

Pistacia Lentiscus

Related Ingredient: LAKESIS

The name *Pistacia* comes from the Greek *pistakê*. *Lentiscus* comes from the Latin *lentus*, meaning viscous. It is called so because it is cultivated for its aromatic resin, also known as mastic, mainly on the Greek island of Chios in the Aegean Sea. The word mastic derives either from the Greek verb *mastichein* ("to gnash the teeth", origin of the English word masticate) or *massein* ("to chew"). This resin is also known by the name "Chios tears", due to its shape.

Synonyms: Mastic Tree, Lentisk Tree



Source: <http://fr.wikipedia.org>

BOTANY

Botanical Family: Anacardiaceae

Pistacia Lentiscus is a shrub evergreen tree, with separate male and female plants, with a strong smell of resin, from 1 to 5 m high. It is fully grown after 40-50 years. In appropriate areas, when allowed to grow freely and age, it often becomes a tree of up to 7 m.

The leaves are alternate, leathery, and pinnately compound (no terminal leaflet), with winged petioles and five or six pairs of deep-green leaflets.

It presents very small flowers, the male with five stamens, the female is divided into 3 lobes.

The fruit, which is rarely present, is a drupe, first red and then black when ripe, about 4 mm in diameter.

The stems/trunks are reddish when young and become grey when older.

The Gum Mastic produced by this tree is a transparent, lemon-white colored, tear-shaped natural resin, which grows only on the southern part of the island of Chios, Greece. Mastic creates a light, balsamlike, fresh and gentle fragrance.



Source: <http://www.mastic.gr>

BIOTOPE

Pistacia Lentiscus grows in dry and rocky areas in Mediterranean Europe. It resists heavy frosts and grows on all types of soils, and can grow well in limestone areas and even in salty or saline environments, making it more abundant near the sea. It is also found in woodlands, dehesas (almost deforested pasture areas), oaks wood, garrigue, maquis, hills, gorges, canyons, and rocky hillsides. It is a very typical species that serves as protection and food for birds and other fauna in this ecosystem. It is a very hardy pioneer species dispersed by birds.

HISTORICAL AND GEOGRAPHICAL DISTRIBUTION

Pistacia lentiscus is native throughout the Mediterranean region, from Morocco and Iberian Peninsula in the West through southern France and Turkey to Iraq and Iran in the East. It is also native to the Canary Islands.

The *Mastic trees* are the trademark of Chios and a main source of income for many residents of the island. Its cultivation started in the ancient times and they produce a rare resin that is largely exported. The mastic trees of Chios provide a resin that comes out from their bark in the shape of teardrops. This resin is used for the elaboration of different products, especially a very unique chewing gum, as well as quality spices, alcoholic beverages and sweets.

The *Mastic trees* of Chios were so important from economical view that it provoked invasions of conquerors and pirates. This fact determined the architecture of the island, as many fortresses were built in the villages around the mastic trees. The good part was that during the Genoese and Turkish invasions, the villages where mastic trees grew enjoyed some privileges and a quote of freedom, which softened the severity of these rulers.

Today, the mastic is the main source of income for about 5,000 families in Southern Chios and 90% of the product is exported. Another thing to mention is that the Chios Mastic Gum has been established by the European Union as an exclusively Greek product and only Greece has the right to produce it.

Source: www.greeka.com

LEGENDS

An interesting detail about the *Mastic trees* is that they grow in many parts of the world but the only place where they elaborate its resin is in Chios. It is not very clear when the cultivation of these trees on the island started, but it is known that Herodotus was the first to notice their resin, around the 5th century BC.

There is even a medieval legend that explains the reason behind this phenomenon, according to which the mastic trees started crying mastic drops, as an expression of lament and sadness when Agios Isidoros, an Egyptian living in Chios and who served the Roman army during the rule of the Roman emperor Decius, was severely tortured by the Romans on the island for worshipping at a Christian church. Indeed, the Romans made it clear to all Christians that they could not serve Rome and Jesus Christ at the same time. The result of this was that many people in this time kept their Christianity a secret and so did Isidoros. One day he went secretly to a church but a soldier noticed him. The soldier reported this immediately to the highest-ranking roman officer on the island. Isidoros was forced to make a choice between Jesus Christ and the roman emperor as his master. Isidoros chose for Christianity although he was tortured and finally killed.

Note also that when Christophe Colomb visited the island in the 15th Century, mastic had already become the trademark of Chios.

Sources: www.greeka.com; www.fragrant-chios.com



Chios Tears

Sources:
www.gummastic.gr
<http://www.travbuddy.com>

MEDICINAL USES

Since ancient times, mastic has been used as a natural medicine. A leaf fossil from a mastic tree has been found dating back six million years.

People in the Mediterranean region have used mastic as a medicine for gastrointestinal ailments for several thousand years.

Regular consumption of mastic has also been proven to absorb cholesterol, thus easing high blood pressure and reducing the risk of heart attacks.

In recent years, university researchers have provided the scientific evidence for the medicinal properties of mastic. A 1985 study by the University of Thessaloniki and by the Meikai University discovered that mastic can reduce bacterial plaque in the mouth by 41.5%. A 1998 study by the University of Athens found that mastic oil has antibacterial and antifungal properties.

In the USA and Japan they produce medicine from mastic to treat stomach ulcers and help relieve stomach aches. Traditionally mastic is taken as a medicine to drop the sugar levels of the blood (diabetes).

DIETARY USES

In ancient Egypt, mastic was also called "the fragrance that pleases the gods." It was a key ingredient in their ancient "Kyphi" recipes.

Mastic gum is principally used either as a flavouring or for its gum properties, as in mastic chewing gum.

As a spice, it continues to be used in Greece to flavour spirits and liquors (such as Chios's native drinks of Mastichato and mastic), chewing gum, and a number of cakes, pastries, spoon sweets, and desserts. Sometimes it is even used in making cheese. Mastic resin is a key ingredient in Greek festival breads, for example, the sweet bread *tsoureki* and the traditional New Year's *vasilopita*.

Mastic resin is also used to make *dondurma* (Turkish ice cream) and Turkish puddings, giving those confections their unusual texture and bright whiteness.

In Lebanon and Egypt, the spice is used to flavour many dishes, ranging from soups to meats to desserts.



Mastic resin

COSMETICS USES

In Medieval times, Mastic resin was highly prized for the Sultan's harem for cosmetics. It can be used in perfumery, aromatherapy, or in the formulation of creams, lotions, shampoos, oils, etc.

OTHER USES

-Mastic Tree: in tourist areas, with exotic plants, it is often chosen to repopulate gardens and resorts, because of its strength and attractive appearance. Unlike other species of *Pistacia*, it retains its leaves throughout the year. It has been introduced as an ornamental shrub in Mexico, where it has naturalized and is often seen primarily in suburban and semiarid areas where the summer rainfall climate, contrary to the Mediterranean, does not hurt it.

-Mastic Resin: it can be used in the production of high-grade varnish.