

Consulates celebrate olive oil and friendship

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Staff Reporter

Olive oil was hailed and celebrated recently as a prized and versatile commodity that fosters unity and peace in the Mediterranean basin and intrinsically defines that ethnically and religiously diverse region.

At a festive reception preceding a one-day academic conference on what the ancient Greek poet Homer described as “liquid gold,” olive oil was lauded as an elixir of life that brings people together.

The eclectic event, held at the Royal Ontario Museum on Nov. 10 and featuring talks, musical presentations and food and wine tastings, was sponsored by four Mediterranean nations that account for much of the world’s olive oil production: Greece, Italy, France and Israel.

First produced in the Mediterranean during antiquity, olive oil was regarded as a venerated product whose range seems boundless.

Commonly used in various national cuisines, particularly in salads layered with feta cheese and black olives, olive oil was traditionally put to use to fuel lamps, manufacture soaps, cosmetics and pharmaceuticals, slather the lithe bodies of Greek and Roman wrestlers, and in religious services.

Alex Gropper, president of the Canadian Institute for Mediterranean Studies, which co-sponsored the scholarly conference, sang its praises before introducing the consul-general of Greece, Dimitris Azemopoulos.

Azemopoulos, whose country is dealing with a European Union debt crisis of monumental proportions, was in a poetic mood.

After calling the Mediterranean a historic crossroads of religion, trade and culture that has shaped modern civilization, he reminded the audience that this sun-caressed area is both a mosaic of cultures and a cacophony of many voices. In a fleeting nationalistic aside, he let it be known that the words “mosaic” and “cacophony” are Greek in origin.

Warming to his dominant theme, the diplomat observed that the olive branch is a universal symbol of peace.

“We send out a clear, unequivocal message of peace,” he noted, adding that peace cannot be grasped by the dead hand of dogma or intolerance. In closing, Azemopoulos spoke of the importance of forging alliances and building bridges between communities.

“In peace, there is strength and hope,” he declared, rounding off his message.

Kenneth Bartlett, a University of Toronto specialist in the Italian Renaissance and the classical tradition, charted the geographical boundaries of the region he loves.

“Where the olive disappears,” he said, “the Mediterranean ends.”

Indigenous to the Mediterranean, the wild olive tree originated in Turkey, which was not represented at the reception.

Believed to have been first cultivated on the island of Crete, olive trees were a source of wealth. During the Roman period, they were planted across the Mediterranean.

In Deuteronomy 8:8, Israel was “a land of wheat and barley, of vines, figs and pomegranates, and [a] land of olive trees and honey.”

According to Bartlett, there are 260 varieties of olives, of which about 30 are under constant cultivation.

Today, the major producers of olive oil are Spain – which did not send its consul general to the reception – Italy and Greece, followed by Syria, Tunisia, Turkey, Morocco, Portugal, France and the United States.

In global terms, total production was 2.9 million tons in 2009.

Calling olive oil “an instrument of union” and “one of [our] great materials,” Bartlett said that olive trees – whose life span can exceed 1,000 years – have always

been considered valuable.

Although the Greeks developed olive oil during the Bronze Age, the cultivation, harvesting and processing of olives has hardly changed over the centuries, he said in tones of awe and admiration.

Saying that the usage of olive oil is part and parcel of the human celebration of life, Bartlett deemed it a “grand yet simple” condiment.

Azemopoulos and his colleagues – Amir Gissin of Israel, Gianni Bardini of Italy and Jerome Cauchard – introduced the musical program. Israeli, Italian and French accordionists delivered rousing performances, while a troupe of young female Greek Canadian dancers wheeled and twirled on the stage in majestic fashion.

The academic conference, titled *Olive Oil Culture in the Mediterranean* and co-sponsored by the University of Toronto’s St. Michael’s College the following day, was addressed by scholars.

For example: Benjamin Graham of the University of Michigan talked about the olive oil industry in medieval Italy. Eric Welch of Pennsylvania State University focused on the Iron Age olive oil industry in ancient Israel. The Canadian Institute for Mediterranean Studies is devoted to the study of all aspects of Mediterranean culture, past and present. It organizes, sponsors or facilitates conferences and symposia, as well as public lectures, archaeological excavations and cultural tours. It also publishes a learned journal, *Scripta Mediterranea*.

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