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Chapter **1**

Defining the Mediterranean Lifestyle

The Mediterranean lifestyle is a combination of daily living habits, customs, and traditions that have both short and long-term benefits for our health. A widely growing numbers of people are “following” the diet, but not all of them have achieved the health benefits they’re aiming for. Why? Because the Mediterranean diet they’re following doesn’t include the essential *lifestyle* components that are key to the Mediterranean way of life. The lifestyle factors are what set people up for success.

Following a Road Map to a Health-Boosting Way of Life

Food in the Mediterranean region is much more than just fuel for physical survival. In all the various cultures of the region, preparing and enjoying food is seen as one of life’s greatest pleasures. Many natives to the area view cuisine as a

reason for socializing, an art form, an act of worship, a means of gift giving, a means of healing, and much more (see Chapter 2).



REMEMBER

In the United States, dieters and other health-conscious eaters tend to think of food as a foe. But in the Mediterranean region, food is a friend. Understanding this key concept is at the core of having success with the diet and lifestyle. You must embrace quality food and all the amazing ways it nourishes you in order to reap the benefits of the Mediterranean lifestyle.

Many of the recipes and culinary combinations that are popular in the Mediterranean region aren't there by accident. They were born out of millennia-old traditions in which they were considered sacred. Even ingredients that we take for granted nowadays, such as salt, lentils, and black pepper, were important forms of currency in antiquity. The Mediterranean way is to coax as much flavor, nutrition, good feelings, and healing properties as possible out of what they choose to eat.

Since the 1970s, scientists have been conducting research about the Mediterranean diet. Chapter 3 is full of research underlining the positive benefits to be had by following a Mediterranean lifestyle. It also includes expert testimonials by world-renowned doctors. If it's proof you're looking for, that chapter is for you.

You may already believe in the health benefits of the Mediterranean lifestyle but wonder how you can possibly see them in your own busy life, far away from the bright blue waters of the Mediterranean. The good news is, you can employ effective strategies to live your best life by making the Mediterranean lifestyle work for you no matter where you currently reside (see Chapter 4).

Following the Mediterranean Lifestyle

Diet and exercise alone won't provide the lasting results and rewards that the Mediterranean lifestyle has to offer. One key to the Mediterranean way of life is to see mealtimes as sacred (see Chapter 5). Having planned and pleasurable mealtimes will set you up for psychological success, which in turn affects your hormone levels and metabolism.

Another part of the Mediterranean lifestyle is laughter. Taking yourself and your life lightly, feeling good on purpose, and developing positive coping methods for adversity are all secrets to success in the Mediterranean region. Chapter 6 explains how to add a little levity to your life.



TECHNICAL
STUFF

Did you know that laughing actually heals by causing the diaphragm to rhythmically contract and release the muscles until all the tension you've been holding in your solar plexus diminishes? Sometimes people even begin to laugh nervously to relieve tension after hearing bad news or during an argument. No matter where you are in the world, laughing gives you another good reason to bond socially — we're 30 percent more likely to laugh with other people than you are to laugh alone.

Finding a healthful activity — or two, or three, or four — that you can do daily will help keep you going strong well into old age. Walking vigorously for an hour a day is probably the most common form of exercise in the traditional Mediterranean lifestyle — but what is most important is that your entire body is moving and that you achieve sweat and rapid breathing for five to ten hours per week if you really want to see maximum results. Chapter 7 is full of advice about exercise and how to make it a beneficial part of your daily life.

Increased digestion, better immunity, improved mood, and reduced risk of illness are just a few of the benefits you have to look forward to by spending more time outdoors. According to one government estimate, the average American spends 90 percent of their life indoors. People in the Mediterranean, however, look for every excuse they can to be outside. Chapter 8 reveals ways to get more fresh air and explains why it's so important.

Taking naps can help you eat less and achieve an optimal weight, reduce the risk of depression, improve your mood and alertness, perform better, improve concentration, and even remove creative blocks. According to science, not all naps are created equal, and many factors impact how helpful naps can be. It's important to understand your body's own needs when trying to determine the best type of nap for you. Chapter 9 explains why naps are good for you and how to get more of them.

Considering Culture

Regardless of which Mediterranean country you spend time in, you'll recognize that daily life is a colorful mosaic of millennia-old cultural traditions, wisdom, and ingenuity, combined with modern conveniences and an ancient zest for life. Chapter 10 includes the ABCs of the Mediterranean lifestyle, a Mediterranean daily living checklist, and a brief cultural overview of each country in the region. Knowing simple yet effective strategies to call upon anytime to feel better will make the lifestyle a pleasure.

Many newcomers to the Mediterranean lifestyle are perplexed by the seemingly paradoxical tenets of some of the traditions practiced in the Mediterranean region. Many of the foods and ingredients are extremely healthful and nutrient-dense, but sugar-laden desserts like tiramisu and baklava leave some outsiders confused. When coupled with the large quantities served at feasts, it can sometimes seem like health is the *last* thing on the minds of people in the region, but that isn't true.

Chapter 11 describes why *both* feasting (practiced a few days out of the year) and fasting (traditionally practiced for many more days than feasting) are important benchmarks of the Mediterranean lifestyle. It also discusses the physical and spiritual implications of fasting according to the three monotheistic faiths in the region — Christianity, Islam, and Judaism.

Preparing and Eating Delicious Food

One of the biggest secrets to the Mediterranean lifestyle is the pleasure people take in food long before they eat it. In the Mediterranean region, the act of preparing a meal is a ritualistic way of not only honoring traditions and passing down heritage, but also getting more enjoyment out of the meal itself. By enjoying the process of making menus, procuring foods, shopping, growing gardens, cooking, baking, canning, or preserving, you can ensure that you're eating better-quality food while gaining meaningful insights and having fun.

Did you know that we eat less and digest food better just by *smelling* it 15 minutes prior to eating? Plus, our bodies get the same positive results when we hear our food described to us before consuming it. The sensory stimulation that our minds receive when smelling, touching, hearing about, and seeing food has as much of an impact on our bodies as tasting it does. Chapter 12 explains how you can take charge of your life by enjoying the act of preparing food. It also reveals how cooking with ancient flavor enhancers, such as herbs and aromatics, can add flavor and nutrients to your food without the fat, salt, and sugar.

In 1993, the nonprofit Oldways (www.oldwayspt.org) created the Mediterranean Diet Pyramid (see Chapter 13) in partnership with the Harvard School of Public Health and the World Health Organization as a healthier alternative to the USDA's original food pyramid. According to the pyramid, plant-based foods should make up the largest part of our diet. Fish and seafood should be eaten often. Poultry, eggs, cheese, and yogurt are important parts of the diet that should be enjoyed in moderation. Meat and sweets are at the top of the pyramid because they should be eaten the least. Chapter 13 also includes portion sizes and eating plans, and explains how to get the most out of your meals.

A well-stocked pantry can set you up for home-cooking joy and success. Chapter 14 offers a practical guide on how to do it Mediterranean-style. Having nutritious ingredients on hand at home can save you time and money. I list the cereals, pastas, grains, beans, legumes, extra-virgin olive oil, condiments, flavor enhancers, baking ingredients, and canned and jarred goods you'll want to have on hand to make cooking easier and more fun!

Chapter 15 explains how to be inspired to shop for the best food possible. Whether you're shopping at farmers markets or supermarkets, or you subscribe to a community-supported agriculture (CSA), I've got you covered. I have tips for making shopping a fun activity, creating shopping lists, and meal planning.

Eyeing Authentic Mediterranean Recipes

If you're new to the Mediterranean lifestyle, you may be overwhelmed, not knowing what to serve or when to serve it. Chapter 16 fills you in. You can find authentic Mediterranean meals, Mediterranean menus, and tips for repurposing leftovers.



TIP

Anyone embarking on the Mediterranean lifestyle needs to be able to plan menus, because there is a specific style that works in terms of flavor, seasonality, and health benefits.

When you're ready to cook, Chapters 17 through 20 are where to turn. From breakfast to small plates to main dishes to desserts, you can find a variety of recipes to take you from morning to night.



REMEMBER

It's no mistake that I saved the recipes for last. Although you may be eager to dive in to cooking, diet is only one component of the Mediterranean lifestyle. It often gets the most play in the United States, but I recommend focusing on everything else *first*, and then turning to the delicious meals. They'll be there waiting for you when you're ready to enjoy them!

