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Chapter 1

Introducing the Mediterranean Diet

When you picture the Mediterranean diet, you may imagine the sea lapping up on a beach near a quaint village whose residents are lounging and eating fresh grapes and olives. That picture is a good start. The Mediterranean diet is a way of life — one where you eat lots of fresh food and slow down. More technically, the *Mediterranean diet* is a modern set of guidelines inspired by traditional diet patterns of southern Italy, the Greek island of Crete, and other parts of Greece. The lifestyle was first researched in the 1960s, and in 2010, the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) officially recognized this diet pattern to be part of the cultural heritage of Italy, Greece, Spain, and Morocco. A more rural lifestyle is a common thread among all these regions.

Research shows that following a traditional Mediterranean diet significantly reduces the risk of heart disease and cancer. The key word here is *traditional*. The Mediterranean region is changing, with faster-paced lifestyles and more modern conveniences. These changes bring with them an increased prevalence of heart disease and cancer.



REMEMBER

For the purposes of this book, when you think of a Mediterranean lifestyle and dietary patterns, the focus is on the traditional habits seen at least 50 years ago in the regions we note here. For instance, if you visited northern Italy in a recent trip, you may not have experienced any of the dietary patterns we promote in this

book. So no, that huge portion of butter-laden pasta you had doesn't qualify for this diet.

Although diet is a big component of the health benefits experienced in the Mediterranean, all the lifestyle patterns combined, including physical activity and relaxation, may provide insight into the health benefits found in this region. This chapter serves as your jumping-off point into the Mediterranean diet and breaks down the Mediterranean dietary patterns and lifestyle choices that you can use as strategies for your own healthy lifestyle.

Identifying the Flavors of the Mediterranean Coast

The Mediterranean Sea is actually part of the Atlantic Ocean; a total of 21 countries have a coastline on the Mediterranean. However, only a few truly epitomize the Mediterranean diet and lifestyle that we discuss in this book. Having a decent understanding of these countries and their cooking styles can help you have a better appreciation for this way of life.

The recipes in this book are inspired by Mediterranean cooking — specifically, the areas of southern Italy, Greece, Morocco, and Spain. Although you may see some of the same ingredients in many recipes, the flavors used in different countries or regions create entirely different dishes. For example, if you've eaten both Italian and Greek meatballs, you know that the two varieties sure don't taste the same. Table 1-1 lists some of the countries in the Mediterranean that are part of this lifestyle and the associated flavors and cooking styles commonly used in those areas.

TABLE 1-1 Common Mediterranean Flavors by Region

Region	Commonly Used Ingredients	Overall Cuisine Flavor
Southern Italy	Anchovies, balsamic vinegar, basil, bay leaf, capers, garlic, mozzarella cheese, olive oil, oregano, parsley, peppers, pine nuts, mushrooms, prosciutto, rosemary, sage, thyme, tomatoes	Italian food is rich and savory, with strongly flavored ingredients. Look for tomato-based sauces and even an occasional kick of spicy heat.
Greece	Basil, cucumbers, dill, fennel, feta cheese, garlic, honey, lemon, mint, olive oil, oregano, yogurt	Greek cooking runs the gamut from tangy with citrus accents to savory. Ingredients such as feta cheese add a strong, bold flavor, while yogurt helps provide a creamy texture and soft flavor.

Region	Commonly Used Ingredients	Overall Cuisine Flavor
Morocco	Cinnamon, cumin, dried fruits, ginger, lemon, mint, paprika, parsley, pepper, saffron, turmeric	Moroccan cooking uses exotic flavors that encompass both sweet and savory, often in one dish. The food has strong flavors but isn't necessarily spicy.
Spain	Almonds, anchovies, cheeses (from goats, cows, and sheep), garlic, ham, honey, olive oil, onions, oregano, nuts, paprika, rosemary, saffron, thyme	Regardless of what part of Spain you're in, you can always count on garlic and olive oil setting the stage for a flavorful dish. Spanish dishes are often inspired by Arabic and Roman cuisine with emphasis on fresh seafood. You often find combinations of savory and sweet flavors, such as a seafood stew using sweet paprika.

Discovering Where the Food Comes From

Although you may be used to cruising to the grocery store and buying whatever you need, folks on the Mediterranean coast 50 years ago didn't roll that way. Instead, they depended on what was farmed and fished locally, making culinary specialties by using everything on hand. Those habits may be fading, but they're still the cornerstone of the Mediterranean diet, and you can still embrace them by incorporating fresh foods into your meals even if you don't live near the Mediterranean.

The following sections highlight where people in the Mediterranean get their food and why these strategies are so important.

Focusing on farming

In addition to creating travel-worthy beaches, a moderate climate of wet winters and hot summers makes many of the areas along the Mediterranean ideal for agriculture. As a result, people living in the Mediterranean area can grow their own food in gardens and small farms, and many do so. A few areas have this type of climate (similar to the climate of southern coastal California), which makes growing specialized foods like olives and fig trees easier, thus providing ingredients for some of the signature recipes from this region.

Many people in the Mediterranean also abundantly use fresh herbs, spices, onions, and garlic to provide big flavor to their cooking. Here's a partial list of common foods grown on the Mediterranean coast; it can give you a glimpse of what fresh ingredients the recipes in Parts 3 and 4 use:

- » Fruits
 - Figs
 - Grapes

- Lemons
- Mandarin oranges
- Olives
- Persimmons
- Pomegranates

» Grains

- Barley
- Corn
- Rice
- Wheat

» Herbs

- Basil
- Dill
- Fennel
- Mint
- Oregano
- Parsley
- Rosemary
- Sage
- Thyme

» Legumes

- Chickpeas
- Lentils
- Peas

» Nuts

- Almonds
- Hazelnuts
- Pine nuts
- Walnuts

» Vegetables

- Artichokes
- Asparagus
- Broccoli
- Broccoli rabe
- Cabbage
- Eggplant
- Garlic
- Green beans
- Onions
- Tomatoes

Eating seasonally

As a side effect of eating what they grow locally (see the preceding section), folks in the Mediterranean also eat seasonally; after all, you can't eat what you can't grow. Eating in-season food makes an impact for the following reasons:

» **Seasonal abundance makes you cook more creatively.** If you have a plentiful amount of, say, green beans, you want to utilize them in any way possible. Finding different, tasty ways to prepare green beans as a side dish or as part of an entree requires more of a thought process, and more care goes into the food itself.

» **You eat an increased variety of produce throughout the year.** On one hand, you may eat a lot of one food while it's in season, but when that season's over, you'll switch to other foods associated with the new time of year. Relying on produce available year-round at the grocery store means you can easily get stuck in a rut of eating the same standbys throughout the year.

More variety in produce means more variety of health-promoting nutrients that help you prevent disease. Although eating a few different types of fruits and vegetables throughout the year is better than nothing, getting a wide variety is the ultimate goal for good health.



REMEMBER

We know that eating seasonally isn't feasible for many people in certain climates. Don't worry! We cover how you can adopt more of these ideas in Chapter 5.

Fishing the Mediterranean Sea

People in the Mediterranean area rely on the nearby sea as a food source. Fish appear in many common traditional recipes, providing a wealth of healthy omega-3 fatty acids. You can add seafood to a few weekly meals and reap the same benefits. The least expensive seafood in the Mediterranean region includes sardines, anchovies, mackerel, squid, and octopus. Mid-priced fish and shellfish include tuna, trout, clams, and mussels. For a pricey, special-occasion meal, options include lobster and red mullet.

During the 1960s, before the area was overfished, a variety of seafood was available in the Mediterranean. Unfortunately, fish stocks today are significantly low in the Mediterranean due to overfishing, and many important species, such as tuna, are threatened.

Eating and Living the Mediterranean Way

The Mediterranean diet includes a specific balance of foods that's high in vitamins, minerals, and antioxidants and contains the perfect balance of fatty acids. Alas, you can't just eat your way to Mediterranean health. Living a healthy lifestyle means you have to look at all aspects of your life. Along with the food plan is a way of life that includes regular physical activity and time for rest, community, and fun; for the folks on the Mediterranean coast, this combination seems to have created that ever-elusive life balance.

To tie all the Mediterranean diet and lifestyle concepts together, Oldways Preservation and Exchange Trust came up with the Mediterranean Food Guide Pyramid based on the dietary traditions of Crete, other parts of Greece, and southern Italy around 1960, when chronic diseases such as heart disease and cancer were low. The focus is on eating a diet rich in vegetables, fruits, whole grains, legumes, and seafood; eating less meat; and choosing healthy fats such as olive oil. Fun activities, time shared with family and friends, and a passion for life are also emphasized. The following sections examine each aspect so that you can find it, too.

Focusing on healthy fats

Although Mediterranean residents don't consume a low-fat diet, their dietary pattern is considered heart-healthy. How can that be? Not all fats are created equal. People in the Mediterranean consume more of the healthier types of fats (monounsaturated fats and polyunsaturated omega-3 fatty acids) and less of the omega-6 polyunsaturated fatty acids and saturated fats other cultures tend to overload on. Instead of focusing on total fat intake, these folks maintain a

healthier ratio of these different groups of fats than you see in the United States; they consume about 35 percent of their total daily calories from fat, but less than 8 percent of their calories come from saturated fats. According to the National Health and Nutrition Examination Survey, the average intake of saturated fats in the United States is 11 percent of daily calories. You can find out more about the details of this fat ratio in Chapter 2.

To start rebalancing your fat ratio, limit your use of fats such as butter and lard in cooking and use more olive oils or avocados for spreads.

Don't say "cheese": Using dairy in moderation

You may think of the Mediterranean as a cheese-eater's heaven, but the truth is that the Mediterranean areas we focus on don't consume a lot of cheese. Dairy is consumed on a daily basis in the Mediterranean diet, and cheese (along with yogurt) is a common source of calcium; however, moderation is the key (isn't it always?).

Incorporate two to three servings of full-fat dairy products daily. One serving may include an eight-ounce glass of milk, eight ounces of yogurt, or an ounce of cheese. (We discuss full-fat dairy versus low-fat dairy in more detail in Chapter 5.)

Eating primarily plant-based foods

One of the most important concepts of the Mediterranean diet pattern is consuming tons of plant foods such as fruits, veggies, legumes, and whole grains. People in the Mediterranean commonly eat five to ten servings of fruits and vegetables each day, which often means having two to three vegetable servings with each meal. Other daily staples include legumes such as beans, lentils, and peas, and whole grains such as bulgur wheat or barley.

Foods in these categories are naturally high in fiber and nutrients, which makes health management easy. Begin by finding ways to incorporate more unprocessed plant foods in your diet on a daily basis; Chapter 20 can help.

Punching up the flavor with fresh herbs and spices

Fresh herbs and spices not only add tremendous flavor to food but also have many hidden health benefits, which we cover in Chapter 5. If you already use ample herbs and spices in your own cooking, you're on the right track. If not, this book

can help you discover new flavors and simple ways to add more of these plants into your diet.

Enjoying seafood weekly

Seafood is a weekly staple in the Mediterranean diet, and with good reason. Not only is it a local product (see the earlier section “Fishing the Mediterranean Sea”), but it’s also a great source of those coveted omega-3 fatty acids. If you live near a coast, you have a great opportunity to find fresh fish in your local stores and restaurants. If you’re landlocked, don’t discount lakes and rivers for fresh fish.



TIP

Check out www.seafoodwatch.org/recommendations/download-consumer-guides for a list of recommended fish in your region. This guide is a great tool to help you choose local fish with low contaminants and also to protect against overfishing.

Don’t like fish? You can get omega-3 fatty acids in other ways, such as with fish oil supplements or by eating lots of fresh herbs, walnuts, omega-3 enriched eggs, chia seeds, and flaxseeds. Even if you don’t like fish, we still encourage you to try some of the seafood recipes in Chapter 17 to see whether we can change your mind!

Limiting red meat

Red meat used to be a luxury item in rural parts of the Mediterranean, so folks there ate it less frequently. Even though it’s now more accessible to the average Joe, the serving limits have stuck over the years.

Beef is only served once or twice a month in the Mediterranean rather than several times a week like in many U.S. kitchens. And when it does hit the table, it’s usually as a small (two- to three-ounce) side dish rather than an eight-plus-ounce entree. This habit helps ensure a reasonable intake of saturated fats and omega-6 fatty acids. (See the earlier section “Focusing on healthy fats” for info on balancing fat intake.)

Don’t panic at the idea of cutting your meat portion so drastically. You can easily replace some of that meat with lentils or beans to add plant-based protein to your meals, or add more vegetable servings to help fill the plate. Also keep in mind that Mediterranean beef recipes are so full of flavor that a small serving becomes more satisfying. (You can see this difference for yourself by trying out the recipes in Chapter 18.)

Having a nice glass of vino

Wine lovers, rejoice! Drinking a glass of wine with dinner is certainly a common practice in the Mediterranean regions. Red wine has special nutrients that are shown to be heart-healthy; however, moderation is so important. Enjoying some red wine a couple of times a week is certainly a good plan for heart health, although you want to check with your doctor to ensure its okay for you. Check out Chapter 2 for specifics on the benefits of red wine.

Getting a good dose of daily activity

Historically, the people in the rural Mediterranean got plenty of daily activity through work, getting where they needed to go on foot, and having fun. The most notable difference is folks who lived in these areas participated in low-impact movement, like walking, kneading bread, and gardening, all day long. In today's fast-paced environment, people tend to do one short burst of high-impact activity and then sit the rest of the day, a pattern still associated with a higher risk of heart diseases, diabetes, cancer, and mortality. Both types of activity are important for optimal health.

Although you may rely heavily on your car and think this lifestyle isn't realistic for you, you can still find ways to incorporate both aerobic exercise (which gets your heart rate up) and strength-training exercises regularly.



TIP

Walking encompasses both aerobic and strength training and helps relieve stress. If you live close to markets or restaurants, challenge yourself to walk to them rather than drive, or simply focus on taking a walk each day to unwind. And don't forget fun activities like hiking a trail, riding your bike, or taking a swim. Keep your body moving all day.

NOW THAT'S A LONG WEEKEND!

If you don't believe that slowing down can really do that much for your health, consider this study. Researchers from the University of Rochester found that from Friday night until Sunday, study participants, even those with high income or exciting work lives, were in better moods, showed greater enjoyment in life, and had fewer aches and pains. Having unscheduled time on the weekends provided individuals with opportunities to bond with others, explore interests, and relax. Hey, wait; those are some of the main tenets of the Mediterranean lifestyle! And if just a couple of days of downtime can make a difference, think about the effects of making this type of time a priority throughout the week.

Taking time for the day's biggest meal

Even though the Mediterranean residents of days gone by were hard workers, often doing a significant amount of manual labor, they always made time for their largest meal of the day. Traditionally, this meal was lunch, where people sat down as a family and enjoyed a large meal full of vegetables, legumes, fruits, and seafood or meat. Taking time for meal and family was a priority; you didn't see people eating in five minutes at the countertop.

In many cultures, having this large relaxing meal at lunchtime is difficult because of work schedules. However, you can adapt this strategy into your life by focusing on supper. Prioritizing some time to unwind and relax from a busy workday provides other benefits for your family. According to a Columbia University survey, teenagers who eat with their families at least five days a week have better grades in school and are less prone to substance abuse.

Although taking time for a large, relaxing meal sounds like one of those optional strategies you can skip, keep in mind that even small lifestyle choices can make a very big impact on overall health. Family dinners can help you clear your head from work and provide enjoyment through good food and conversation. If you're go, go, go all day at work, prioritizing family mealtime can be priceless for your daily stress management.

A good goal is to spend at least 20 to 30 minutes eating your larger meals. This time frame gives your biological system time to let you know you're full. Plus, it allows you to sit and enjoy your food. Use these tips to help you slow down at mealtime:

- » Have great table discussions with your family and friends. Ask a question about everyone's day or talk about current events.
- » Taste each and every flavor. During each bite, let the food sit in your mouth. Chew it slowly and take pleasure in the freshness and the many tastes that roll across your taste buds. By slowing down and really tasting the flavors, you'll be more satisfied than you would be eating it quickly.
- » Serve lots of food in small portion to help you enjoy each flavor. Adding several vegetables, sliced tomatoes, olives, salads, and protein to a meal helps you enjoy all the different flavors and temperatures.
- » Take some time to be grateful for what you have.
- » Make meal time a television-, computer-, and phone-free zone to avoid mindless eating.

FIGHTING STRESS WITH DAILY RITUALS

Many principles of the Mediterranean lifestyle revolve around family, community, and fun. It's so easy to get caught up in a busy, hectic life and put these small experiences on the back burner because they don't appear to be that important. However, these little rituals throughout the day add up for a big impact on stress management. Stress impacts your health in so many ways, from increasing your risk of high blood pressure and heart disease to promoting headaches, so managing it is key. Here are two examples of daily routines that illustrate how little experiences sprinkled throughout the day can provide more stress relief:

1. Using Mediterranean lifestyle strategies

- Wake up and have a light breakfast
- Workday begins (stress inducer)
- Lunch break with a light walk (stress reliever)
- End workday
- Home for sit-down dinner with family (stress reliever)
- Clean-up and evening tasks, such as kids' homework
- Reading or journaling (stress reliever)
- Bedtime (stress reliever)

In this example, the person has opportunities to let go of a little stress multiple times during the day. Now take a look at an example far too many people get trapped in:

2. Using fast-paced lifestyle strategies

- Wake up and skip breakfast (stress inducer)
- Workday begins (stress inducer)
- Lunch break, eating quickly in ten minutes at the desk (neutral — doesn't induce stress or reduce it)
- Work late (stress inducer)
- Rush through the drive-through to pick up a meal for family, eating in five minutes at the countertop (neutral)
- Clean-up and evening tasks, such as kids' homework
- Television (may be a stress inducer or reliever)

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- Nighttime screen time (blue light from devices) can decrease melatonin, leading to sleep issues (a stress inducer)
- Bedtime (stress reliever)

The first example has one big stress inducer (work) and four stress relievers sprinkled throughout the day. The second example has three to four stress inducers and only one or two stress relievers. That stress builds up in your body, setting you up for an increased risk of disease and takes a toll on your mental health. Taking the time for those small experiences during the day, such as a family dinner or a walk, make a big difference. And remember that the activities here are just examples. You can find stress relievers that work for you, such as knitting, yoga, teatime, painting, meditation, exercise, gardening, or conversation with a dear friend.

Enjoying time with friends and family

Community spirit is a large part of the Mediterranean culture and is something that's disappearing in American culture. Getting together on a regular basis with friends and family is an important priority for providing a sense of strong community and fun. The fun and laughter that come with friendly get-togethers are vital for stress management. Without these little joyful experiences, stress can tip to an unhealthy balance.

To put this strategy into practice, invite some of your close family and friends over each week, perhaps for dinner. It can be as casual as you like. The important thing is to add this type of fun and enjoyment to your life more often.

Having a strong passion for life

The Mediterranean coast is full of sunshine, good food, and beautiful surroundings, so the people who live there naturally tend to have a strong passion for life, family, friends, nature, and food. Choosing to have a strong passion and love of life is associated with more happiness and fulfillment and less stress.

What are you passionate about? Perhaps you love the arts, or maybe nature is your thing. Whatever your passions are, make sure to find a way to make them a part of your life.