

by A. Elizabeth Sloan

Healthy Eating Mediterranean Style

Mediterranean is poised to be the next truly important ethnic cuisine. It aligns well with consumers' interest in savory, spicy, ethnic, and bold flavors. Moreover, its diversity of virtually untapped authentic regional cuisines, ingredients, street foods, and theatrical cooking techniques will provide a source of inspiration for culinary concepts for years to come.

The fundamentals of the Mediterranean diet mirror current consumer aspirations for healthier eating. The diet is characterized by an abundance of plant foods, including fruits, vegetables, breads, beans, legumes, nuts/seeds, olive oil, cheese, yogurt, fish, and poultry. Eggs, wine, sweets, and meat are consumed in moderation by those who adopt this diet, which is low in saturated fat but not necessarily low in total fat.

Leading medical authorities, including the American Heart Association and the Mayo Clinic, have endorsed the Mediterranean style of eating, and the *U.S. 2015–2020 Dietary Guidelines* highlight the value of a “Healthy Mediterranean-Style Eating Pattern.” It is the only modern food pyramid that incorporates exercise and eating meals with others as its foundation. Also, importantly, the Mediterranean style of eating is in sync with other strong consumer trends, such as sustainable farming and protection of the planet.

Mediterranean is not an unfamiliar cuisine, but it has yet to be fully explored. Nearly half of U.S. adults have tried and liked Mediterranean cuisine; this includes 55% of those aged 35 and over versus 40% of those aged 18–34. In addition, 37% of adults have not tried it but would like to do so, per Technomic's 2018 *Ethnic Food & Beverage Consumer Trend Report*.

Northern Mediterranean cuisines reflect influences from Italy, Greece, the coastal areas of Spain, and the Provencal region of France as well as the Mediterranean islands of Sicily and Crete. The Southern tier includes classic dishes from Algeria, Morocco, Tunisia, Libya, Mauritania, Egypt, the Levantine, and Turkey.

Mediterranean as a descriptor on U.S. menus increased by 25% over the past decade, per Datassential's 2019 *MenuTrends*. Americans most associate Mediterranean foods with Greece, per Datassential. Greek salad, tzatziki sauces, feta cheese, kalamata olives, orzo, hummus, and tomatoes/chopped cucumbers were among the fastest-growing menu items in eateries that added Mediterranean fare to their menus.

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Flatbreads/naan, falafel, Mediterranean-style pizza, olive oil, charcuterie, and sauces/flavorings, including tahini, pistachio, cardamom, Romesco, and gremolata, have also posted strong gains. Vertical rotisserie meats, such as shawarma or doner kebab, skewers/spits, tagines of slow-cooked stews and soups, and street foods, such as paella prepared in steaming wok-like pans, are among the unique Mediterranean-style preparations.

Mediterranean single-serve desserts, including baklava, cassata (a layered sponge cake), basbousa (a syrup-soaked semolina cake), leche frita (a dessert made with flour, milk, and sugar), kourabiedes (a Greek cookie), and torta de aceite (a sweet biscuit), are well positioned as treats for American diners.

In addition to playing a prominent role in foodservice, Mediterranean foods are quietly mainstreaming onto supermarket shelves. Conagra Brands' *Healthy Choice*, *SmartMade* from Kraft Heinz, and *Stouffer's Fit Kitchen* from Nestlé all include a Mediterranean frozen meal option. Cedarlane Foods offers frozen *Eggplant Mediterranean (Moussaka)* and a *Falafel Protein Bowl*. Whole Foods, Kashi, and California Pizza Kitchen are driving growth of frozen Mediterranean pizzas. Kellogg's *MorningStar Farms* brand includes a *Mediterranean Chickpea* veggie burger. Frozen spanakopita and tiropita appetizers help meet the demand for plant-based morsels.

Taylor Farms and Ready Pac Foods offer Mediterranean fresh salad kits. The *Green Giant Simply Steam* line of frozen vegetables includes a *Mediterranean Blend*. The *Marie's* salad dressing brand added a *Mediterranean Vinaigrette*. Sun Basket's menu of meal kit varieties includes a Mediterranean option.

Mediterranean cheeses such as Halloumi, graviera, and kefalotyri are gaining in popularity, per the Specialty Foods Association.

Saputo Cheese offers *Great Midwest Mediterranean Cheddar* with kalamata olives and sun-dried tomatoes.

Campbell's *Yes!* soup line includes a *Mediterranean-Style Wedding Soup*; Good Foods' refrigerated dips come in *Feta Cucumber* and *Tzatziki Style* varieties. The *Prince* and *Ronzoni* brands now include orzo in their assortments.

Americans are looking for a lifestyle that makes healthier eating easier, and the Mediterranean diet fills the bill. A 2019 expert meta-analysis on the top 40 popular diets published in *U.S. News & World Report* cited the Mediterranean diet as the best diet overall—best for diabetes, best for healthy eating, and easiest to follow.

Of the 50% of adults who tried a diet or eating plan last year, 9% chose the Mediterranean diet, per the Hartman Group's 2019 *Health & Wellness* report. In addition to heart health, the Mediterranean diet provides benefits related to reducing inflammation and supporting cognition. Studies over the past 50 years confirm that the Mediterranean diet supports a reduction in overall mortality, heart disease, cancer, and the effects of Parkinson's and Alzheimer's disease. **FT**



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