

# MEDITERRANEAN CUISINE

## THE INGREDIENTS & CULTURE BEHIND THE FOOD

**T**he Mediterranean region encompasses a wide area stretching from Spain in the west to Turkey in the east and south to the northern countries of Africa from Morocco to Egypt, and rounded off by Syria, Lebanon, and Israel. In all, 21 countries make up the Mediterranean, each with its own unique culture and foods. Despite these differences, years of trade, conquest, immigration, and shared climate among the countries has yielded numerous culinary similarities between otherwise disparate peoples.

The Mediterranean diet has been touted for decades as one of the healthiest in the world. The people of the region have longer lifespans and lower rates of heart disease and high blood pressure. A product of necessity, Mediterranean cuisine focuses on using whatever fresh ingredients are available, and preparing them simply to highlight their flavors.

### RICH CULINARY HISTORY

The warm climate of the Mediterranean

provides a long growing season for an abundance of crops, giving locals easy access to fresh ingredients. A lack of natural barriers among coastal communities and relatively easy-to-navigate waters have historically allowed easy access to new areas within the Mediterranean for trade, travel, and invasion. Many new foods introduced to the region quickly acclimated to the soil and over time became staples in the local diets. Use of flatbreads, lentils, fish, and seafood date back to the ancient Greeks. The ancient Romans expanded their menus through conquest, taking spices, fruits, and wines from around the empire. Through trade came spices from Asia via the Middle East, olives from Europe traveled to the east and Northern Africa, and from Africa came salt. The borrowing and mixing of ingredients and dishes continued through the Ottoman Empire, the reign of Napoleon, the Age of Exploration, and beyond with

each community putting their own local twist on ingredients, flavors, and cooking styles.

### THE FRESHEST PRODUCE

While dishes and preparation styles vary from country to country, one unifying aspect of Mediterranean cuisine is the preference for seasonal ingredients of the highest quality. The fertile lands and mild climate provide ideal growing conditions for a wide variety of foods. Grains play an important role across the region. In ancient times emmer and barley dominated, but today wheat is used for everything from breads and pasta to couscous and bulgur. Vegetables are also crucial to the Mediterranean plate. Olives and olive oil are used widely as are tomatoes and peppers—Aleppo chiles in the Eastern Mediterranean and Calabrian chiles in Southern Europe are among the most popular. Greens such as arugula, radicchio, and spinach



## MEDITERRANEAN REGIONS

### EASTERN MEDITERRANEAN

**Countries:** Greece, Turkey, Syria, Lebanon, Israel, Palestine, Egypt

**Common Ingredients:** yogurt, fresh cheese (feta, halloumi), parsley, sumac, mint, lemon juice, pomegranate, nuts, chickpeas

**Dishes:** kebabs, pita, lavosh (flatbread), spanakopita (spinach pie), baklava (pastry of layered filo), kibbeh (bulgur wheat meatball), moussaka (eggplant and potato casserole)

### SOUTHERN EUROPE

**Countries:** Italy, southern France, Spain, Portugal, Malta

**Common Ingredients:** tomatoes, garlic, capers, anchovies, mustard, anise, pine nuts, olive oil, cardoons, mozzarella

**Dishes:** pasta, leavened bread, bouillabaisse (fish stew), chicken cacciatore, paella (Spanish rice dish), eggplant and chicken Parmesan, socca (chickpea flour crepes), chicken piccata

### NORTHERN AFRICA

**Countries:** Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia, Libya

**Common Ingredients:** abundant spices including: cumin, coriander, saffron, cinnamon, cloves, chiles, and paprika, apricots, dates, raisins, artichokes, okra

**Dishes:** couscous, kefta (meatball kebab), chicken tajine (stew), ftet (fava bean salad), mechouia (similar to ratatouille)

are used frequently. Other staples include eggplant, artichokes, onions, carrots, broccoli, asparagus, lentils, and chickpeas. Fresh fruits—figs, pears, citrus, melons, and dates—are featured prominently in desserts.

## FOOD CULTURE

It isn't only the ingredients that set the Mediterranean region apart from the rest of the food world. The approach to food and the culture surrounding it also make it unique. It has been said that, among Italians, the interest in food and the art of food production is so deeply ingrained in the culture and its people that there is no Italian word for *foodie*. Food in the region is often prepared simply with carefully selected ingredients. Neither cooking nor eating are rushed. Meals are enjoyed leisurely with friends and family. Food isn't just sustenance, it's an integral centerpiece of the culture.

Meal times and structures vary across the region. In the east salad is not necessarily a distinct course. Often it is served at the beginning of dinner and remains on the table throughout the meal. In the west, salad comes after the main course to cleanse the palate. In a more formal setting in the east, appetizers will precede two main dishes. A salad along with the appetizers stays



on the table throughout the meal. Only when coffee and dessert are brought out will the main dishes be cleared away. In the west the courses are more distinct. Appetizers are followed by a soup, pasta, or risotto, then a meat dish with cooked vegetables, followed by the salad, and

coffee and dessert at the end. Breakfasts also vary widely depending on the time of day they are consumed. For some, it is a roll and a cup of coffee before work, for others a larger, more substantial meal at mid-late morning. In the east, breakfast is typically yogurt with honey or fruit

## SPICES OF THE MEDITERRANEAN

The Mediterranean is famous for its spices and spice blends, especially in the eastern and North African countries. Each country has its own variation of many common spice blends, but they share at least a few of the same basic ingredients.

### ZA' ATAR

Za'atar is used to flavor meats and vegetables. Ingredients used for the blend include: oregano, basil, thyme, savory, marjoram, sumac, sesame seeds, salt, and lemon peel.

Combine it with lemon juice, lemon zest, minced garlic, and olive oil and rub on chicken thighs before grilling.

### BAHARAT

This spice blend, common in Lebanon, Syria, Israel, and Jordan, is often used to season meats. Common ingredients include: black pepper, paprika, cumin, coriander, cloves, nutmeg, cinnamon, and cardamom. Use it to season braised dishes or on flatbreads.

### HARISSA

Harissa is a chile paste used in Northern Africa as a dip, marinade, or ingredient (often added to soups). It is frequently made with red chiles, coriander, cumin, garlic, salt, and olive oil. Use it in meat marinades, or add it to hummus for a spicy kick, or to olive oil for dipping bread.

### RAS EL HANOUT

This spice blend from Morocco can contain upwards of 30 ingredients and is used on meat and vegetables. Common

ingredients include: cumin, ginger, turmeric, salt, cinnamon, black pepper, white pepper, coriander, cayenne, allspice, nutmeg, and cloves.

### HERBES DE PROVENCE

This traditional blend of herbs originated in southern France where it is often used to season chicken, potatoes, salads, sauces, and soups. Ingredients include: thyme, marjoram, savory, rosemary, mint, fennel seeds, sage, tarragon, chervil, and sometimes lavender.

### SUMAC

This spice, frequently used throughout the Mediterranean, comes from the berries of a bush that grows wild throughout the region. It is used as a souring agent similar to lemon or vinegar. Try adding sumac to sweet sauces or glazes for roasted or grilled chicken to bring a balanced, complex flavor.

### MAHLAB

Also spelled *mahalab*, *mahleb*, and *mahaleb*, this spice is made from seeds of small black cherry trees that grow in the Mediterranean. It has a sweetness similar to rosewater and nutty flavor similar to marzipan and is used in a variety of baked goods.



*Ground sumac*

preserves or black olives, feta, tomatoes, and cucumber. Whether sweet or savory, breakfast is always served with bread. The size of breakfast will generally determine the size of lunch. A light breakfast means a bigger lunch, while a large breakfast will lead to a small lunch later in the afternoon. Lunch eaten at home or in a restaurant is usually a multi-course meal. Students or workers on the go might pick up a sandwich, slice of pizza, or a kebab from a café or street vendor.

Mediterranean cuisine offers numerous health benefits. Favoring fresh ingredients over processed and packaged foods, the cuisine is, by and large, lower in saturated fats, salt, and sugar. Many of the vegetables and whole grains that serve as culinary staples across the region are high in soluble fiber, which helps digestion and blood glucose levels. Olive oil, the primary fat used for cooking, is a monounsaturated fat, which is considered a heart-healthy fat. Longer, slower meals shared with friends and family lend themselves to a more

relaxed culture, which helps alleviate stress and promotes deeper social connections that benefit mental health.

## MEDITERRANEAN FLAVORS AT HOME

Incorporating the flavors of the Mediterranean into your home cooking is easy. The simplest way to start is by substituting olive oil for butter wherever possible. Choose breads made with whole grains, which are loaded with fiber. Season chicken and vegetables with herb and spice blends like za'atar, baharat, or herbes de Provence. Try glazing grilled chicken with pomegranate molasses. Pick up some halloumi (a brined cheese made from sheep's and goat's milk) to add to kebabs. Add legumes such as chickpeas and lentils to your meals. Make a Greek salad with olives, feta, tomato, onion, and a light olive oil-based dressing over romaine lettuce. Serve poached pears, fresh fruit, or baklava for dessert. Enjoy all with a glass of wine and dreams of a warm, sunny coastline.





## MEDITERRANEAN **CHICKEN THIGHS**

Chef Ben Maides  
Au Courant Regional Kitchen  
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### Serves 4 to 6

4 Smart Chicken® thighs  
2 tablespoons salt  
1 tablespoon black pepper  
2 tablespoons canola oil  
3 shallots, sliced  
2 tablespoons sliced garlic cloves  
2 tablespoons capers  
1 teaspoon chili flakes  
 $\frac{3}{4}$  cup Kalamata olives, halved  
1 cup white wine  
1 pound medium-sized tomatoes, quartered  
 $\frac{1}{4}$  cup extra-virgin olive oil  
1 ounce basil leaves, torn

Preheat the oven to 400°F. Season the thighs with salt and pepper and set aside. Heat a pot with the canola oil and sear chicken thighs until golden brown. Remove from the pan and set aside. Add the shallots and sauté until soft. Add the garlic, olives, capers, chili flakes, and olives and cook for about 2 minutes. Add the white wine and tomatoes and cook for about 5 additional minutes. Add the chicken thighs and transfer to the preheated oven to cook for 45 minutes. Remove from the oven, stir in olive oil and fresh basil, and serve.