed with olive oil before tandoor-roasting happens,” said Farman Ali, Corporate Master Chef Indian Cuisine, The Leela Palaces, Hotels and Resorts, The Leela Palace Bangalore. Since then, this has been a favourite among gourmands. “We can use the olive oil in Kadhai vegetables, which reduces the calorie content, while retaining the zestful flavour. It can also be used in chicken dishes like Murgh Zartaar, Murgh Do Pyaza and murgh stew to enhance the health benefits

without altering the original taste,” explained Ali.

Such culinary creations are not to be seen in isolation. In various parts of the country, there are efforts to enhance the health quotient of a dish, which would otherwise contain dollops of desi ghee.

Higher Taste, the Sattvic restaurant at ISKCON Bangalore is in the process of experimenting with olive oil, especially when it comes to seasoning. “We have learnt that seasoning rasam and sambar with olive oil does not alter the taste or flavour. Vegetable dishes like poriyal and varuval can be successfully made with olive oil,” added Kaivalyapati Das, Executive Chef, *Higher Taste*. The tagline of Higher Taste is to serve healthy food and this is researched at an internal food lab. “These dishes need to pass through a green lighting process, which is underway right now. We see these dishes being offered to our customers on an intermittent basis in the near future,” said Chamari Devi Dasi and Kaivalyapati Das, Joint Heads, Food Innovation and Engineering, Higher Taste.

A high incidence of cardiac diseases, coupled with the fact that olive oil may help lower hypertension, inflammation and problems associated with obesity have created a market for it in India. Olive oil is high in monounsaturated fats and has antioxidants, a trademark that convinced Krishna Shantakumar, the general manager of Aswati Group, which owns On the Edge restaurant in Bangalore. As high-end chefs used olive oil to whip up gourmet dishes at the fine dining Italian restaurant, Shantakumar decided to try out olive oil at home. The intuition was right. Ever since he switched to olive oil, he has never regretted it.





“Once you reach a critical age, it’s best to opt for olive oil. Of course, this can happen only after mindsets change,” said Shantakumar and added that awareness created by zippy food shows enabled people make conscious choices. “This has helped shatter myths about olive oil, that being it carries the smell of olives. Olive oil is suited for frying at a moderate temperature, as the food absorbs the oil. My rotis, cutlets and dosas are made with olive oil,” said Shantakumar, sharing the experience. Olive oil forms a crisp, golden crust while frying food between 130C and 190C. The food remains light and digestible and after filtering the oil, it can be reused two-three times.

In his television series *Olive it Up*, celebrity chef Aditya Bal has demonstrated how olive oil can be adapted to an Indian fare by traveling to metros and cooking local delicacies with it. “Olive oil can be used for gentle frying and sautéing. It can be used for dressings and making marinades,” said Bal. In his show, Bal has whipped up delicacies. “We’ve used olive oil for mak-

ing kebabs in Hyderabad and prawn curry in Kolkata. On both occasions, the dish was tastier and much lighter compared to what it was when made with the regular refined oil or clarified butter,” explained Bal.

Olive oil consumption shows a healthy sign. According to data published by the Indian Olive Association (IOA), exports from Italy and Spain to India were 3,988 MT in 2010 versus 2,617 MT in 2009, representing a growth of 52%, with similar aggressive growth trends predicted for the coming years. IOA aims to popularize olive oil. “IOA strives to increase awareness about olives and olive oil among the people, especially with reference to its nutritional and health aspects,” explained VN Dalmia, President, Indian Olive Association. Besides IOA, VN Dalmia also promotes the Leonardo Olive brand. “We introduced Leonardo Olive Pomace Oil for Indian food. Extra Virgin Olive Oil presented problems with frying: it was unstable at high temperatures and imparted an olive flavour to the food and changed the taste,” said VN Dalmia, Chairman, Dalmia Continental, owners of Leonardo Olive Oil. People who tried it concluded that olive oil was unsuitable for Indian cooking. “Olive Pomace Oil didn’t have any of these problems,” highlighted Dalmia. When Leonardo entered, DCPL chose to focus on Indian cuisine and daily use, the volume growth driver. The effort was to develop recipes and tie-up with chefs and restaurants for integrating Leonardo Olive Oil in Indian cuisine. Olive oil is produced in Spain, Italy, Tunisia, Syria, Algeria, Morocco and Turkey and many imported brands are available in India. Anil Chandhok, Director, Chenab Impex Pvt. Ltd. imports olive oil. “When

I started the importing olive oil in 2003, there was hardly any olive oil variants in the stores, except for the ones in small tins, used for massage or for fancy cooking by expats,” explained Chandhok. He realized that olive oil had to be integrated into Indian cuisine to gain significance. “We decided that in addition to Extra Virgin Olive oil (the one with the strongest aroma) and the ‘Pure’ Olive oil (having significant aroma) we would launch ‘Extra Light’ as its neutral aroma would not turn off the Indian consumers from trying it,” he explained. Subsequently customer education happened through in-store tastings and with time, the Extra Light Olive oil became the medium for cooking in many Indian households. “Though some unsaturated oils reduce cholesterol, they reduce total cholesterol (both good and bad cholesterol) whereas only olive oil increases good cholesterol or HDL Cholesterol. Now if instead of using 5L of the cheaper oil every month, the olive oil consumption will be about 3.5L,” Chandhok added. While describing the nuances of flavor it unleashes, Chandhok hailed olive oil as king, which enhanced the flavour of vegetables, meat, fish and chicken.

Though olive trees live up to 1,000 years, olive oil should be consumed within 12-14 months from the production date.

