



As Columbus outfitted his ships, he kept in mind the possibility that he and his men might end up stranded in a strange land without access to familiar foods. He had visited Portugal's colonies in West Africa, and knew that foods from home might be essential to his survival.

The *Nina*, the *Pinta* and the *Santa Maria* were stocked with water, biscuits, salt pork, dried beef, cod, sardines, anchovies, dried chickpeas, raisins, olive oil, vinegar and fortified wine—typical provisions for Spanish ships of the period and typical of the diet of people living on the northern coast of the Mediterranean Sea.

The Mediterranean is the place where Europe, Africa and Asia intersect—a place where people from different cultures meet and exchange ideas, goods and food. It was the center of the classical world—ancient Greece, Rome, Egypt, and Carthage were all Mediterranean cultures—and the local cuisine has always been a synthesis of ingredients and cooking styles.



The Mediterranean is so large and encompasses so many cultures that it is difficult to define a Mediterranean cuisine.

However, Portugal, Spain, France, Italy and Greece—countries that border the Mediterranean Sea—also share a history in which three foods have been constant: wheat bread, olive oil and wine. All three were central to the diets of the ancient world. And none of these existed in the Americas prior to the arrival of Columbus.

## PRESSING ISSUES

Olive oil is the most universal ingredient in Mediterranean cooking. While Islamic cultures avoid wine and in parts of the Middle East pasta and couscous are favored over wheat bread, every culture in the Mediterranean uses olive oil.

Because olive oil burns very slowly and gives off very little smoke when it burns, it was used in lamps that were part of religious rituals, and came to symbolize the feeding of the body and the soul. Throughout Biblical times it was used as an anointment, and later in the coronation ceremonies of the kings

and queens of Europe.

“Olive oil served a variety of purposes. For one, it was part of the holy oil used to bless newborns. It was used as a lubricant and for maintenance of lighting and heating. And it was, of course, used for food, which was probably its most important function.”

—Ruben Mendoza

Olive trees can live for hundreds of years, and their roots are so deep that even if the tree is cut down, the roots will survive and send out new growth. As a result, the olive tree became a symbol of regeneration, immortality and dependability.

The technological skill necessary to cultivate an olive tree makes olives edible, and produces olive oil that is so complex that the ancient Greeks used “olive knowledge” as a criterion for judging a society's development. The cultivation and production of olive oil meant a society was living in a state of relative harmony because the demands of processing were so intensive that they generally occurred only in more or less peaceful times.

For many centuries, harvesting and processing olives for oil was done by sailors in winter, when rough weather kept them on shore. It reinforced the olive as a symbol of home, safety, and the security of a peaceful, smoothly-running society. When one of the doves that Noah sent out to search for land returned with an olive branch in its beak, the signs of peace and eventual regeneration were blended into one symbol.

In many parts of the Mediterranean, you can still see the traditional method of production. Olives are brought in from the fields, the leaves and stems are removed, and they are washed and transported to the press. Pressing is done by stone wheels, with each stone weighing a little over 2,000 pounds. The wheels crush both the meat and the pits of the olives, reducing them to a thick paste. The paste is then spread on disks made of hemp, which are placed onto a spindle. When the column of disks is about five feet high, it is moved to a machine that applies an enormous amount of pressure, squeezing out the olive's dark juice and oil. The mixture of juice and oil then goes into a piece of equipment that separates the olive juice from the extra virgin olive oil. The oil is then filtered and bottled.

The countries that border the Mediterranean are the major producers of olive oils presently used in the Americas.

## THE UPPER CRUST

The second food in the Mediterranean trilogy is wheat bread. Wheat, oats, barley and rye contain a complex of proteins known as gluten. When gluten combines with water, it produces a sticky substance that makes bread dough malleable and traps the gases released into the dough from the yeast. Wheat is the grain with the most gluten and is therefore the logical choice when making leavened bread.

For thousands of years, wheat bread has had an honored place in the history of western cuisine. The word “companion,” in fact, comes from the Latin word “companionem,” which means “someone with whom you share your bread.” In medieval and Renaissance Europe, the type of bread you ate defined where you stood in society. A crusty white loaf similar to what you find today in Italy and France was the daily staple of the upper classes. The poor made their bread from millet or oats.

Wheat bread was also the only form of bread approved by the Catholic Church for use in the Eucharist. When early colonists were unable to grow wheat successfully in the Caribbean or the coastal parts of Mexico, more conservative members of the Church became concerned that the New World was the devil’s world. They believed God would not have created a place in which the essential elements of the Eucharist could not be produced.



## TO YOUR HEALTH

The third element in most Mediterranean cuisine is wine. The wine grape was domesticated about 7,000 years ago somewhere in northwestern Iran. Three thousand years ago, ancient Greeks considered wine a basic part of their diet and essential to their religious observances.

The ancient Egyptians were among the earliest societies to use stills to make alcohol, but they were not making alcohol for drinking. Their alcohol was used as a solvent into which charcoal dust was mixed in order to produce the black eye makeup worn by women of the time. The makeup was called *al-cohol*. Elizabeth Taylor’s look in Cleopatra was the result of wearing vodka, not drinking it, and it was authentic.

During their conquest of Spain, Arabs had introduced a wide range of spices, taught the Spanish how to cultivate rice, and shared the secret of how to distill alcohol. They also introduced the distillation process to local winemakers, who used it to fortify their wines and, in the process, came up with sherry.

Hundreds of grape varieties were growing in the Americas when Columbus arrived, but they were not the type of grape that produced traditional European wine. The most important wine growing regions in Europe are all in countries that border on the Mediterranean. Spanish colonists brought some of the classic European grape varieties to the Americas, and eventually found ideal growing conditions in Argentina, Chile and California.



## ROUNDING OUT OUR DIET

To a certain extent, the Mediterranean interest in vegetables was a result of the intense seagoing commercial traffic within the area. Southern European ports had had centuries of contact with the Ottoman Empire, and Arab, Persian and Turkish cooking styles often favor vegetables over meat.

Upper-class Europeans living in the Mediterranean valued beef and game as much as their counterparts in the north, but Mediterranean cooks have always had a greater interest in vegetables. Salad greens were far more common in the diet of Renaissance Italians than they were for people living in northern Europe.

During the 700 years the Moors controlled most of Spain, they introduced spinach, zucchini, artichokes, cucumbers, melons, rice, eggplant and citrus fruits. Much of what we consider southern European cooking had its origin in the Arab world.

Because of the easy access to the sea, Mediterranean communities also had a great appreciation of fish and seafood. The dominant religion in Mediterranean Europe was Catholicism. And at the time, the Catholic calendar had 166 fast days during which meat was not to be eaten. If you could afford them, fish and seafood became the main protein sources during fast periods. Poorer groups in society turned to legumes—fava beans, peas, or chickpeas—for their fast days.

“The most important feature that I think Arabs contributed to Mediterranean cooking is rice and the composed rice dishes, those elaborately colored and flavored assemblages of ingredients where rice is presented with all kinds of little bits of meat and seafood and vegetables and wonderful spices like saffron.”



—Elizabeth Rozin

Dairy products were the most widely used foods derived from animals. Yogurt was a mainstay in Middle Eastern cooking.

And cheeses were popular in the Southern European countries. One distinct advantage cheese has over other milk products is that it has a longer shelf life, which made it particularly useful to sailors who could not carry fresh milk aboard ship.

## THE IMMIGRANT TREE

As Spanish and Portuguese colonists settled down in the Americas, the foods they brought with them from the Mediterranean were blended with the foods available here, and a new cuisine developed. The cooks of Mexico adapted



the tortilla by making it with wheat as well as corn. Olive oil, cheese, garlic and onions from the Mediterranean took up residence next to American foods like corn, chili peppers, tomatoes and chocolate. Today's Mexican cooking owes as much to the Mediterranean diet of 500 years ago as it does to the kitchens of the Maya and Aztecs.

In the United States, Thomas Jefferson, always ready for a gastronomic experiment, planted olives on his estate in Virginia but the results were poor. Southern planters were not interested, and soon the idea of an olive and olive oil industry along the southeast part of the Atlantic coast dried up. Jefferson's love of Mediterranean food remained intact, however, evidenced by the fact that he imported an Italian pasta-making machine and put it to regular use.

North America's interest in the olive goes back for at least a hundred years before Jefferson. Franciscan friars had been cultivating small olive groves in Mexico, and when they moved north into California they brought their olive-growing technology with them. Their first successful harvest of "Mission olives" in North America was in San Diego during the mid-



1700s. From then on, Spanish missions along the coast of California were in the olive business.

Napa and Sonoma counties, above San Francisco, proved to have perfect olive-growing conditions. During the early years of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, many California farmers turned to the cultivation of table olives as opposed to olives for oil. While most of the world's olive crop is crushed for oil, much of California's production goes straight to pizzas, salads and Martinis.

Franciscan monks also experimented with citrus orchards, planting groves of oranges, limes and lemons. During the late 1840s, Anglo settlers rediscovered the mission orchards and

by the end of the 1800s, southern California was a major center for citrus production, exporting oranges to the rest of the United States.

## THE DATING GAME

Dates have been a staple food in Mediterranean cultures for thousands of years and may very well be our oldest cultivated fruit. Sculptures at least 7,000 years old clearly show Middle Eastern farmers working with date palms. Spanish missionaries brought date palms to the Americas and eventually grew them in their California missions.

Date palms come in male and female varieties, which is great for their social lives but doesn't really work that well for farmers, because it means that half of their land would go to male trees that don't produce fruit. So date growers do their pollinating by hand, and have done so for thousands of years.

Because of their sweetness—a dried date can have 70 percent of its weight in sugar—dates have often been thought of as nature's candy.



Today, California is a major producer of dates.

## HOW ITALIANS SAVED AMERICAN COOKING

By the end of the 1800s, West Coast farmers were turning California into a second Mediterranean, but most cooking in the United States was still influenced by British cookery—minimal amounts of seasoning, very few vegetables, and lots of meat and potatoes. Major variations in the diet were usually the result of food fads, health food movements and ideas promoted by the emerging schools of dietary science and home economics.

In short, most American cooking was excruciatingly boring.

What began to alter the way Americans ate was the arrival of millions of European immigrants—particularly from Italy. At first, nutritionists from federal, state and city governments tried to convince the Italians that their traditional diet was unhealthy. Cooking classes were set up to teach the immigrants how to prepare foods in the bland and uninteresting style that dominated American cuisine.

They were urged to give up their tomato-based sauces in favor of flour-based white sauces that often had both the consistency and flavor of glue. Butter was suggested over olive oil. Overcooked meat, as much and as often as possible, was essential. Almost all vegetables were off limits. But if you had to have them, the longer they were cooked the better—two days sounded good, except for broccoli, which would need three.

Fortunately, Italian immigrants held on to their way of eating, and in doing so saved gastronomy in the United

States. They imported pasta and olive oil from Italy and built networks of distributors to make sure Italian immigrants across the country could have access to Italian ingredients. They also started farms and backyard gardens to supply the produce they wanted.

"When the Italians came, Americans thought they were not eating very healthfully. They were eating funny bread, and funny tomatoes, and so Americans immediately started talking to them about converting from olive oil to butter, and from pasta to steak. Nutritionists complained that they just couldn't get Italians to give up their pasta. So it's one of the great ironies of American nutrition that we now think of Italian cuisine as one of the most healthful in the world.

—Marion Nestle

## FERMENTING CHANGE

The Italian restaurant, a mainstay of American dining, got its start from one of the more bizarre undertakings by our federal government: the introduction of the 18<sup>th</sup> Amendment to the Constitution. The amendment, known as Prohibition, tried to put an end to the use of alcoholic beverages in the United States.

Starting in 1920, and continuing for more than a decade, our federal, state and local governments wasted millions of dollars, gave organized crime its first big chance to get organized and totally failed to achieve its objective.

Prohibition, however, did have a few side benefits. A number of winemakers in California went into the cheesemaking business. They figured that if you could ferment grape juice, you could just as easily ferment milk. And they were right. Today, we have some wonderful cheeses being made by these same families.



The other positive result of Prohibition was an increase in the number of middle-class Americans who were introduced to Italian cuisine. The first waves of immigrants from Italy tended to live in rooming houses where they also ate their meals. If you came from Naples, you would end up taking bed and board in a house run by people who had also come from Naples, and the meals would be based on Neapolitan recipes adapted to ingredients available in the United States. By the 1890s, there were hundreds of such Italian rooming houses in major cities in America.

In those days, many police officers worked in the neighborhoods where they lived. No matter how devoted he was to enforcing the law, it was unlikely that an Italian police

officer would tell his uncle Tony that he could not make a little wine or distill some grappa for use in his rooming house dining room.

Homemade wine and grappa were also often available in small neighborhood Italian restaurants. Non-Italians started going to these restaurants because they knew that they could get a few glasses of wine with dinner and a glass of grappa afterwards. They also ended up loving the food.

When Prohibition ended, many cooks in small Italian neighborhood restaurants and rooming houses opened more elaborate restaurants in non-Italian neighborhoods in order to cater to their Prohibition customers. Italian restaurants soon became the most popular restaurants in America. Even today, if you ask someone what kind of restaurant they would like to go to, more often than not they will answer, "Italian."

When World War II came to an end, tens of thousands of servicemen who were stationed in Italy returned to the United States with a great appreciation of Italian cooking. By that time, there were large Italian communities in many American cities, particularly in the Northeast and in San Francisco. Good Italian food was easily available and became more and more popular during the 1950s.

"The Italian influence on drinking in America, I think, is the best one. I like it because it is not a 'gourmet' or haute cuisine tradition, but one which says 'Let us enjoy ourselves. Let us be happy. Food and drink are to be enjoyed with family, with friends, in abundance.' After all, most Italian wines originally were probably not of the highest quality. But they were meant to be enjoyed, to bring an added dimension to the joys of the table which, I think, the Italians have always celebrated."

—Elizabeth Rozin

## PIZZA!

Pizza, in one form or another, has been part of Mediterranean cooking for thousands of years. The ancient Romans had a type of pizza and even sold it from storefront shops. If Julius Caesar arrived in Manhattan today, he would clearly understand what was going on in our pizza parlors and probably go for extra cheese and anchovies.

In 1905, Gennaro Lombardi opened the first pizzeria in New York City. As the 20<sup>th</sup> century rolled on, more and more Americanized Italian food became available to the general public, and they loved it.

"But the food exchange was actually far more complicated, because about one-third



of all Italian immigrants who came to the United States

repatriated back to Italy, and brought American ideas about eating back with them. So dishes like spaghetti and meatballs or pizza were as much gifts from the Italian-American food culture back to Italy as they were Italian dishes.

"For example, before the giant migration to the U.S., pizza in Naples was a disk of flat bread with a bit of olive oil and some herbs on it. But returned Americans, known as



*Americani*, went back to Naples and brought American-style pizza. It needed tomato sauce. It needed cheese. It needed meat."

—Hasia R. Diner

In the 1950s, the idea of pizza sold by the slice or by the pie with home delivery began to spread across the country. Curiously, the large firms that came to dominate the pizza industry were not founded by Italian immigrants on the East Coast. Most of them got their start in the Midwest—like Pizza Hut in Kansas, for example—in the heart of meat and potato country.

## THE NEW MEDITERRANEANS

The introduction of Mediterranean foods to the United States was slow but steady. But during the 1970s, there was a dramatic increase in the number of Americans traveling in Italy—Rome had become a prime tourist destination. While there, the travelers learned about dishes with complex flavors, real pasta, good wine, good bread, and the use of olive oil instead of butter.

Gourmet shops were also opening in major cities in the United States, offering a vast collection of imported Italian foods. European-style bakeries were springing up as well.

In addition, a major new wave of immigrants were coming from the Mediterranean. This time they were not from Italy, but came from Greece, Turkey, Lebanon, Palestine, and Egypt. They built communities that retained many aspects of their homelands, especially when it came to food. Slowly but surely, average Americans were introduced to these foods and eventually came to accept them as part of their diet. The foods were new to Americans, but are among the oldest in Western cookery.

By the early 1990s, the traditional foods of the Mediterranean had a wide audience in America. But their appeal was suddenly enhanced when a series of scientific papers claimed the Mediterranean diet could reduce the chance of heart disease and cancer.

Today, some of the most popular foods in America come from the Mediterranean, and they are all here because of Columbus. Without him, this entire hemisphere might be forced to live without pizza, or pasta, or those wonderful little olives that go into Martinis.

## TO LEARN MORE

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