

Original Article

There are many Mediterranean diets

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Interest in Mediterranean diet began 30 years ago, when Ancel Keys published the results of the famous *Seven Countries Study*. Since 1945, almost 1.3 million people have come to Australia from Mediterranean countries as new settlers. There are 18 countries with coasts on the Mediterranean sea: Spain, southern France, Italy, Malta, Croatia, Bosnia, Albania, Greece, Cyprus, Turkey, Syria, Lebanon, Egypt, Libya, Malta, Tunisia, Algeria and Morocco. This study from which this report derives aims to investigate the influence of the food habits of immigrants from Mediterranean countries on Australian food intake. Here we look at the 'traditional' food habits of the above Mediterranean countries as told by 102 people we interviewed in Sydney, who came from 18 Mediterranean countries to Sydney. Most of the informants were women, their age ranged from 35 to 55 years. The interview was open-ended and held in the informant's home. It usually lasted around 1½ hours. The interview had three parts. Personal information was obtained, questions relating to the food habits of these people back in their original Mediterranean countries and how their food intake and habits have changed in Australia were also asked. From the interviews, we have obtained a broad picture of 'traditional' food habits in different Mediterranean countries. The interview data was checked with books of recipes for the different countries. While there were similarities between the countries, there are also important differences in the food habits of the Mediterranean countries. Neighbouring countries' food habits are closer than those on opposite sides of the Mediterranean Sea. We suggest that these food habits can be put into four groups. The data here refer to food habits in Mediterranean countries 20 or 30 years ago, as they were recovering from the Second World War. There is no single ideal Mediterranean diet. Nutritionists who use the concept should qualify the individual country and the time in history of their model Mediterranean diet.

Key words: different Mediterranean diets, food habits, Mediterranean diet, Sydney.

Introduction

'The Mediterranean diet' has been widely recommended for a healthy lifestyle since Ancel Keys first used the term in 1975.^{1,2} The essential concept is that this is not a set of changes to our usual diet dictated by scientific experiments. It is a set of food habits and recipes enjoyed traditionally by the ordinary people of Mediterranean countries who have been found to have lower rates of coronary and other chronic diseases than the most scientifically developed countries, for example, USA, UK and Germany.³

If one takes a more than superficial interest in the Mediterranean diet, questions arise of time and place. There are at present 18 countries with coasts on the Mediterranean Sea. In clockwise order from Gibraltar they are Spain, France, Italy, Croatia, Bosnia, Albania, Greece, Turkey, Syria, Lebanon, Israel, Egypt, Libya, Tunisia, Algeria and Morocco, plus the island countries Malta and Cyprus. Some of the larger of these countries also have distinct regional differences, food habits and recipes.

Descriptions of the Mediterranean diet can be consulted. For Ancel Keys in the 1950s it included 'home made minestrone . . . pasta in endless variety . . . served with tomato sauce and a sprinkle of cheese, only occasionally enriched with some bits of meat or served with a little local seafood . . . a hearty dish of beans and short lengths of macaroni . . . lots of bread never more than a few hours from the oven and never served with any kind of spread; great quantities of fresh vegetables, a modest portion of meat or fish perhaps twice a week, wine of the type we used to call 'Dago red' . . . always fresh fruit for dessert'.⁴

Later Keys cites 'The heart of what we now consider the Mediterranean diet is mainly vegetarian: pasta in many forms, leaves sprinkled with olive oil, all kinds of vegetables in season and often cheese, all finished off with fruit and frequently washed down with wine . . . it is much lower in meat and dairy products and there are some differences in dessert. What we call pie is almost unknown, as are cornstarch and steamed puddings. Cakes are mostly special types for Christmas and Easter and fresh fruit is the standard dessert'.⁵

For Trichopoulou *et al.*⁶ studying older people in Greek villages, the eight characteristics of the traditional Greek diet are:

1. A high ratio of monounsaturated to saturated fat.
2. Moderate alcohol consumption.
3. High consumption of legumes.
4. High consumption of cereals (including bread).
5. High consumption of fruits.
6. High consumption of vegetables.
7. Low consumption of meat and meat products.
8. Low consumption of milk and dairy products.

To use this system it needs reference amounts for each of the eight food groups per day: high relative to . . . and low relative to what comparison diet? Average diets in north

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Europe have been used. The Oldways, Preservation and Exchange Trust has proposed a Mediterranean diet pyramid.⁷ Unlike the standard (black background) USDA pyramid, which shows only five food groups, the Mediterranean pyramid's triangular area is divided up for 11 different food groups. Their areas, presumably representing relative grams per day (in cm²), are: bread, pasta, rice, couscous, polenta, bulgar 33; vegetables 25; beans, other legumes and nuts 20; fruits 16; olive oil and olives 10; cheese, yoghurt and other dairy 9; fish 5; poultry and eggs 3; sweets 1; lean red meat 1. Wine in moderation is shown alongside.

These amounts differ from a pattern of 1960 southern Italian (Nicotera) food intake that Fidanza suggested as a 'real reference Mediterranean Italian diet' (g/head/day, all ages, men and women): cereals 398, vegetables 286, legumes 41, fruit 83, fish 32, edible fats (olive oil) 38, meat 34, eggs 12, cheese 16, milk (mL) 30, sugar products 22, wine (mL) 119.⁸ Several of the ratios here are quite different from the Oldways pyramid.

From France, Vialettes observed that in the classic Mediterranean world the diet is based on three plants: wheat, the olive and vine. In the south the palm tree replaces the olive, and the characteristic consumption of wine occurs in the western Mediterranean countries. He also suggests that garlic and onions may have health benefits at customary intake.⁹

The recorded national amounts of the food groups consumed in the individual Mediterranean countries in the early 1960s differed considerably.^{10,11}

Cereals ranged twofold (Libya low, France high), fruits fourfold (Morocco low to Turkey high), vegetables fourfold (Libya low to Spain high), meats about fivefold (from Egypt to France), olive oil (from essentially zero in Egypt, Malta and Israel to 18% of dietary energy in Greece).

Between the early 1960s and the recent years there have been great changes in food consumption patterns in all the Mediterranean countries.^{4,8,11–13}

Ferro-Luzzi concluded 'describing the Mediterranean diet, was supposed to be a quite easy task, has turned out to be a demanding and almost impossible enterprise since data are lacking, incomplete or too aggregated. It appears that currently there is insufficient material to give a proper definition of what the Mediterranean diet is or was in terms of well defined chemical compounds or even in terms of foods. We do not think we have succeeded in characterizing the Mediterranean diet in a satisfactory way. The closest we feel that one can come in terms of a definition . . . is to assume that it resembles the diet eaten in south Italy in the early 1960s, as described by the Euratom Study . . . The all embracing term 'Mediterranean diet' should not be used in scientific literature until its composition, both in foods, nutrients and non-nutrients is more clearly defined and the metabolic basis of its health-promoting virtues has been better explained'.¹¹

As part of a study of the influence of the food habits of immigrants from Mediterranean countries on contemporary Australian food consumption patterns, we have interviewed people (mostly women), now living in Sydney who lived in one of the Mediterranean countries when they were younger and recalled what they used to eat and drink in their original countries.

Methods

People were interviewed who came from Spain, southern France, Italy, Malta, Croatia, Bosnia, Albania, Greece,

Cyprus, Turkey, Syria, Lebanon, Egypt, Libya, Tunisia, Algeria and Morocco.

A total of 102 people have been interviewed. Local phone books were used to identify the location of each community service and clubs in Sydney. From here, names of good informants were contacted.

The age of the informants was from 35 to 55 years old. Most of the informants were women, because food preparation and cooking is mainly the responsibility of women in Mediterranean countries. All the informants were born and had grown up in a Mediterranean country.

Up to the present, adequate numbers have not been interviewed from Syria, Palestine, Israel, Algeria, Libya and Tunisia.

The interview was open-ended, not structured and held in the informants' homes. It was not limited by time and usually lasted around 1½ hours. Some repeat visits were made.

Visiting the informants' homes gave the opportunity to observe some items, preparation and cooking methods that were used, also the way of serving their dishes. The interview had three parts, including asking personal information: education level, where they lived in their original Mediterranean country, involvement in food shopping and preparation and when they came to Australia. The second part considered the original food habits of these Mediterranean people back in their original country. They were asked about their staple foods and dishes, the food items or dishes as centrepiece and their trimmings or side dishes. The third part dealt with their food habits in Australia to find out what changes they had made in foods consumed and methods of preparation.

Information was recorded in a computer notebook (Acer Extensa 503T; Acer, Homebush Bay, Australia).

Supplementary information has been sought in cookery books from and about the different Mediterranean countries. Some of the informants lent copies of cookbooks, from which copies were made.

Results

From the interviews, we found that food consumption varied not only between different Mediterranean countries, but also within the same country.

These differences are related to several factors such as culture, ethnicity, religion, socioeconomic status and the climate of the country.

Tables were prepared for each country with 110 foods and (dishes) in a standard order. Frequency of consumption was expressed with simplified scoring as 0, +, ++ or +++.

Some countries different, some similar

It could be seen that there were large differences in food consumption patterns between countries that are far apart, e.g., Italy and Morocco, and there were similarities of food habits between some neighbouring countries, for example, Lebanon and Turkey (Table 1).

Two countries with different food habits: Italy and Morocco

Most of the Italian cereal and cereal products came from white flour, bread and pasta. In Morocco, the cereal products were the white flour in bread and pastry, wholemeal bread

Table 1. Frequency of the food consumption (days/week)

	Different diets		Similar diets	
	Italy	Morocco	Lebanon	Turkey
White flour	+++	+++	+++	+++
Wholemeal flour	0	++	0	0
White bread	+++ Cylindrical loaf, focaccia and rolls	+++ Long stick	+++ , pitta + (layered flat bread)	+++ pide flat fermented bread or simit crusty rings smothered with sesame seeds
Wholemeal bread	0	+++ , kobez	0	0
Pasta	+++ , various shapes	0	+ , fried vermicelli	+ , fried vermicelli or ravioli
Couscous	0	+++	0	0
Burghul	0	0	+++	+++
Rice	++ , more in North	+	+++	+++
Potato	++ , to make gnocchi	+++	++	++
Butter	+ , in North Italy	+ , smna (clarified butter for cooking)	++ , smna (for cooking and desserts)	++ Sana yag (for cooking and desserts)
Buttermilk	0	+++	++	+
Cheese	+++	++	+++	+++
Yogurt	0	++	+++	+++
Margarine	0. ++	0	0. ++	0. ++
Allspice	+	+++	+++	+++
Basil	+++	++	0	0
Turmeric	0	+++	0	0
Broccoli	++	0	0	0
Cauliflower	++	0	++	++
Eggplant	+	++	+++	+++
Olive	+++	++	+++	+++
Silverbeet	0	+	+++	+++
Tomato	+++ , fresh and peeled	++ , fresh and paste	++ , peeled and fresh	++ , fresh and peeled
Pumpkin	+	+++	0	0
Vine leaf	0	0	+++	+++
Zucchini	++	+	++	++
Fresh broad beans	++	++	+++	++
Fresh green beans	++	0	+++	+++
Fresh haricot bean	++	+	+	+
Dried broad beans	+	++	+++	++
Dried lentils	0	++	+++	+++
Dried cannellini	++	0	+	+
Chickpeas	++	+++	+++	++
Dried haricot bean	+	++	+++	+++
Apples	++	+	++	++
Apricots and peaches	++	++	++	++
Cherries	+	0	+++	+++
Dates	0	+++	0	0
Figs	++	+++ , fresh and dry	++ , fresh more than dry	++ , dried more than fresh
Grapes	+++	++	++	++
Lemons	+	++	++	+++
Oranges	+++	+++	+++	+++
Pears	+++	++	+	+
Plums	++	++	++	++
Pomegranates	+	+++	++	++
Eggs	++	++	+++	+++
Suet	++ , pancetta	+++	+++	+++
Olive oil	+++	+	++	++
Other vegetable oil	+ , frying + olive oil	++ , frying only	++ , frying only	++ , frying only

Table 1. Continued

	Different diets		Similar diets	
	Italy	Morocco	Lebanon	Turkey
Beef	++	++	+++	+++
Lamb	++	+++	++	++
Pork & ham	++	0	0	0
Veal	+++	+	+	+
Sausages	+++ , various	+	+	0
Fish & fish products	++ , especially in south	+++	++	+
Almond	++ , biscuits and drink	++ , desserts	+++ , desserts	+++ , desserts
Peanut	+	+++	++	++
Pistachio	0	0	++	+++
Pinenut	+	0	+++	+++
Sesame	+	++	+++	+++
Honey	++	+++	+++	+++
Halva	0	+	++	++
Nougat	++	0	0	0
Turkish delight	0	++	++	++
Desserts	+, biscuits, Gelato, cakes	+, biscuits, baklava, compote	+, baklava, cheesy dessert, mahmoul	+, rice pudding, baklava, biscuits
Coffee	+++ , various	+++ , most is Turkish	+++ , Turkish	+++ , Turkish
Tea	++	+++ , green minted	++	++
Alcoholic beverages	+++ , red and white wine	0	++ , arak (anize-flavoured spirits)	++ , arak (anize-flavoured spirits)

0 = 0; + = 1,2 ; ++ = 3,4,5; +++ = 6,7 serves per week.

and couscous, which is made of semolina. Rice has a major role in north Italy, to make different kinds of risotto.

Regarding dairy products in Italy, butter is used in the north; cheeses in the north and south of the country. In Morocco, clarified butter is used and buttermilk which is consumed as a drink. Cheese could be found in the Moroccan diet, but not as a staple food. Also yogurt is consumed as a snack with honey.

Various vegetables are consumed in Italy, for example, broccoli, capsicum, cauliflower, green beans, mushrooms and zucchini. Fresh and dried herbs are used in Italian cooking, such as basil. In Morocco, eggplant, potatoes, pumpkins and green broad beans are the main vegetables, in couscous or *Tajines* dishes. Turmeric and allspice are the usual flavour ingredients.

Cannellini and haricot beans are the staple Italian pulses, but in Morocco these are broad beans and chickpeas. Dates are consumed greatly in Morocco, whole or mashed to fill sweet pastry; however, not in Italy. Fresh and processed meats have important roles in the Italian diet. Lamb is the principal meat in Morocco. Italians use pinenuts mainly in *pesto*; they have no role in Morocco.

Confectionery and sweets are different, in Italy almond nougat, in Morocco, *halva* and Turkish delight. Beverages differ, in Italy different kinds of coffee and wine, in Morocco, green minted tea.

Two countries with similar food habits: Lebanon and Turkey

The right side of Table 1 shows, by contrast, neighbouring Lebanon and Turkey. Although the shapes and the names of

the bread in both countries are different, white flour is used to make them. Occasionally, macaroni or spaghetti is consumed, but fried vermicelli is used with rice more frequently.

Rice and/or *burghul* are consumed daily in both countries. The consumption of clarified butter is high to moderate. Different kinds and flavours of cheeses play important roles in both countries' diets, also yogurt is consumed on its own or in cooking dishes. In both countries, vegetable dishes are prepared with olive oil and tomato purée, either without meat and served cold or hot with meat. The main vegetables in Lebanon and Turkey are eggplant, broad and green beans, okra, zucchini and vine leaves. Consumption of dried pulses is high to moderate in both countries. The same fruits are eaten in Lebanon and Turkey. Fats are clarified butter, suet and smaller amounts of olive oil.

Both countries consume the same meats. They have high consumption of pistachio nuts, used in every kind of traditional sweet and the sesame seeds used to make the sesame seed paste to produce *tahini*. Although the names of the sweet dishes are different, the ingredients and preparation methods are similar. For men and women, the traditional beverage in both countries is Turkish style coffee. Men more than women drink similar spirits (*Arak*) in both countries; in Turkey this includes Moslems.

Food habits of Mediterranean countries fit (roughly) into four groups

It is possible to fit the Mediterranean countries into four groups of neighbouring countries whose food habits are closer to each other than to the other countries:

1. Western group: Spain, France, Italy and Malta.
2. Adriatic group: Croatia, Bosnia and Albania.
3. Eastern group: Greece, Lebanon Cyprus, Turkey and Egypt.
4. North African group: Libya, Algeria, Morocco and Tunisia.

Their food patterns are summarised in Table 2.

The Western group, as seen in Table 2, consume bread, rice, pasta and potatoes as staple food, with vegetables and legumes. Wheat flour, mostly white, is used to make bread and pastry for savoury or sweet dishes. Pasta consumption ranges from high to moderate in this group, with the exception of Spain, where rice intake is higher than pasta. Rice consumption is nevertheless high except in France. Polenta and rice are major foods in north Italy. Potato plays an important role in the Spanish diet. Olive oil is consumed mainly in Italy and Spain, in cooking or salads or on bread, whereas France consumes more butter than the rest of these countries (more in the north) and Malta consumes vegetable oil (for example, corn oil). Cheeses are the most important item among dairy products. They have different names, shapes and taste. The highest consumption of garlic is in Spain. Fresh tomatoes, sun-dried, paste or purée are eaten daily. Pulses are most eaten in Spain, least in Malta. Fresh fruits, dried, glazed and jams are important. Game meat (rabbit and kid) consumption is moderately high in these countries.

The Adriatic group has a high consumption of white wheat flour as bread, also pitta, that is, soft dough stuffed with meat or vegetables. Dairy product consumption is high and takes different forms; butter and buttermilk in Bosnia; ricotta and cottage cheese, sour cream and clotted cream are eaten in similar amount in all three countries. Vegetables are important foods, for example, eggplant and okra as stew; potato as fried, in stew, baked, mashed and salad; pumpkin, mainly to stuff pitta dough; cabbage and vine leaves are filled with rice and minced meat or cabbage used as salad with tomatoes and garlic. Dried pulses consumption is low. Olive oil consumption is low (Albania, Bosnia) to moderate (Croatia). Beef is the most important meat. Turkish coffee is the daily drink for this group of countries. Wine is consumed more in Croatia than the rest of these countries.

The Eastern group all consume white flour products. Wholemeal flour and bread are consumed in Egypt. Rice is used in savoury dishes either fried with butter, or in dessert dishes. Clarified butter is used more than margarine. Couscous in Egypt is a sweet dish and dissimilar to North African couscous.

Potato is eaten in different dishes, not as a staple food. Different sorts of cheeses play an important role in the eastern group's diet. They consume vegetables called *melokhia* (*Chorchorus olitorius* or Jews' mallow), except in Turkey. Also okra dishes could be the centrepiece during the summer for all countries. Stuffed vine leaves are used in all these countries. Taro is found only in Cyprus, Egypt and Greece. A dried broad bean is the main ingredient in the daily Egyptian cuisine to make mashed broad beans (*foulmedames*) or fried minced broad beans (*tahmia*). Dill, parsley, coriander and oregano are the essential herbs. Fresh and dried dates are consumed in Egypt. Eggs and egg dishes are everyday ingredients. Use of olive oil ranges greatly, it is very high in Greece and negligible in Egypt, where the oil is from cottonseed.

Chicken is important in this group, and pigeon in Egypt. Pastrami, which is preserved meat, is eaten throughout. Nuts are prominent in savoury or sweet dishes in Lebanon and Turkey. Sesame seeds are significant ingredients, in *tahini* or *halva*. A sweet preserve made from green walnuts is only found in Cyprus and Greece.

Turkish coffee is the daily drink for all countries, but Egyptians drink more black tea than the rest of the eastern countries. Egyptians do not drink alcohol as a rule; the other countries drink spirits with different names.

The North African group eat bread made from whole-meal flour and barley flour. Pasta intake is high in Libya (Italian influence), however not in the other countries. Couscous is eaten more than rice. Buttermilk is a common drink in these countries. Cheese, clotted cream, margarine and sour cream are not important. Fresh tomato and paste and fresh hot pepper (chilli) are consumed. Potato, pumpkin and chick-peas are major foods. Dates and date molasses are essential for this group's diet. Eggs and egg dishes could be consumed twice a day. Olive oil consumption ranges from high in Libya, moderate in Algeria and Tunisia to low in Morocco. Also, suet from fat tail lamb is eaten daily. Lamb is the most used meat in these countries. Preserved meat (*kedid*) is consumed in large amount. Garlic has an essential place in Algerian and Tunisian cuisine, fenugreek is mostly used in Libya as flour or seeds. Allspice and turmeric are important in all four countries' cooking, and saffron is used more in Morocco. Alcohol is discouraged and little used in these countries. Tea drinking ranges from high in Libya and Morocco to low in Algeria.

Discussion

Food and drink patterns reported here are based primarily on our interviews with informants. They refer to food habits about 20 or 30 years ago. We have checked the data with books of recipes for the different countries including *The Foods and Wines of Spain*, *The Complete Spanish Cook Book*, *French Provincial Cooking*, *The Top One Hundred Dishes of Provence*, *The Complete Book of Italian Cooking*, *Italian Cooking Class Cook Book*, *The Food of Italy*, *Southern Italian Cooking*, *Croatian Cuisine: The Modern Way*, *Croatian Cook Book*, *Flavours of Greece*, *Traditional and Modern Greek-Australian Cuisine*, *The Complete Middle East Cook Book*, *The Turkish Cuisine*, *Traditional Turkish Cooking*, *Allef Baa Al-tabek* (in Arabic), *Al-Matbek Al-Lebnani* (in Arabic), *Step-by-Step Moroccan Cooking*, *Traditional Moroccan Cooking*, *The Best of Maltese Cooking*, *What Food is That?*¹⁴⁻³⁴

The data were also compared with available figures for national food consumption in the 1960s.

We have found it difficult to describe a traditional Israeli diet with our methods. This may be because Israel is, like Australia, a country that people have been migrating into rather than out. There must be different food habits between the Jewish and Palestinian populations.

As can be seen from Tables 1 and 2, there are between Mediterranean countries differences in 'traditional' consumption of cereals, type of meat, amount of fish, types of vegetables and of fruits, type and amount of fat or oil, type of dessert and sugar consumption and amount and type of alcohol consumption. Some of these differences are large.

Table 2. Characteristics of Mediterranean diet

Food	Western (W)	Adriatic (A)	Group Eastern (E)	North African (N)	Exceptions
Bread	+++	+++	+++	+++	
Flour	White wheat	White wheat	White wheat	White wheat	Wholemeal in Egypt and N. Barley in N.
Pasta	+++	+	+	+++	Especially in Italy and Libya.
Rice	+++	++	+++	+	It is used mainly to stuff the vegetables in A region.
<i>Burghul</i>	–	–	+++	–	Especially in north Italy and Spain. It could be used in the rest of the groups, but in different size and names.
Couscous	–	–	–	+++	In Egypt, couscous is sweet.
Butter	+++	+	+	–	Especially in France, north Italy and Bosnia.
Buttermilk	–	++	–	++	More common in Lebanon and Turkey and N as drink.
Cheese	+++ , various	++	++	+	Especially ricotta and cottage cheese in A group, feta in E, in N mainly Mozzarella.
Clotted cream	–	++	+++	–	
Yogurt	–	+++	+++	+	
Margarine	–	–	–	–	Clarified butter used instead of it.
Artichoke	++	–	+	–	
Broccoli	++	–	–	–	Especially in Italy.
Eggplant	++	+++	+++	+	
Garlic	+++	+	+++	+	
Vegetable marrow	+, in Malta	–	–	–	
<i>Melokhia</i>	–	–	+	+	Green in E group and dried in N.
Okra	–	+++	+++	–	
Pumpkin	+	+	–	+++	
Taro	–	–	+++	–	Not including Lebanon and Turkey.
Tomato	+++ , fresh, peeled and paste	+, fresh	++ , fresh and peeled	+++ , fresh, paste	Especially in Italy and Libya.
Vine leaf	–	++	+++	–	
Basil	++	–	–	++	Especially in Italy, Libya and Malta.
Coriander	–	–	+++	–	
Garlic	+++	+	+++	++	
Parsley	+++	+++	+++	+++	
Oregano	++	–	+++	–	
Saffron	++	+	–	+	Especially in Spain and Morocco.
Turmeric	–	–	+	+++	In N savoury cooking, in Lebanon as sweet.
Dried broad bean	+	+	+++	+	Especially in Egypt.
Chickpeas	+	+	++	+++	Especially in Lebanon among the E group.
Apples	++	++	++	++	
Citrus	++	++	++	++	
Cherries	+	+	+	–	
Dates	–	–	–	+++	
Figs	+++	+	+	++	
Pomegranates	+	+	+	+	
Clarified butter	–	++	+++	+	Especially in Egypt.
Suet	+	+	++	+++	Especially in Lebanon and Turkey in E group. In W group is France.
Olive oil	+++	+	– to +++	+++	Egypt -, Greece +++ 0.
Beef	++	+++	++	+	
Lamb	++	+	++	+++	
Pig meat	+++	+	+	–	Especially in Cyprus, Greece and Croatia from the A countries.

Table 2 Continued

Food	Western (W)	Adriatic (A)	Group Eastern (E)	North African (N)	Exceptions
Veal	++	-	-	-	Especially in Italy and Spain.
Chicken	++	+++	+++	++	
Pigeon	-	-	++	+	Especially in Egypt and Morocco.
Preserved meats	+++	++	++	+++	Pastrami only in E, A and Egypt. In Italy, salami, mortadella, prosciutto, etc. In Spain, <i>jamon serrano</i> and <i>chorizo</i> . In N <i>kedid</i> salted and sun dried meat.
Fish and fish products	++	+	++	++	Especially in Spain.
Nuts	+	+	+++	+	Mostly pistachio and pinenuts in Lebanon and Turkey.
Seeds	-	-	+++	-	Particularly sesame seeds.
Sugar and preserves	+++	+++	+++	+++	Most of it as white sugar and syrup.
Confectionery	+	++	++	-	Most are halva and Turkish delight, except in Cyprus and Greece it is preserved walnut.
Coffee	++ , various	+++	+++	++ , various	Turkish coffee with exception of W and N countries.
Tea	+	+	+++	++	Especially in Egypt.
Alcoholic beverages	+++	+	++	-	Most of it is wine.

(-), no consumption; (+), low consumption; (++) , moderate consumption; (+++), high consumption.

For example, pasta is consumed most in Italy and Libya; *burghul* in the eastern group, couscous only in the North African group. Stuffed vine leaves are characteristic of the Adriatic and eastern groups. Olive oil consumption is very high in Greece, moderate in some other countries, rare in Egypt. Sesame seeds are used only in the eastern group and dates in North African countries including Egypt. Wine consumption is high in Spain, France and Italy; Eastern countries drink more spirits. Most of the countries with a predominantly Muslim population drink very little alcohol.

Since the baseline observations of the Seven Countries Study around 1960, diets have changed in the Mediterranean countries along with increasing prosperity in France, Italy and Spain and with conflicts in Croatia, Bosnia, Albania and Lebanon. There is concern in some of these countries that present food habits are not ideal and should be changed back to a 'Mediterranean' ideal or towards new dietary guidelines.³⁵⁻³⁷

People interested in food in parts of the world far away from the Mediterranean Sea have different ideas about their own ideal Mediterranean diet.

These may not be as divergent as the realities. Some Mediterranean diets are associated with better health statistics than others. For example, life expectancy at birth (1998) ranges from 78 years in Spain, France, Italy, Greece, Cyprus and Israel (that is, the same as in Australia) down to 67 years in Egypt and Morocco.³⁸ Many factors, as well as food patterns, must influence these statistics, but it is obviously essential to qualify the term 'Mediterranean diet' by stating which country you are talking about and at what time in recent history.

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