



Review Article

The Mediterranean Diet between traditional foods and human health: The culinary example of Puglia (Southern Italy)

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Abstract

The Mediterranean Diet, through a healthy profile of fat intake, carbohydrate at low glycaemic index, high content of dietary fibre, antioxidants and anti-inflammatory compounds, reduces the risk of certain pathologies such as cardiovascular disease. However, it represents anything much more than a dietary regimen and it is also characterised by its links to the various food cultures of the different countries of the Mediterranean area. On the other hand, the traditional cuisine of the Puglia region (Southern Italy) is based on a nutritional model mainly vegetarian because only a small share of calories is of animal origin; cereals are the basic ingredient, pulses and olive oil the main protein and fat source, respectively. In this paper we reported the culture, history, identity and heritage of this culinary model of the Southern Italy tradition to understand possible linkages with the Mediterranean Diet. Moreover, some traditional recipes of the Puglia cuisine are examined as regards gastronomic and nutritional aspects, also for better explaining its relationship with the food style best famous in the world.

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Much more than a dietary regimen

As explained by most dictionaries and shown by the media, the use of the term “diet” is frequently associated to specific food regimes, normally of a restrictive nature and with therapeutic or aesthetic purposes. Nevertheless, etymologically the word *dieta* comes from the Latin *diaeta* which in turn comes from the Greek *diáita*, “way of living”, “life regime” (Corominas, 2000). Anatole Bally (a renowned Hellenist) in his dictionary (Bally, 2000) translates the term *diáita* as type of life and specifies as a first meaning *...in general, a whole set of habits of the body and the spirit, tastes, customs, etc...* Classical authors already used this term with the same sense as that used by Bally: Hippocrates in his works; Plato in *Republic* and *Laws*; Herodotus in *The Histories*; Pindar in *Pythian*; etc. This “way of living” is what we also know today as “lifestyle”. Style or way of life that characterise individuals, groups, communities or villages and which make them similar or different from each other. Therefore, the Mediterranean Diet is this evidently dynamic and ever changing lifestyle with all its diversity, which it is possible to consider in its holistic sense made from tangible and intangible aspects and values. Other plural designations such as Mediterranean Diets and Mediterranean cuisines are the result of an argument used by those who believe that we cannot talk about “one” single diet, but that there are “many” diets in the Mediterranean just as there are many cuisines. It is a persistent argument which is also applied to the Mediterranean by those who think it is not relevant to consider it as a whole.

The Mediterranean Diet as an unequalled legacy of landscapes, places, knowledge, know-how, technologies, products, myths and beliefs, accents, creativity and hospitalities. It is in short, a (or perhaps “the”) common language of the Mediterranean people. Furthermore, another important milestone in the dissemination of its significance was been the inscription of the Mediterranean Diet in the List of Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity by UNESCO, in November 2010. In no case this recognition represents an ultimate milestone, but rather an undertaking to work to safeguard this legacy.

A combination of history, cultures and environment

The traditional Mediterranean Diet is the heritage of millennia of exchanges amongst the peoples and cultures of the Mediterranean Basin. It formed the basis of eating habits throughout the region until the mid twentieth century, but it is now gradually being lost due to the spread of the western-type economy and urban and technological society as well as the globalisation of production and consumption.

The Mediterranean culture integrates the past and the present, because many of its modern aspects can be traced to

the ancient past. Effectively, the Mediterranean basin has been, for millennia, a crossroads of civilisations as a point of convergence for people, merchandise and religions. In Tunisia, for example, you can find Portuguese and Spanish survivals in the consumption of “*bacalao*” or salt cod. It was probably the Portuguese who introduced the cod into Tunisia, as shown by the adoption of the Arab name “*baqalaw*”. It is now mainly consumed in a porridge, chiefly in Sfax, on the feast of *Aïd el Kebir*, to accompany a sweet and sour dish, the ritual “*charmoula*”. Inhabitants of the inland areas tended rather to eat a mollusc dried in the sun and salted, called “*ouzeif*”.

Even the scenery represents, in some ways, a composite picture: some plants such as olive trees, wheat, and vineyards exist in this area from time immemorial. Oranges and lemons, however, originate from the Far East and were brought to the Mediterranean by Arabs. Thorny plants such as prickly pear were brought from America. Also tomatoes, eggplants, corn and potato have been imported, but these and several other plants have gradually become integral parts of the Mediterranean diet. Indeed, the benevolent climate in the region and the human activities have moulded disparate components into a balanced ecosystem (Braudel et al., 1985).

As regards the religion, during polytheistic and monotheistic times the influence of the sacred and the liturgical on diets, production and habits has been substantial. Amongst the celebrations and deity festivities, the *yumuaa*, the *shabbat*, the *dominica*, saints' feasts and other holy days of obligation, the Mediterranean has spent half its life offering up or praying... or disputing the monopoly of the divine truth. Foods here have been raised to the category of the sacred. Bread, wine and oil (the Mediterranean triad) occupy a prominent place: oils anoint the newborn, the king and the moribund; Athena's olive tree founds the state-city and represents the most useful offering for humankind; the dove with the olive branch announces the end of the Flood; the olive of the Koran is the “the blessed tree which is neither from the East nor the West and whose oil seems to take light without coming into contact with fire”; the wine and bread at the Last Supper, are the body and blood of Jesus Christ. The list is endless, in all peoples and times of the Mediterranean. Today we have almost forgotten that when we refer to a companion we are referring to a *cum panis*, someone with whom we are sharing bread.

Conceived as a constantly evolving lifestyle, the Mediterranean Diet is a complex system of shared knowledge relating to health, food, cultures and people; it is the product of a particular environment, a geographical region of multiple facets and rich history, which conserves traditional knowledge and a diversity of foods and diets.

The shortage of resources has prompted communication amongst Mediterraneans and the construction of a food style

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