The Art & Science of Olive Oil: Nutrition, Medicine and Planetary Health

Securing the Future of a World Cultural Heritage

In November 2020, the world marked the 10th anniversary of the designation by UNESCO of the Mediterranean Diet as an Intangible Cultural Heritage. At the foundation of the Mediterranean Diet is the olive oil kitchen, and behind that the world of olive tree cultivation and olive oil production from growing and harvesting to processing. Olive oil has been an integral part of Mediterranean food and society for millennia. And yet even today—with all of the attention that has been paid to olive oil and the Mediterranean Diet over the past several decades—we are still early in the discovery process about the true value of olive oil and the heritage of olive grove landscapes across the Mediterranean to our health, to our cultures and the sharing of food with family and friends, and to the sustainability of our environment.

The Art & Science of Olive Oil: Nutrition, Medicine and Planetary Health is being designed as a small, two-day invitational conference hosted by the Pontifical Academy of Sciences that brings together leading scientists and other experts from a variety of fields to highlight what we know about the contribution that olive oil can make to our lives as well as what needs further research attention. Our inquiry will highlight the scientific case for a heightened focus on quality in olive oil production, the many pathways that olive oil is thought to contribute to optimal health, and the surprising contribution this ancient food and related food system is making toward our planetary health.

In centuries past, many food and agricultural practices persisted for many hundreds of years due in part to the slow pace of change. Today, in the modern world, the future of olive oil and the sustainability of rural agricultural communities throughout the Mediterranean that depend on a

robust olive oil sector are not automatically assured. The challenges are: the headwinds of competitive, global marketing practices; consumer preferences that are still largely detached from healthy food system considerations; and impacts from climate change that will likely require sustained investment in agricultural research to keep olive groves healthy. A final focus of this workshop, then, is to add to our understanding of why and how this Mediterranean tradition of olive oil needs our active, vigilant attention to assure that it survives and thrives for future generations. This discussion will include a focus on innovation in the culinary arts, preventive medicine, education, marketing and digital communications.

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