The Mediterranean

Geography: The lands that ring the Mediterranean sea receive a fraction of the rainfall of say, Northern Europe, and support only limited agriculture. The presence of the sea, the absence of rainfall and the often searing temperatures of this Southern climate shape the region's food supply. Examples include:

- Limited amount of meat and dairy products
- Dairy products largely consumed as cheese or yogurt
- Olive oil as the principal fat (the olive tree is native to the region and grows well throughout the coastal zone)
- Extensive use of fish and shellfish in coastal Mediterranean areas
- Plentiful use of dates and citrus in North Africa.
MEDITERRANEAN COOKING: THE FUNDAMENTALS

Herbs, Spices and Flavorings

ANISEED
Used in cakes, breads, cookies and drinks. Anise-flavored aperitifs are popular throughout the Mediterranean — from French pastis to Greek ouzo to Turkish raki.

BASIL
Especially common in French and Italian cooking. Uses include Italian pesto and the French pistou (vegetable soup with basil).

BAY LEAVES
Part of the French bouquet garni. Turkish bay leaves (packaged by McCormick and others) are preferable to the stronger, more medicinal California bay leaves.

CAPERS
Unopened green flower bud of wild shrub that grows all over the Mediterranean. Available brined or salted. Many prefer the salted variety (rinse before using). Capers appear in preparations as diverse as tapenade and fava puree.

CARAWAY SEEDS
Used in the Tunisian spice mixture tabil, which in turn is used in charroula.

FENNEL and DILL
Fennel is used in various forms: fresh bulb, stalks and leaves; dried seeds. Greeks use lots of fresh dill in savory pies, salads, dolmades and many other dishes.

HARISSA
Tunisian hot chile paste. Used in cooking and modified for table harissa sauce.

MASTIC
Resin extracted from the acacia tree (used in chewing gum). Used by the Greeks and others in breads, sweets (including ice cream) and drinks.

MINT
Fresh mint is essential to Moroccan tea and is used throughout the Mediterranean in dishes ranging from tabbouleh to yogurt preparations. Greeks and Turks use dried mint in soups, meat dishes, pies and salads. In some Turkish recipes, dried mint and black pepper are heated in some oil or butter and swirled into a dish at the last minute.

ORANGE FLOWER and ROSE WATERS
Orange flower water is used to flavor cakes and cookies in Provence and Lebanon, and to flavor almond pastries throughout North Africa. Rose water is used in desserts and syrups.
OREGANO
Used dried by the Greeks, Italians and others. This is one herb that is best dried in the Mediterranean context.

PARSLEY
Common in salads, such as fattoush. Used in Provence as part of a persillade – a garlic and parsley mixture.

PEPPERS
Red pepper capsicums are grown and used throughout the Mediterranean. Some areas – such as Nabeul in Tunisia, Maras in Turkey, and Aleppo in Syria – are widely acclaimed for their peppers. Maras and Aleppo peppers are sometimes marketed as Near East peppers in this country. Sweet and hot paprikas are used in Macedonian cooking (Greek and Slavic Macedonia). Paprika appears in North Africa in salads, vegetable tagines, and virtually all tomato dishes (use Hungarian or Spanish paprika).

POMEGRANATE MOLASSES
An essential Eastern Mediterranean ingredient, this syrup is made from reduced pomegranate juice, sugar and lemon juice. It is used with walnuts and beans, and to flavor salads and vegetables, fish, lamb and pork dishes.

PRESERVED LEMONS
An essential condiment in Moroccan cooking.

RAS EL HANOUT
A Moroccan spice mixture which translates as “top of the shop (herb and spice shop).” Commonly used in meat and game dishes, even in some recipes for bisteeya. Can contain as many as a couple dozen spices, including allspice, cardamom pods, cayenne, cloves, coriander seeds, ginger, lavender, mace, nutmeg, turmeric and more.

ROSEMARY and SAGE
Favorites in Italian cooking.

SAFFRON
The dried golden yellow stamens of a purple crocus flower and the world’s most expensive spice. The best saffron comes from Spain; the thread form is preferred over the powdered form. Paella is the most famous saffron dish.

SESAME SEEDS
Tahini, an emulsion of sesame seeds and oil, is used throughout the Eastern Mediterranean. Sesame seeds are used sprinkled on breads, and are the basis for halvah, that famous Turkish sweet.

SUMAC
Crushed dried red berries of a species of sumac (nonpoisonous). Used with rice, grilled meats and – in the spice mixture za’atar – on oiled flatbreads.

TABIL
A Tunisian spice mixture introduced to Tunisia from the Spanish Moors. Includes coriander, caraway and fennel seeds, aniseed, ground red and black pepper, cumin and turmeric.

**ZA'ATAR**

Refers either to the herb thyme (or a member of this family of herbs) or a powdered mixture of sesame, sumac (the nonpoisonous variety) and thyme. The latter is used on oiled pita bread or as a flavoring in meat dishes.
Mediterranean Cooking: The Fundamentals

Olive Oil, Olives and Garlic

Olive Oil

- The olive tree is cultivated throughout the Mediterranean. The major producing countries are Spain, Greece, Italy and Tunisia. But oil is also produced in France, Morocco, Turkey and elsewhere.

- The use of olive oil really defines the boundaries or borders— the geography — of Mediterranean cooking. For example, southern Italy is far more reliant on olive oil than the north, and therefore exhibits more of the Mediterranean character to its cooking. However, many olive oil-based preparations can be found in northern Italy. In Morocco, the boundaries are hard to find: generally cold foods, such as salads are made with olive oil— and hot foods are made with butter.

- Quality in olive oil is a function of olive variety, soil and climatic conditions, timing and method of harvest, processing methods (pressing, bottling and storing) and acidity. Extra virgin olive oils are all less than 1% acidity.

- The best extra virgin oils are generally made from low-acid immature olives that are hand-picked and pressed quickly before the oil starts to oxidize and ferment.

- Italy, Greece, Spain all produce excellent extra virgin olive oils, as do — in much more limited quantities — other countries in the Mediterranean.

- Olive oils that don’t meet standards of taste, including acidity, are refined. Typically, a small amount of extra virgin oil is added back in for flavor, and the result is sold simply as “olive oil” (formerly “pure olive oil”).

- Olive oil should be stored in an airtight metal or glass container in a cool dark place to avoid rancidity.

- It makes sense to use a variety of grades of olive oil for cooking and baking. Extra virgin oils are most appropriate for salads and other cold preparation, hot preparations where the flavor of the oil is detectable and to finish hot dishes (as a condiment). Olive oil (not extra virgin) is the oil of choice for deep-fat frying since its smoking point is higher.

Olives

- In part of the Mediterranean: Greece, Turkey, Syria, Lebanon, Egypt and Libya, people eat cured or marinated olives, but don’t eat olives in cooked dishes.

- In the rest of the Mediterranean: Italy, southern France, Spain, Morocco and Tunisia, olives are essential to the cooking traditions.
Olive Oil and Garlic

- Olive oil and garlic is the fundamental flavor combination in the Mediterranean.

- A number of important Mediterranean sauces begin or build on simply pounded garlic, olive oil and salt:
  - Aioli (Spain): garlic, olive oil and salt (sometimes with eggs)
  - Aioli (France): with the addition of eggs
  - Rouille (France): with the addition of red peppers and fish entrails
  - Salsa verde (Italy): with the addition of anchovies, capers and herbs
  - Pesto (Italy): with the addition of basil, nuts, and cheese
  - Skordalia (Greece): with the addition of potatoes, soaked bread or nuts
  - Tarator (Turkey): with the addition of nuts, typically walnuts or hazelnuts
  - Harissa (Tunisia): with the addition of hot peppers and caraway
  - Charmoula (Morocco): with the addition of cumin, paprika, fresh coriander and parsley
Mediterranean Cooking: The Fundamentals

Mediterranean Diet

The Mediterranean Diet Pyramid is based on food patterns typical of Crete, much of the rest of Greece, and southern Italy in the early 1960's (before the start of the decline of the region's traditional diets), where adult life expectancy was among the highest in the world and rates of coronary heart disease, certain cancers, and other diet-related chronic diseases were among the lowest.

In 1960, the Greeks had 90% less premature death from coronary heart disease than Americans at that time.

**Characteristics of the Diet**

1. An abundance of foods from plant sources, including fruits and vegetables, potatoes, breads and grains, beans, nuts, and seeds;

2. Emphasis on a variety of minimally processed and, wherever possible, seasonally fresh and locally grown foods (which often maximizes the health-promoting micronutrient and antioxidant content of these foods);

3. Olive oil as the principal fat, replacing other fats and oils (including butter and margarine);

4. Total fat ranging from less than 25% to over 35% of energy, with saturated fat no more than 7 to 8% of energy (calories);

5. Daily consumption of low to moderate amounts of cheese and yogurt (low-fat and nonfat versions may be preferable);

6. Weekly consumption of low to moderate amounts of fish and poultry (recent research suggests that fish should be somewhat favored over poultry); from zero to four eggs per week (including those used in cooking and baking);

7. Fresh fruit as the typical daily dessert; sweets with a significant amount of sugar (often as honey) and saturated fat consumed not more than a few times per week;

8. Red meat a few times per month (recent research suggests than if red meat is eaten, its consumption should be limited to a maximum of 12 to 16 ounces per month); where flavor is acceptable, lean versions may be preferable;

9. Regular physical activity at a level which promotes a healthy weight, fitness and well-being;

10. Moderate consumption of wine, normally with meals; about one to two glasses per day for men and one glass per day for women (from a contemporary public health perspective, wine should be considered optional and avoided when consumption would put the individual or others at risk).
The Mediterranean Diet Pyramid

A Few Times per Month
Lean Red Meats

A Few Times per Week
Sweets
Eggs
Poultry
Fish

Cheese & Yogurt
Olive Oil

Daily
Fruits
Beans, other Legumes & Nuts
Vegetables

Breads, Pasta, Rice, Couscous, Polenta and Bulgur, other Grains, and Potatoes

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*(Information from the Mediterranean Diet Pyramid, developed by the Regional Office for Europe of the World Health Organization (WHO), the WHO/FAO Collaborating Center for Nutritional Epidemiology at the Harvard School of Public Health and Oldways Preservation & Exchange Trust.)*
**chicken tagine**  
*Yield: 10 servings*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Ingredient</th>
<th>U.S.</th>
<th>Metric</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Chicken</td>
<td>3 each</td>
<td>3 each</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(about 3 lb each)</td>
<td></td>
<td>1,400 g</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Salt</td>
<td>1 tbsp</td>
<td>20 g</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ground black pepper</td>
<td>1 1/2 tsp</td>
<td>3 g</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Olive oil, extra-virgin</td>
<td>3 fl oz</td>
<td>90 ml</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cipollini onions,</td>
<td>30 each</td>
<td>30 each</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>blanched and peeled</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Garlic cloves, thinly sliced</td>
<td>1/2 oz</td>
<td>15 g</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ginger, peeled and thinly sliced</td>
<td>1/2 oz</td>
<td>15 g</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cumin seed, ground</td>
<td>1 tsp</td>
<td>0.5 g</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Saffron</td>
<td>1/4 tsp</td>
<td>0.5 g</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chicken Stock (page 304)</td>
<td>8 fl oz</td>
<td>240 ml</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parsley, chopped</td>
<td>4 tbsp</td>
<td>10 g</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Green olives</td>
<td>50 each</td>
<td>50 each</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lined lemons</td>
<td>2 each</td>
<td>2 each</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Procedure**

Cut the chickens into 6 pieces. (A portion will consist of one breast or thigh and one drumstick.) Season the chicken parts with salt and pepper. Heat the oil over medium-high heat in a large roondeau and sauté the chicken until a light golden color. Work in batches if necessary. Remove the chicken from the pan and reserve.

Add the onions to the pan and sauté until they take on a light brown color, about 8 minutes.

Add the garlic and ginger and sauté until aromatic. Stir in the cumin and saffron.

Add a small amount of liquid and begin the braising process. Adjust the seasoning with salt and pepper, if necessary. Cover the pan and braise over low heat until the chicken is cooked through.

In the last 15 minutes add the parsley, olives, and lemons. Serve immediately.

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**Nutrition Information**

*Per 12-oz (340-g) serving:
* 454 Calories
  - Protein: 7 grams
  - Carbohydrate (total): 20 grams
  - Fat (total): 20 grams
  - Sodium: 191 milligrams
  - Cholesterol: 549 milligrams*
LEBANESE COLESLAW
SALAT MALFOOF

Yield: 8 portions

Ingredients
Garlic cloves
Salt
Lemon juice
Olive oil
White cabbage, shredded
Mint, chopped
Caraway seeds

Amount
3 each
1¼ teaspoon
5 oz.
5 oz.
1 lb.
3 tablespoons
3 tablespoons

Method
1. Mash garlic with salt to a paste, whisk in lemon juice, then olive oil - slowly as you would for mayonnaise to form an emulsion.
2. Toss all remaining ingredients together, serve immediately.

Note: The original recipe calls for Dutch cabbage that has a strong garlic flavor, if not available you may increase the garlic cloves.
**BEETS AND WALNUTS WITH WALNUT OIL DRESSING**

*Yield 6 to 8 Portions*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Ingredients</th>
<th>Amounts</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Beets, well scrubbed</td>
<td>8 - 10 ea.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Olive oil</td>
<td>as needed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lemon juice</td>
<td>4 Tbsp.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sea salt</td>
<td>to taste</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Walnut oil</td>
<td>4 Tbsp.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cracked walnut halves</td>
<td>6 - 10 Tbsp.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Freshly ground black pepper</td>
<td>to taste</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chives, chopped</td>
<td>1 bu.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Arugula</td>
<td>3 bu.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Frisee</td>
<td>3 bu.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Method**

1. Preheat oven to 375 °F. Wash and trim the beets, toss with olive oil, salt and pepper. Roast the beets until tender, about 45 minutes. When cool, remove the skin and cut into ¾ inch dice. Set aside.

2. Prepare the dressing by whisking together the lemon juice and salt. Gradually whisk in the walnut oil. Adjust the seasoning.

3. Pour some of the dressing over the beets and toss. Just before serving, add the walnuts and season generously with pepper. Pour the remainder of the dressing over the frisee and arugula, season to taste. Serve the beets on a bed of frisee and arugula. Garnish with chives.

*Source: Simply French © 1991 Patricia Wells and Joel Robuchon (William Morrow)*
SHRIMP PANCAKES
TORTILLITAS DE CAMARONES

Yield: 10 small pancakes

Shrimp pancakes are found only in Cádiz, where they are offered on all restaurant menus and are found frying at street stands. Their quality is gauged by the amount of shrimp they contain and by the type of shrimp used, which should ideally be the tiny camarones.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Ingredients</th>
<th>Amount</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Olive oil</td>
<td>3 tablespoons</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Onion, finely chopped</td>
<td>3 tablespoons</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parsley, minced</td>
<td>2 tablespoons</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Paprika</td>
<td>1/8 teaspoon</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Flour</td>
<td>3 tablespoons</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Water</td>
<td>7 tablespoons</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Salt</td>
<td>3/4 teaspoon</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Baking powder</td>
<td>1/2 teaspoon</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Small shrimp, shelled and finely chopped</td>
<td>1/4 lb.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Oil for frying</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Method
1. Heat the 3 tablespoons of oil in a skillet.
2. Add the onion and parsley and sauté very slowly, covered, until the onion is tender.
3. Stir in the paprika.
4. In a bowl, mix together the flour, water, salt and baking powder.
5. Add the onion mixture and the shrimp.
6. In a skillet, heat the frying oil, 1/4 inch deep, until it reaches the smoking point.
7. Drop the batter by the tablespoon into the oil, flattening the pancakes into 21/2-inch rounds with the back of a spoon that has been dipped in the hot oil.
8. Fry until golden, turning once.
9. Drain and serve immediately.