THE OLIVE OIL AS MEDICINE
of Carmelo Vazzana, Vice President of UNASCO

Those who love olive oil, now can have one more reason for this, linked not only to its taste, but also to their own health. Olive oil has a high content of phenols (hydroxytyrosol and oleuropein) which contrast free radicals.
In our body there are continuously oxidative processes going on, in order to synthesize proteins, fats and carbohydrates into plain molecules. But these processes do not always complete. This generates “interim” compounds known as free radicals, which damage the structure of our cells and start the aging process. Our body has a natural self-defense system (anti-oxidant system) sufficient for our protection. But if one adds other factors to that, like those related to the environment (for example pollution) or to bad habits and behaviors (stress, smoking, alcohol…) the production of free radicals becomes excessive and our natural defenses are defeated. This is why it is important to follow a diet rich in phenols and flavonoids, which are found mainly in the olive oil. Since ancient times, the olive oil has been used in cosmetics, gastronomy and medicine; for example, it has been proven that if we oil the skin with the extra-virgin olive oil, it penetrates through the pores and the follicles, protecting the surface layers from external influences.
Women from Andalusia still maintain their ancient tradition, inherited from the Arabs, of massaging their breasts with the olive oil to keep them soft, sustained and turgid.
In the ancient pharmacopoeias, olive oil was used for the preparation of medicinal ointments because of its ability to dissolve in itself the active principles and to mix with other fats like wax, resin etc. Other ways of using the olive oil externally are: as a healing balsam, prepared by mixing equal parts of oil and red wine and shaking it well; a liniment for burns, prepared by mixing equal parts of oil and slaked limewater, and shaking it until it forms an emulsion which can be spread on the burns. Olive oil has also a fundamental role in the formation of tissues. It saves nutritious substances; it reduces the absorption of oxygen and the transformation of nitrogenous elements in the tissues and at the same time it limits the losses of mineral substances through urine.
The Study of the Seven Countries, published in 1970, took into consideration the type of diet, blood pressure and cholesterol levels of 13,000 men aged between 40 and 59 years, living in Italy, Greece, former Yugoslavia, the Netherlands, Finland, U.S.A. and Japan. The mortality caused by heart diseases was strictly related to the age, blood-pressure and smoking. The intake of saturated fats and plasmatic levels of cholesterol from this sample were checked at the beginning, after 5 and after 10 years. There were big differences in proportions of the saturated and monounsaturated fatty acids taken with diets in the Mediterranean countries, the northern Europe and the U.S.A. In the first 15 years mortality was low among olive oil consumers (olive oils with few fatty acids and a high ratio of monounsaturated/saturated fatty acids) that is, in Italy, Greece and Yugoslavia. In the U.S.A. the high intake of monounsaturated fatty acids was balanced out by a high intake of saturated fatty acids, so the mortality from cardiovascular diseases was high.

The data for the island of Crete suggest that besides the proprieties that help lowering the cholesterol level, thanks to the oleic acid present in olive oil, there are other advantages derived from nutritious and non-nutritious elements of the Mediterranean diet (like the antioxidant vitamins).
Some Mediterranean countries have kept their eating habits for 40 years and still show a low mortality rate from cardiovascular diseases compared to the Western European countries and the United States.
An important approach to the secondary prevention of the coronary heart disease is an aggressive treatment of all risk factors also through a diet.
There is many evidence that the diets containing low levels of animal products and saturated fatty acids are linked to low cholesterol levels and a low percentage of cardiovascular diseases.
The diets with high content of monounsaturated fatty acids (such as olive oil) provide benefits against direct risk factors such as hyperlipidemia, high blood-pressure etc., and even through direct protective effects like the anti-oxidant activity. Some epidemiological studies show that the regular use of olive oil is inversely related to different types of cancer. Most of these surveys report the connection between this nourishment and the mammary or gastric neoplasia. Although more research is needed, the current data indicates convincingly, even if not conclusively, a protective role of the olive oil in the prevention of breast cancer. The protective effect of the olive oil regarding the gastric cancer is less clear. The only possible conclusion so far is that eating fruits and vegetables can be useful. Some studies suggest that the olive oil has protective effects against other kinds of cancers too, such as colon, endometrium and ovarian one. But this data is derived from a limited number of studies, whose results cannot be taken into consideration except as hypothesis. On the other hand, there is no evidence of any oncogenic effect related to the use of the olive oil.
One fact is certain: the olive oil does not cause the weight gain. Women who switch from a western type of a diet to a healthy Mediterranean diet usually do not gain weight, even if they eat more fats than before.
Two studies, made by Dr. Gene Spiller and Dr. Bonnie Bruces (Health Research and Studies Center in Los Altos, California) took into consideration women who had switched from a typical western diet, rich in meat and dairy products, to a Mediterranean diet rich in fruits and vegetables, where the primary source of fat is the olive oil. Both of these studies (the first one, on 15 women and men and the second one, on 12 women aged between 34 and 84 years) show positive changes in blood lipids produced by switching from a four-week Western diet to a four-week Mediterranean diet, such as: the lowering of the total cholesterol and LDL- cholesterol and the growth of the anti-oxidant defenses. In these studies, in which calories taken in the form of fats were 30% of the total amount of calories (in the first study it was from 30% to 35%), there has not been noted any change in weight .
“People involved in this study have not immediately recognized the difference between the beneficial and unhealthy fats”, said Bonnie Bruce, speaking at the Symposium in Crete, “Crete, Greece and healthy Mediterranean diets”. "People were initially afraid of gaining weight, but later discovered that they were able to enjoy some of the meals they love more, dressed with the olive oil, not only

without gaining any weight, but improving the function of the colon, and improving also satiety and taste. With the typical Western diet they were hungry all day, but when they added olive oil on bread, for lunch, combined with fruits and vegetables, they have found the energy necessary for the day. "
In order to confirm all this, there has been designed a 6 months study on 40 people.
There are also other news.
In fact, there are nine proofs that confirm that the monounsaturated fatty acids protect against breast cancer. One teaspoon (i.e. 10 gr.) of olive oil rich in monounsaturated fatty acids per day, with a proportionate reduction of other fatty acids, may reduce the risk of breast cancer by 45%. This is what was shown in the new study conducted in Sweden and just published in "Archives of Internal Medicine".
Dr. Alicia Wolk, (Karolinska Institute of Stockholm) and other Swedish researches have studied 61,471 women, aged between 40 and 76 years from 1987 to 1990. Women have been submitted to mammography, completed a questionnaire about the frequency of the consumption of olive oil and were followed for many years. The data were recorded by Swedish Cancer Registry to determine who from the group developed breast cancer during the period of the study.
Authors say that there is a growing evidence that the monounsaturated fats may protect against breast cancer. There are three types of oils and fats which supply the body with a concentrated form of energy: saturated (found in meat and dairy products), monounsaturated (found in the olive oil, grapestone and nuts) and polyunsaturated (found in seafood, soya beans, sunflower and safflower oil).
Researchers state that "our data on monounsaturated fats concur with those from the perspective “Nurses Health Study” and with the studies on animals, suggesting that monounsaturated fats, regardless of their origin, are inversely related to the risk of breast cancer".
Furthermore "recently, four studies carried out in Spain, Greece and Italy show that the consumption of olive oil, the main source of monounsaturated fats in Mediterranean diet, is associated with a lower risk of breast cancer".
"Research and health policies should take into consideration the emerging evidence that monounsaturated fats can prevent breast cancer”.