

= Mediterranean cuisine =

Mediterranean cuisine is the food from the lands around the Mediterranean Sea and its preparation . This geographical area broadly follows the distribution of the olive tree , which provides one of the most distinctive features of the region 's cooking , olive oil . Although this region spans a wide variety of cultures with distinct cuisines , the historical connections of the region , as well as the impact of the Mediterranean Sea on the region 's climate and economy , mean that there are common elements in these cuisines , which include Italian , Levantine , Maghrebi , Ottoman , Provençal ( French ) , and Spanish cuisines .

The region 's food came to be seen as a more or less unified cuisine following the cookery writer Elizabeth David 's book , A Book of Mediterranean Food ( 1950 ) . Other writers , such as the Tunisian historian Mohamed Yassine Essid , have agreed with David , defining the three core elements of the cuisine as the olive , wheat , and the grape , yielding oil , bread and pasta , and wine , respectively .

The cooking of the area is not to be confused with the Mediterranean diet , made popular because of the apparent health benefits of a diet rich in olive oil , wheat and other grains , fruits , vegetables , and a certain amount of seafood , but low in meat and dairy products . Mediterranean cuisine encompasses the ways that these and other ingredients , including meat , are dealt with in the kitchen , whether they are healthgiving or not .

= = Geography = =

= = = By city and country = = =

The cookery writer Elizabeth David 's introduction to A Book of Mediterranean Food ( 1950 ) defines her scope as " the cooking of the Mediterranean shores " . She sketches out the geographical limits as

from Gibraltar to the Bosphorus , down the Rhone Valley , through the great seaports of Marseilles , Barcelona , and Genoa , across to Tunis and Alexandria , embracing all the Mediterranean islands , Corsica , Sicily , Sardinia , Crete , the Cyclades , Cyprus ( where the Byzantine influence begins to be felt ) , to the mainland of Greece and the much disputed territories of Syria , the Lebanon , Constantinople , and Smyrna .

= = = By a key culinary plant = = =

David defines the region as coextensive with the range of the olive tree : " those blessed lands of sun and sea and olive trees " . The olive 's natural distribution is limited by frost and by availability of water . It is therefore constrained to a more or less narrow zone around the Mediterranean Sea , except in the Maghreb and in Spain , where it is distributed more widely , and on the islands of the Mediterranean , where it is widespread . It does not grow in most of France , most of the north of Italy ( except Liguria ) , or the inland regions of the Balkans .

The Tunisian historian Mohamed Yassine Essid similarly defines the region by the olive 's presence , along with bread , wheat , and the grape as the " basic products of Mediterranean folk cuisine " :

Mediterranean cuisine is defined by the presence of fundamental elements which are said to play a more important role than others , reflecting a community of beliefs and practices which transcend religions , languages and even societies . The olive tree , the emblematic tree on more than one account , traces the bounds of a frontier of landscapes and lives on either side of which the Mediterranean begins or ends . Above Montelimar , nicknamed " Gates of Provence " , is the limit of the olive .

= = Key ingredients = =

Essid , as already mentioned , identifies the " trinity " of basic ingredients of traditional Mediterranean cuisine as the olive , wheat , and the grape , yielding oil , bread , and wine respectively . The archaeologist Colin Renfrew calls this the " Mediterranean triad " .

== Olive ==

The olive appears to come from the region of Persia and Mesopotamia , at least 6 @, @ 000 years ago . It spread from there to nearby areas , and has been cultivated since the early Bronze Age ( up to 3 @, @ 150 BC ) in southern Turkey , the Levant , and Crete . The ten countries with the largest harvests ( in 2011 ) are all near the Mediterranean ( Portugal being the tenth largest ) : together , they produce 95 % of the world 's olives .

The olive yields bitter fruits , made edible by curing and fermentation , and olive oil . Some 90 % of the fruit production ( 1996 ) goes into olive oil . The Mediterranean region accounts for the world 's highest consumption of olive oil : in 2014 , the highest @-@ consuming country , Greece , used 17 kg per head ; Italy , 12 kg , Spain 3 kg ; the United States for comparison used only 1 kg per head .

== Wheat ==

Wheat was domesticated in the Fertile Crescent , in and near the Levant some 10 @, @ 000 years ago . Its ancestors include wild emmer wheat ; this was hybridised , harvested and sown to create domestic strains with larger grains , in ears that shatter less readily than wild forms . It had been spread across the Mediterranean region as far as Spain by 5 @, @ 000 BC .

Wheat is a staple food in the Mediterranean region . Wheat bread was already critically important in the empire of Ancient Rome , which included the entire region ; at that time , around 2 @, @ 000 years ago , North Africa was the " breadbasket " of the empire . Other staple wheat @-@ based Mediterranean foods include pasta and semolina ( wheat middlings ) products such as couscous and burgul . In turn , these are made into dishes such as the Greek dessert galaktoboureko ( milk börek ) , consisting of filo pastry parcels around a custard made with semolina . A widespread wheat dish from Turkey and the Levant to Iran and India is halva , a dessert of sweetened semolina with butter , milk , and pine kernels .

== Grape ==

The grape was domesticated between 7 @, @ 000 and 4 @, @ 000 BC between the Black Sea and Persia ; archaeological evidence shows that wine was being made there by 6 @, @ 000 BC , reaching Greece and Crete in the fifth millennium BC and Spain by the last millennium BC . Winemaking started in Italy in the ninth century BC , and in France around 600 BC .

Grapes are grown for making wine , for drying as raisins , or for eating as table grapes . Wine grapes are often rich in tannins , while raisins and table grape varieties are chosen for their flavour . Grape production remains important in the Mediterranean area , with a large part of the world 's harvest . Italy produced 8 million tonnes ( mt ) in 2013 ; Spain 7 @. @ 5 mt ; France 5 @. @ 5 mt ; Turkey 4 @. @ 0 mt ; Egypt 1 @. @ 4 mt ; Greece 0 @. @ 9 mt ; Algeria 0 @. @ 6 mt . Wine production is similarly large , with France 4 @. @ 3 mt ; Italy 4 @. @ 1 mt ; Spain 3 @. @ 2 mt , but with much lower figures from the Muslim countries .

== History ==

== Concept ==

The concept of a Mediterranean cuisine is very recent , probably dating from the publication of David 's A Book of Mediterranean Food ( 1950 ) . David herself did not use the term , speaking instead of Mediterranean " food " , " cookery " , or " cooking " . The usefulness of the concept is

disputed . Carol Helstosky , author of the book *Food Culture in the Mediterranean* ( 2009 ) , is among the authors who use " Mediterranean cuisine " interchangeably with " Mediterranean food " . In the preface to her book she writes

Mediterranean food is incredibly popular : pasta , pizza , gyros , kebab , and falafel can be found just about everywhere . Food experts and cookbook authors adore Mediterranean cuisine ...

Essid acknowledges that " geographical differences and the vicissitudes of history " have affected the food of different Mediterranean lands , but nonetheless asserts that :

Rules for the preparation and consumption of food are common to the lands that border the Mediterranean . They offer both stability , continuity and reproduction of a specific pattern of eating which resists conquest , invasion , colonisation , social change , industrialisation and urbanisation . Consequently , wherever you go , in southern Europe or the lands bordering the southern Mediterranean , you will find a cuisine and gastronomic ritual which is always familiar .

On the other hand , Sami Zubaida argues in his book *Culinary Cultures of the Middle East* ( 1994 ) that :

The idea of the " standard Mediterranean " ... is a modern construction of food writers and publicists in Europe and North America earnestly preaching what is now thought to be a healthy diet to their audiences by invoking a stereotype of the healthy other on the shores of the Mediterranean . Their colleagues in Mediterranean countries are only too willing to perpetuate this myth . The fact of the matter is that the Mediterranean contains varied cultures .

The cookery author Clifford A. Wright wrote in 1999 : " There really is no such thing as ' Mediterranean cuisine ' . At the same time , we seem to know what we mean when we use the expression .... " Wright argued that David 's book itself was largely about specifically French Mediterranean food , pointing out that " only 4 percent of her recipes come from North Africa or the Levant " .

Since David 's time , a variety of books on Mediterranean cuisine have been written , including Helstosky 's 2009 book , already mentioned ; books by other cookery writers include S. Rowe 's *Purple Citrus and Sweet Perfume : Cuisine of the Eastern Mediterranean* ( 2011 ) ; Mari @-@ Pierre Moine 's *Mediterranean Cookbook* ( 2014 ) ; and J. R. Stevens ' *Mediterranean Cuisine* ( 2015 ) . There are many more cookbooks covering specific cuisines in the Mediterranean area , such as B. Santich 's *The Original Mediterranean Cuisine : Medieval Recipes for Today* ( 1995 ) , on Catalan and Italian recipes ; H. F. Ullman 's *on the cooking of Tunisia* ( 2006 ) , Spain and Italy , each one subtitled " Mediterranean Cuisine " .

### == = Origins == =

The ingredients of Mediterranean cuisine are to an extent different from those of the cuisine of Northern Europe , with olive oil instead of butter , wine instead of beer . The list of available ingredients has changed over the centuries . One major change was the introduction of many foods by the Arabs to Portugal , Spain and Sicily in the Middle Ages . Those foods included aubergines , spinach , sugar cane , rice , apricots and citrus fruits , creating the distinctive culinary tradition of Al @-@ Andalus .

Another major change was the arrival of foods from the Americas in Early Modern times ( around the sixteenth century ) , notably the incorporation of the potato into Northern European cuisine , and the eager adoption of the tomato into Mediterranean cuisine . The tomato , so central now to that cuisine , was first described in print by Pietro Andrea Mattioli in 1544 . Similarly , many of the species of *Phaseolus* beans now used around the Mediterranean , including *P. vulgaris* ( the French or haricot bean ) , were brought back from the Americas by Spanish and Portuguese explorers .

### == = Cooking == =

David 's introduction to her 1950 book characterises the cooking of the Mediterranean countries as " conditioned naturally by variations in climate and soil and the relative industry or indolence of the inhabitants . "

David identifies " the ever recurring elements " in the food of this extensive region as olive oil , saffron , garlic , " pungent " local wines , as well as the " aromatic perfume " of herbs , especially rosemary , wild marjoram , and basil , and the bright colours of fresh foods in the markets , " pimentos , aubergines , tomatoes , olives , melons , figs " and " shiny fish , silver , vermilion , or tiger @-@ striped " . She includes cheeses of " sheep 's or goat 's milk " , " figs from Smyrna on long strings " and " sheets of apricot paste which is dissolved in water to make a cooling drink . "

With common ingredients including the olive , wheat , and grape ; a shared climate ; and a long period for cultural exchange , it might be expected that a single , pan @-@ Mediterranean cuisine would have developed . Certain items , such as olive oil , bread , wine , roast lamb or mutton ( for example , Maghreb méchoui , Greek kleftiko and souvlaki , Turkish shish kebab ) , bottarga , and stews of meat with vegetables and tomato ( such as Spanish andrajos , French estouffade à la Provençale , Italian ciambotta , Turkish bu?u kebab? ) , are indeed found all around the Mediterranean . Despite this , however , the lands bordering the Mediterranean sea have distinct regional cuisines , from the Maghreb , Levant and Ottoman to the Italian , French , and Spanish . Each of those , in turn , has national and provincial variations .

= = = Maghrebi = = =

Maghrebi cuisine includes the cuisines of Algeria , Libya , Morocco , and Tunisia . One of the most characteristic dishes of the region is couscous , a steamed , small @-@ grained wheat semolina , served with a stew . The dish is ancient , mentioned by the Medieval traveller Ibn Battuta , and found for example also in Italian cuisine , at Genoa , Livorno and Trapani .

One stew that may be served with couscous is the Moroccan tagine , a hearty , somewhat dry dish of meat and vegetables , cooked slowly in a pot ( called a tagine ) with a tall conical lid . Dishes from the Maghreb region of North Africa are often coloured and flavoured with the hot spice mixtures harissa and ras el hanout ( containing such spices as cumin , coriander , saffron , cinnamon , cloves , chillies , and paprika ) . Other characteristic flavourings of the region are preserved lemons and dried apricots and raisins .

= = = Levantine = = =

Levantine cuisine is the cooking of the Levant ( including the Middle Eastern Mediterranean coast , east of Egypt ) . Among the most distinctive foods of this cuisine are traditional small meze dishes such as tabbouleh , hummus , and baba ghanoush . Tabbouleh is a dish of bulgur cracked wheat with tomatoes , parsley , mint and onion , dressed with olive oil and lemon juice . Baba ghanoush , sometimes called " poor man 's caviar " , is a puree of aubergine with olive oil , often mixed with chopped onion , tomato , cumin , garlic , lemon juice , and parsley . The dish is popular across the whole of the Eastern Mediterranean and North Africa .

Ful medames , originally from Egypt and still a national dish there , consists of fava beans with oil and cumin ; it is popular throughout the Levant . The dish may be ancient : dried beans of Neolithic age have been found near Nazareth .

= = = Ottoman = = =

Ottoman cuisine has given rise to the cuisines of modern Turkey , parts of the Balkans , Cyprus , and Greece . A distinctive element is the family of small flaky pastries called börek . These are popular and widespread across the Eastern Mediterranean region , and date as far back as ancient Roman times . Börek are made of thin sheets of filo pastry , filled with mixtures such as meat , caramelised onion and sweet peppers .

Another widespread and popular dish is moussaka , a baked dish of aubergine or potato with various other ingredients : often minced meat and tomatoes , sometimes a layer of egg custard or béchamel sauce on top . In its Greek variant , well @-@ known outside the region , it includes layers of aubergine and minced meat with custard or béchamel sauce on top , but that version is a

relatively recent innovation , introduced by the chef Nikolaos Tselementes in the 1920s .

== = Greek == =

Much of Greek cuisine is part of the larger tradition of Ottoman cuisine , the names of the dishes revealing Arabic , Persian or Turkish roots : moussaka , tzatziki , yuvarlakia , keftethes , boureki , and so on . Many dishes ' names probably entered the Greek vocabulary during Ottoman times , or earlier in contact with the Persians and the Arabs . However , some dishes may be pre @-@ Ottoman , only taking Turkish names later ; Ash and Dalby , for example , speculate that grape @-@ leaf dolmathes were made by the early Byzantine period . Greek cookery makes wide use of vegetables , olive oil , grains , fish , wine and meat ( white and red , including lamb , poultry , rabbit and pork ) . Other important ingredients include olives , cheese , eggplant ( aubergine ) , zucchini ( courgette ) , lemon juice , vegetables , herbs , bread and yoghurt . Some dishes can be traced back to ancient Greece : lentil soup , fasolada , retsina ( white or rosé wine flavored with pine resin ) and pasteli ( candy bar with sesame seeds baked with honey ) ; some to the Hellenistic and Roman periods : loukaniko ( dried pork sausage ) ; and Byzantium : feta cheese , avgotaraho ( botargo , cured fish roe ) and paximadi ( traditional hard bread baked from corn , barley and rye ) .

== = Italian == =

Mediterranean Italian cuisine includes much of Italy outside the north and the mountainous inland regions . It is a diverse cuisine , but among its best @-@ known and most characteristic foods are risotto , pizza in Neapolitan and Sicilian styles , and pasta dishes such as spaghetti .

Risotto is a dish made using Italian short @-@ grain rice , which is both highly absorbent and resistant to turning into a pudding when cooked with stock and flavoured with onions and garlic , cooked in butter . Anna Gosetti della Salda 's book of Italian regional cookery lists 37 risotto recipes , 18 of them from the Veneto . Variations among Veneto risottos include additions of fish and white wine ; chicken ; eel ; mushrooms and grated Parmesan cheese ; quails ; small pieces of beef ; courgettes ( zucchini ) ; clams ; Ragù ; beans ; mussels ; prawns ; cuttlefish ; and asparagus .

Pizza , or as David notes " pissaladina or pissaladière " in Provence ( the cuisines of Mediterranean France and Italy having something in common ) , is a piece of bread dough rolled out thin , with a topping which varies from place to place , but is generally much simpler than those in the English @-@ speaking world . In Naples this is tomato , anchovies and buffalo mozzarella . In San Remo it is onions cooked in olive oil , with salted sardines . The Provençal variety uses onions , black olives , and anchovies .

Spaghetti dishes also vary . It may be eaten as David says " simply with olive oil and garlic " , without cheese , or with a sauce of " very red and ripe peeled tomatoes " , cooked briefly and flavoured with garlic and either basil or parsley . One Sicilian variant includes pieces of bacon , onions fried in fat , garlic , stoned olives , and anchovies , served with olive oil and grated Parmesan cheese .

== = French == =

Mediterranean French cuisine includes the cooking styles of Provence , Occitania , and the island of Corsica . Distinctive dishes that make use of local ingredients include bouillabaisse and salade niçoise .

Bouillabaisse is a substantial dish from the French port of Marseille , capital of Provence . It is a stew for at least eight people , because it should contain many kinds of fish such as crayfish , gurnard , weever , John Dory , monkfish , conger eel , whiting , sea bass , and crab . These are cooked with Mediterranean vegetables and herbs , namely onions , garlic , tomatoes , thyme , fennel , parsley , bay , and orange peel .

Salade niçoise is a colourful salad of tomatoes , tuna , hard @-@ boiled eggs , Niçoise olives , and anchovies , dressed with a vinaigrette .

= = = Spanish = = =

Spain 's varied cuisine includes the cooking of Andalusia , Catalonia , Valencia , and the Balearic islands . Paella is a characteristic Spanish dish , originally from Valencia and now popular across a much wider area , made in many versions . It may contain a mixture of chicken , pork , and shellfish , fried in oil in a large shallow pan , with vegetable flavourings , and long @-@ grain rice cooked to absorb the water and coloured with saffron . Other local ingredients may include artichoke hearts , peas , sweet peppers , sausages and so on .

= = Mediterranean diet and cuisine = =

The Mediterranean diet , popularised in the 1970s , is sometimes conflated with Mediterranean cuisine . Thus , the American Diabetes Association writes about " Mediterranean @-@ Style Eating " , mentioning " the traditional Mediterranean lifestyle ... of ... eating healthfully together among family and friends " , and asserting that " Mediterranean cuisine is plant @-@ based " , citing the ingredients " whole grains , fruits , vegetables , herbs and spices , beans , nuts , seeds , and olive oil " , and stating that most foods " in a Mediterranean diet come from plants " .

The 1984 travel guide Guida all 'Italia gastronomica states that " around 1975 , under the impulse of one of those new nutritional directives by which good cooking is too often influenced , the Americans discovered the so @-@ called Mediterranean diet . The name even pleased Italian government officials , who made one modification : changing from diet ? a word which has always seemed punitive and therefore unpleasant ? to Mediterranean cuisine . "

" Mediterranean diet " as popularly understood may have little to do with either Mediterranean cuisine or indeed the traditional Mediterranean diet based on the trinity of wheat , olive , and grape . Thus , Judy Lance 's book Low Carb Eating : How a Wheat Free Menu , or Mediterranean Diet Can Help with Weight Loss advocates a diet called Mediterranean , but lacking the wheat staple entirely .

= = A changing cuisine = =

Since David wrote about Mediterranean food in 1950 , and indeed since dietary researchers showed in the 1950s that people around the Mediterranean had less coronary heart disease than the peoples of northern Europe , the traditional Mediterranean ways of life and of eating have changed . Increased wealth and busy lives have led people to eat more meat and less vegetables : their diet is becoming more northern European , with more convenience foods and with less of a preventative effect on cardiovascular disease .