

## MASTIC MYSTIQUE

The precious resin from Chios.

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FYI FOOD



Mastic is the most valuable spice, cosmetic, and cure-all in the Mediterranean. Used as a seasoning, mastic's flavour is slightly sweet, hinting of rosemary, mint, and fennel with a mild, palate-cleansing, bitter undertone, and an earthy aroma redolent of pine. But its unique flavour is rivalled in its renown by its impressive and historically documented medicinal properties.

"Mastic has the mysterious virtue and power to bring on Aphrodite's excitements," claimed 17th-century Italian geographer Francesco Piaccenza. The 15th-century Arabic love manual *The Perfumed Garden of Sensual Delight* advises men to pound mastic berries with oil and honey, and drink the liquid first thing in the morning: "You will thus become vigorous for the coitus." (During the years of Ottoman control, one sultan would consume a potion of spices, sugar, and mastic before satisfying—or at least attempting to satisfy—his 300 concubines.) It was also used for dental hygiene: women in ancient Rome and Byzantium cleaned and whitened their teeth with mastic toothpicks, and even today it is added to toothpaste, mouthwash, and chewing gum. With its antioxidants, antimicrobial properties, and healing effects, mastic aids in body, skin, and hair care; helps reduce ulcers; and has been shown to help prevent stomach cancer. In candles and as essential oil, it provides soothing aromatherapy.

The elusive resin-spice grows in groves of ancient mastic trees. A type of wild pistachio, the slow-growing evergreen also known as the lentisk (*schinos* in Greek) has shiny, dark green leaves and a rough, gnarled trunk. It presents a mystery, for although the trees grow throughout the Mediterranean region, it is only on the southern half of the Greek island of Chios that they exude their crystal-clear sap. No one knows why this is—perhaps because of underwater volcanoes or due to perfect climate conditions, or maybe just as a favour from the



gods. What is known is that for more than 2,500 years, the people of Chios have been tapping each tree once or twice a week to release its clear sap. Using ancient tools and timeless methods, approximately 5,000 families harvest hundreds of tons of mastic each year, entirely by hand.

Those who make their living from mastic have an intimately intertwined relationship with the cherished trees. The traditional method of harvest involves spreading white clay under the trees to keep the sap drops clean as they fall. Next, harvesters prick the bark in small cuts called *kentima*, which means *embroidering* and suggests the delicate nature of the task. Ever so slowly, the droplets begin flowing out and are collected, sorted, and hand-cleaned. It is then ready to be exported, almost entirely to the Arab world.

The world's supply of mastic is controlled by a cooperative of villagers and is covered by the European Union's Protected Designation of Origin (PDO) and Protected Geographical Indication (PGI). These terms ensure that only products genuinely originating in that region and harvested by traditional methods can be sold.

As a result of increased interest in the history and collection of mastic, several organizations have been created in recent years to aid in both public education and the sustainable harvesting of the resin. Three years ago, Roula and Vassilis Ballas, two young escapees from the diesel fumes and corporate race of Athens, worked with the locals to create Masticulture, a travel bureau and eco-tourism organization with the goal of reinvigorating the 24 traditional mastic villages on the island's south coast through sustainable tourism. These villages, called Mastichoria, are the hometowns of the families that cultivate mastic trees and harvest their sap. "Vassilis and Roula are the faces of a new kind of tourism in Greece. Their programs are for people who are not satisfied with lying out on a beach like lizards," says Greek travel expert Matt Barrett.

Despite its historical origins, the demand for mastic remains higher than ever. You can find all sorts of foods flavoured with mastic: ice cream, breads, cookies, cakes. Crushed mastic is an ingredient in products such as sesame halvah, hard candies, and ouzo-like Mastichato liqueur. Creamy Turkish puddings and Turkish delight candy (*loukoum*) are also commonly flavoured with mastic. Take a mastic tear from its tin and it resembles rock candy or coarse sea salt, but start chewing and it quickly softens; you can even blow bubbles. Crush a tear and it easily fragments into crystalline bits, ready to use.

Although obscure in North America, mastic is a lovely treat. And its mystique—from its rich history to the mysteries surrounding its unique location—only makes it more beguiling. ●