



## ASSORTED SYRIAN OLIVES

In the Levant, olives have always been a fundamental element of the landscape and the table. Syria is the original home of the olive tree, where it has been cultivated for thousands of years as an important food source. The trees grow to be quite old—more than a thousand years, in some cases—and continue bearing fruit into old age. The olive fruit is harvested in early autumn and processed for storage.

Olives appear on the Aleppian Jewish table at almost every meal, including breakfast. In Aleppo, families would cure between 30 and 40 pounds for their annual household use. Whole families would work for a few nights after the harvest to crack the green olives with the bottom of a heavy *halwan* pot. The olives were then cured in glass jars.

Today, the fresh olives required for this recipe may be available at farmers' markets or gourmet shops.

1 pound fresh green or black olives

1 tablespoon kosher salt

½ cup extra-virgin olive oil  
(if using green olives)

1 lemon, cut lengthwise into quarters  
(if using green olives)

½ cup freshly squeezed lemon juice  
(about 3 lemons; if using green olives)

2 ribs celery, cut into 2-inch pieces  
(if using green olives)

1 long hot green chile pepper  
(if using green olives)

1. To prepare and preserve green olives (*zeitoon akhdar*), first crack the olives with the flat side of a chef's knife or the bottom of a small heavy pot. Soak the olives in a *tishet* (large metal bowl) filled with water, covered, for 3 to 4 days, changing the water daily. Drain the olives and toss with the salt, ¼ cup of the oil, and 1 lemon wedge. Let the olives cure for 3 to 4 days, or until softened. Then place the olives in jars with the lemon juice, celery, chile pepper, remaining ¼ cup oil, and the remaining lemon wedges.

2. To prepare and preserve black olives (*zeitoon aswan*), soak in a *tishet* filled with water and a generous amount of coarse salt for 7 to 10 days to extract the bitterness. This process will cause the olives to release their water. The olives will keep in the refrigerator for 2 to 3 weeks. When serving, marinate the olives lightly in extra-virgin olive oil.

### ❧ Variation ❧

Another alternative is to cure the olives in olive oil. First, soak the olives in salt water for 3 to 4 days, then cover with extra-virgin olive oil. This method will take no more than 2 weeks.

### ❧ Note ❧

Garlic, Aleppo pepper, thyme, lemon slices, vinegar, or bitter orange juice may be added during the curing process.