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### On Olives & Feminism

One night, after a particularly successful galivant on the town, my roommates and I found ourselves laughing and gliding in our kitchen, opening refrigerator and pantry doors, carelessly looking for something to eat.

I can picture my roommate squeezing her hand into a jar of blue-cheese-stuffed-olives; her legs tucked neatly beneath her, eyes determined.

After she had wrangled a few out and plopped them in her mouth, she closed her eyes and leaned back into the open refrigerator, smiling. I sat at the countertop eating my air-fried pizza, unable to peel my eyes from her. Out of all the wonderful things someone could put in their mouth when they're drunk, how could one choose an olive? And not just any olive but a blue-cheese-stuffed-olive?

An olive of course, is repulsive as it is, and adding blue cheese is just a slap in the face. I remember looking at her and thinking, *How could you do this to me?* I must have accidentally said something along these lines because I remember her telling me it wasn't polite to judge people's food choices (or more likely; "Fuck you these are fucking amazing"), but either way I shut up. She had a way of shutting me up.

A few minutes later, when she groaned for me to bring her the trash can, she forbid me to say “I told you so” in between chunks of olives and cheese. I sat there with her, rubbing her back, and holding her hair, all the while thinking, *This is what you get! I bet you’ll never eat an olive again!*

I fetched a cup of water from my room, feeling smug. When I saw her with her elbows on the trash can and a fresh olive between her lips, a pit in my stomach opened so wide I worried I would never experience true happiness ever again. And when she smiled and looked up at me, reaching out her proverbial olive branch, I too needed the trash can.

A few summers ago, I worked as a barback at a nice restaurant on the gulf. Among my duties were cutting limes, replacing kegs, organizing garnishes, and stuffing olives with blue cheese. I wiped throw up off counters and carried trash bags full of glass to dumpsters. I shoveled ice into ten-gallon buckets and wagoned cases of liquor that quadrupled my body weight, but worst of all – I stuffed olives.

You would be surprised at how many people not only asked for olives in drinks that didn’t call for them but for *extra olives* too. One time my aunt visited and asked me to make her “olive soup”. This was simply a double shot of vodka in a martini glass full of olives.

Last Christmas break, I visited my cousin’s for dinner. Her husband explained the various cheeses, salamis, and figs on her charcuterie board, all of which he had brought back from a recent trip to Italy. When my cousin heard him explaining the spread, she made a big show of telling us all she had one more “special” cheese to bring out. She abandoned her Aperol spritz and whisked away to the fridge, bringing back a wheel of cheese wrapped in tulip-embroidered cloth.

Slowly, carefully, as if placing down an infant, she lay the cheese on the table. The kitchen fell silent for only a moment while she unveiled the wedge then - “Tada! An olive cheddar!”

Suddenly the air in the room had lifted. The aunt confessing thoughts of suicide and the men comparing pistols found their conversations – and bodies – drifting towards the kitchen. Various forms of ascent followed; there were the “oos” and “ahhs” of the more normal relatives, the semi sexual grunts of the older ladies, and the silence from the dads as they said nothing but pretended to chew each piece carefully and thoughtfully as to avoid reprimands from their wives.

Next, there was the ceremonial cutting of a wedge for each household to take home. The family had now amassed around the charcuterie board, pounding chests, chanting, and clapping.

“Just a little more!” my father insisted as our host raised his eyebrows, looking for direction on where to slice down.

“Oh my god, I’m being so bad, but I have to have another” an aunt said (not the suicidal one).

“Me too” (the suicidal one).

The women stuck out their bellies and frowned at themselves, each one’s bloating supposedly far worse than the others, all the while munching on the olive cheese all the same. I looked down at my own belly, which was neither as flat as it was when I was a girl or as full of movement and webs of stretchmarks like the women in my family. I couldn’t help but feel quite sad.

I was deep in thought about this when my cousin's husband asked me if I liked olives. I told him I didn't, but I felt rude not trying the cheese, so I took a small piece and swallowed it without breaking much down. Still, the olive taste remained in my mouth.

"I don't like it" I concluded.

"But aren't you going to Spain this summer? How are you going to survive? They LOVE olives. Especially with *tapas*. You'll get a few drinks in you and that's all they'll have. You'll learn to like them."

Now I was really confused. How can someone pound a few vodka crans or *cervezas* and think to themselves; *Man, an olive would really hit the spot right now!* What was it with drunk people and olives? I made it my mission to find out before I left.

According to a study by Jessica and Daniel Kruger, "College students' food cravings increase, consumption of fruits and vegetables is lower, and consumption of junk foods is higher with alcohol consumption than at other times." So, while all together food cravings increase with alcohol consumption, the desire for fruits and vegetables decrease, and drunkenly eating olives, a fruit, is not normal.

My roommate was so happy that day on the floor, though. She wasn't the least bit embarrassed to fish chunks of bile-covered olives from her nose. And the women in my family, various cocktails in, stood eating the olive cheddar long after their husbands went back to shining their armory.

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According to SipSmith, a London based Gin distillery, olives became popular garnishes in the 1880s, as the flavors highlighted the aromatics in the gin, complementing the vermouth, and balanced the Martini's intensity.

*Real Housewives of Atlanta* star NeNe Leakers said in an interview with *bravo* that she actually uses olives to sober up while drinking. "You know if you eat an olive, if you're drinking, and you wanna kind of come down off of your buzz a little bit or you're on a date with a guy, just keep popping olives and you won't get buzzed," she shared.

Say Yes To The Betch of *Betch Magazine* attests that the sodium content in olives helps prevent dehydration and minimize hangovers.

RHonRHpodcast says on Reddit: "Because.... Yum. 🍋🍓"

When I asked what the first thing my friend ate when she studied abroad in Spain was, she said an acai bowl. *Okay*, I thought, *very American*. When I asked what she ate most, she said quesadillas, both before and after going out. She was the "Quesadilla Queen", the designated chef. When I questioned her abroad roommate about this, she said, "You have no idea how hard those shits slapped". This surprised me because I've never seen her cook at our apartment, but I assume she was captivated by the spirit of food and love in Spain. (That is the only possible explanation.)

I dug deeper. She told me that her peers would often go to happy hour and share tapas and pitchers of sangrias. Typical dishes included seafood *paella*, *patatas bravas*, *croquets*, and charcuterie-type boards. My roommate is a fairly picky eater, so she would avoid the seafood in favor of a more familiar spread of meats, cheeses, and olives.

“I wasn’t overwhelmed by olives, but I did eat them.” she said. “They were at most restaurants. Most people would disagree with me, but I like American olives better.”

This was a brave statement, but a reassuring one. Surely even Spanish olives weren’t good enough to turn me to the dark side.

This gave me some context, but I wasn’t finished. I had to know the lore between Spaniards and olives.

In my Spanish textbook *Sol y Viento*, I learned that the tapas tradition originated in Spain and has since spread to major cities around the world as ideas and people became increasingly interconnected. This gave me some good context, but it didn’t answer all my questions, so I kept on. I found a study on tapas culture by Amado Millan. According to the author, tapas are “any variety of appetizer (olives, pickles, cold cuts, sausage, squid and other types of fried fish, shellfish, salads or any kind of light and appetising food) served in bars and similar establishments as an accompaniment to a drink’.” (158). *Oh, great* I thought. *Olives are the number one thing on the list.* I kept reading.

It seems that such fare is always enjoyed in communion with others and is a central part of Spanish socialization. Because of this, eating is not the primary focus of tapas, but rather the companionship and social status gained by participation (this makes the olive eating less obscure). Those eating tapas can express their identity or social class in a variety of ways. For instance, one can example their wealth and generosity by buying a round of tapas for friends. On the contrary, never offering to pay can cause one to be ostracized from the group. Likewise, eating the largest share can be seen as glutinous, and the last portion of food is often left uneaten,

as there is a taboo surrounding finishing a shared dish by oneself (Millan 165). Maybe I can leave the olives.

I read that tapas foods are often served on communal pots, plates, or boards, while drinks are served in small (10 cl), individual glasses or bottles. It's also uncommon for Spaniards to share their drinks unless they are close friends or romantic partners. This is good because I'd rather keep my wine and leave the olives for someone else to suffer through.

Though tapas are traditionally served with drinks, drunkenness is never the goal. In fact, Millan writes "This ritual favors sobriety despite the ingestion of alcohol" (166). Small amounts of alcohol are consumed to facilitate socialization, and the food itself slows inebriation.

Though drinking less, the Spanish still prefer to do most of their drinking outside the home. In 1995, 59% of Spaniards wine consumption and 79% of beer intake took place in restaurants and bars (Millan 161). I wonder what percentage of olives are consumed outside the home. Is olive eating as performative as drinking is for the Spanish?

I thought back to a wedding I'd been at recently. Upon arrival at the reception, my date and I were greeted by the fanfare of elegantly placed cheeses, salamis, fruits, nuts, pickles, and olives. Mountains of food rose up from below my waist to the ceiling above. Flower arrangements wove naturally by the cheese and fruit like a stream continuing softly around a rock. Pepperonis became roses and rounds of brie were etched into honeycombs. It would be incorrect to classify the spread as a grazing table, a *grazing room* seeming more fitting. I cannot accurately convey the magnitude of the assortment, but rest assured that the bride's family had provided us with thousands of dollars' worth of charcuterie. I was dazzled and grateful, but I couldn't help wonder if that was very efficient. Firstly, it was quite awkward trying to hold my

clutch, my drink, and to scoop jam and goat cheese onto my plate. Second, as I was swept away by the crowd, clutching my tiny champagne bottle full of bubbles, I noticed that we had only managed to bring the mountains to hills. What was the point of having such a grand charcuterie room?

It seemed that the charcuterie board existed at the crossroads of a woman's complex relationship with food and her basic need to eat. It allowed for the phenomenon that we know as "girl dinner" to occur – a woman can fulfill all her basic food groups while eating as much or as little as she wants. Additionally, the small portions are suitable for social contexts and the food as we know pairs well with wine. Charcuterie boards, and olives by extension, are inherently feminine under this pretense.

Interestingly, as women gained social agency in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century, they began to participate in the male-dominated tapas culture as a way to facilitate the removal of gender discrimination in social circles (Millan 162). Tapas gave leverage to women in the 60's, and while it's true that men are still the primary occupants of Spanish bars, the gap is closing.

Now I'm at a crossroad. Are olives... empowering? Can I even be a feminist if I hate olives? Does my hatred of the food stem from accidentally internalized misogyny?

There is only one way to find out. I am going to eat an olive.

I know this act will help me on my journey of self-actualization and my journey to Spain. I don't want to do this, but some greater part of me knows *I need to*. It's like the time when I was picking out a book to read at the airport news stand and I realized it was a Jewish enemies to lovers' story about rival bakers. I almost put it back, but I decided to buy it in hopes that it would



make me more well-rounded (also I was worried someone might be watching and think that I didn't like Jewish people).

Right now, I'm sitting in a study hall. I could go home and get an olive, but I happen to be one floor above a pizza place.

I go down and explained my situation to the lady at the front counter. To my surprise, she didn't seem shocked or off put by my request at all, in fact, she offered to get me not one, but two olives from the back (one black and one green). The whole thing took less than five minutes.

I return to my seat upstairs with the mini plastic cup of olives they probably use for salad dressing.

It is taking far more courage to eat these olives than it did to ask for them.

I've decided to eat the black one first, because if I can conquer that I can do the green one. The first thing I noticed was that it was extremely slippery, in fact, I almost dropped it. With the help of my handy-dandy fine motor skills though, I eventually got the beady fruit into my mouth.

The outer coating tasted just like olive oil and acted as a lubricant for the rest of it. This was probably the only acceptable part of the experience. It didn't take long for the olivey taste to permeate. It was very unpleasant.

I try to challenge myself. Why did I find the taste so revolting? It wasn't because of the sodium content – I love pickles and don't mind capers. I even eat those little Himalayan salt rocks as a treat sometimes. It was the juice. Such an overpowering flavor. So distinct. I imagine

this is what a beetle would taste like if it was left in the sun for a while. I have to try the green olive.

By now the black one is sitting heavy in my stomach. If I close my eyes, I can picture it all alone in the center of my flesh, underneath a glaring spotlight. I am slightly nauseous, and I have a small fear that this next olive will put me over the edge, but I must persevere.

The green olive was uncomfortable but notably less disgusting than the black one. I still did not like it.

I will admit that there are foods that I started eating because I think they make me look cool not because I actually enjoy the taste. Among these are caviar, oyster, and lobster. The first time I enjoyed caviar was at *Sexy Fish* in Miami. When we ordered the tuna tartare, we didn't know it had caviar on it (or at least I didn't). When it came to the table, though, nobody said anything. I was astonished. How sophisticated! I too would ignore the caviar like it was ketchup on a burger. I still don't know if the tartare was exceptional or if I actually liked it, but I have accepted the latter as my truth. I picked up a liking for oysters when I went to Charleston because I thought it was hilarious to put all the little toppings on and slurp them down. I completely discarded my mild distaste for lobster on a trip to Maine when I realized that I actually just needed to drench the crustacean in mayonnaise for it to be enjoyable.

The thing is, it didn't take me long to develop a palate for these foods. I actually enjoy them now. I don't see myself doing the same for olives, no matter where my travels bring me. And even though this would make me objectively cooler, there are some things you just can't fake. I just really don't like olives.

I hate olives and I am cool. I hate olives and I am going to have a fun time in Spain  
enjoying tapas with friends. I hate olives and I am a feminist.

I am Brianna Marie Cloutier, and I am a proud olive hater.

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