

# WHAT'S FRESH, WHAT'S LOCAL

## A Mediterranean Diet for a Mediterranean Climate

BY JANET LITTLE



Back in the early 1960s, a group of scientists studied the dietary habits of the people living on the island of Crete in Greece. The Cretans' life expectancy was among the highest in the world. In addition to having the lowest rates of heart disease, cancer and other diet-related chronic diseases, the Cretans also had the lowest rate of obesity in the early 1960s and 1970s.

The researchers analyzed the Cretans' food choices and found their diet high in complex carbohydrates and fiber and low in sugar. The Cretans ate a lot of fresh fruits and vegetables—between two to three cups of each, every day. Their diet was rich in dark leafy greens, whole grains and legumes, with moderate weekly intake of fish and small amounts of chicken, lamb, pork, and red meat. The average diet was consisted of olive oil as well as walnuts, seeds, snails, wild greens and legumes, all of which are good sources of omega-3 linolenic acids. The Cretans' diet was rich in monounsaturated and polyunsaturated fats, not in trans- and saturated fats like those found in most diets today.

Fresh, local, organic and homemade foods were the staples of the Cretans' diet. Cheese was handmade from fermented sheep's or goat's milk and vegetables were grown in their own gardens. Nuts were handpicked from nearby trees and olives were harvested and pressed by hand for their fruity, heart-healthy oil. Breads were made by allowing dough to ferment slowly, resulting in a lower glycemic index and toothsome texture.

Even the meat the Cretans ate was much different than much of the meat we eat today. They raised their chickens, pigs and cows without added hormones and antibiotics and allowed them to graze freely on wild native grasses and herbs. The result? Healthier, happier animals with higher levels of omega-3s and less saturated fats when compared most of the meat in our supermarkets today.

Another factor contributing to the low rates of heart disease and cancer among Cretans was their consumption of unsaturated and omega-3 fats. The average Cretan diet was rich in olive oil as well as walnuts, seeds, snails, wild greens and legumes, all of which are good sources of omega-3 linolenic acids. And while some researchers found the Cretans diet derived up to 40 percent of its calories from fat, the most accurate analysis I found noted a diet with 27 percent to 30 percent of its calories from fat. The most important fact is the Cretans' diet was rich in good fats, not in trans- and saturated fats like those found in most diets today.

### ADOPTING A MEDITERRANEAN-STYLE DIET

Southern California is one of the few places in the world to have what is classified as a Mediterranean climate. Our warm, dry summers and mild, wet winters offer the same growing conditions as the countries bordering the Mediterranean. In fact, most of the foods traditionally eaten in Crete are also grown or raised locally. If you are going to adopt a Mediterranean-style diet, a great place to start is at one of the farmers' markets around the county—keep an eye out for staples such as legumes, olive oil and nuts.

One of the main appeals of a Mediterranean-style diet is its selection of

Photograph: Cheryl Koehler

## WHAT'S IN SEASON

Avocados  
Basil  
Green Beans  
Beets  
Blackberries  
Boysenberries  
Cauliflower  
Celery  
Cherimoyas  
Corn  
Cucumbers  
Eggplant  
Figs  
Grapes  
Grapefruit  
Guavas  
Lemons  
Limes  
Melons  
Onions  
Peaches  
Pears  
Peppers  
Plums  
Potatoes  
Radishes  
Raspberries  
Scallions  
Summer Squash  
Strawberries  
Tangelos  
Tomatoes  
Valencia Oranges

full-flavored foods, including fruity olive oil and red wine. The focus of adopting a Mediterranean-style diet is to make wise choices about the types of fat you eat, including monounsaturated fats, such as olive oil, and polyunsaturated fats, which contain the beneficial linolenic acid (a type of omega-3 fatty acid). These fat sources include canola oil, nuts and seeds, walnuts in particular. Fish, especially cold-water varieties, are another great source of omega-3 fatty acids and should be consumed once or twice a week. Saturated fats should be consumed in moderation and hydrogenated oils (trans-fatty acids) should be avoided, as both of these types of fats contribute to heart disease.

Here are some other dietary choices to keep in mind:

- Put the emphasis on plant-based foods, including fruits and vegetables, whole grains, beans, nuts and seeds.
- Choose a variety of minimally processed and, when possible, in-season, organic and locally grown foods.
- Consume low to moderate amounts of cheese and yogurt from goats and sheep.
- Make olive oil a main source of monounsaturated fats.
- Keep total fat calories between 25 percent and 30

percent of daily calories with saturated fat no higher than 8 percent of total fat calories.

- Limit consumption of fish and poultry to twice weekly.
- Eat very small amounts of red meat, no more than once per week.
- Enjoy fresh fruit as a typical daily dessert.
- Drink a moderate amount of wine with meals; about one to two glasses per day for men and one glass per day for women.

Along with the dietary choices of a Mediterranean-style diet, it's also important to include physical activity in your healthy lifestyle plan. A Mediterranean lifestyle is more than buying olive oil and drinking wine. You need to walk more and sit less, ride your bike rather than driving your car, have a sit-down meal versus eating at your desk or in front of the television. In fact, studies show that eating while watching television increases food intake by 40 percent. Even more reason to turn off the TV and make dinnertime family time.

*For over 20 years, Janet Little has worked within the health food industry. She's the spokesperson and nutritionist for Henry's Farmers Market.*

## GRILLED EGGPLANT, ZUCCHINI AND TOMATO STACKED SALAD

Serves 3 to 4

1 small eggplant

1 zucchini

1 teaspoon sea salt

3 tablespoons extra-virgin olive oil

1 tablespoon balsamic vinegar

6 Kalamata olives, pitted and chopped

½ teaspoons oregano

½ teaspoons mint

Salt and black pepper to taste

2 tablespoons canola oil

1 large on-the-vine tomato, sliced into 6 slices

3 ounces Feta cheese, sliced

6 large basil leaves

Slice eggplant and zucchini lengthwise, and place on a baking sheet. Sprinkle with salt. Set aside for 5 minutes. To make the dressing, whisk together olive oil and balsamic vinegar. Add olives, oregano, mint, salt and pepper. Set aside. Heat grill pan over medium high heat. Add canola oil. Pat excess water from eggplant and zucchini with a paper towel. Place eggplant and zucchini in pan and grill for 2 minutes per side or until golden. Layer the eggplant and zucchini with tomatoes, Feta and basil. Drizzle with dressing.





## GRILLED MIXED VEGGIES

*Served as a side dish or main course, a quick sear or slow roast adds caramelized flavor to the season's finest produce.*

Serves 4

- 1 large sweet onion, sliced into ¼-inch rings
- 2 organic peppers (red, orange or yellow), seeded, cored and cut in half
- 4 Portabella mushrooms, stems removed
- 2 zucchini, trimmed, sliced lengthwise into ¼-inch planks
- 2 yellow squash, sliced lengthwise into ¼-inch planks
- 1 pound asparagus spears, ends trimmed
- 1 cup olive oil and balsamic vinegar dressing
- 1 teaspoon each thyme, oregano and basil
- Salt and pepper, to taste
- Grill basket

Combine first six ingredients in a bowl. Add dressing, herbs, salt and pepper; mix well. Marinate for 1 hour or overnight in refrigerator. Prepare a medium-hot fire in grill. Place vegetables in grill basket (reserve marinade) and grill for 15 minutes, stirring 2 or 3 times. Place veggies on a platter and serve with extra marinade. If you don't have a grill basket, the vegetables may be cooked directly on the grill.

## CITRUS-GRILLED HALIBUT

*Serve this spectacular dish on a fancy platter garnished with tangy grapefruit sections and marjoram sprigs. Delicious!*

Serves 4

- ½ cup fresh grapefruit juice
- ¼ cup olive oil
- 2 teaspoons fresh marjoram, chopped
- ½ teaspoon salt
- ⅛ teaspoon ground black pepper
- 4 halibut fillets, about 8 ounces each
- 4 sprigs fresh marjoram, for garnish
- Grapefruit sections, for garnish

In a shallow glass dish, make marinade by combining grapefruit juice, olive oil, marjoram, salt and pepper. Add halibut fillets, turning once to coat both sides. Cover dish and refrigerate 1–2 hours, turning fillets once or twice.

Preheat grill. Reserve marinade, and move fillets to a lightly oiled wire basket. Place basket 4–6 inches above hot coals. Grill for 10 to 12 minutes, turning once and brushing with reserved marinade, until fillets are barely opaque in thickest part. To serve, arrange cooked fillets on a platter and garnish with grapefruit sections and marjoram sprigs.

## GRILLED ROSEMARY-DIJON LAMB CHOPS

Serves 6

- 4 cloves garlic
- 3 tablespoons rosemary leaves
- 3 tablespoons olive oil
- 1 tablespoon Dijon mustard
- Juice and zest of one lemon
- 1 teaspoon salt
- 1 teaspoon freshly ground pepper
- 12 lamb chops

Place garlic, rosemary, olive oil, mustard, lemon juice, lemon zest, salt and pepper in food processor. Pulse until it forms a paste. Rub the paste over both sides of the lamb chops. Place on a baking sheet or in a resealable bag and refrigerate for 1 hour, or up to 3 hours. Allow to come to room temperature before cooking. Heat grill pan over medium-high heat. Brush lightly with vegetable oil. Place chops on grill and sear 2½ minutes per side for medium-rare. Allow to rest 5 minutes before serving.