



Modernizing Mediterranean

Inspired by tradition

ATLANTIC
FOOD
DISTRIBUTORS

The roughly two-dozen nations bordering the Mediterranean Sea have long enjoyed an embarrassment of culinary riches, thanks in part to the region's prominent role in the spice trade. And while many of their cuisines have found favor in Western society, many more have not—yet.

I say “yet” because while most of us are at least vaguely conversant with the cuisines of France, Italy, Greece, and Spain, we for the most part are unfamiliar with those of, say, Croatia, Turkey, Israel, Lebanon, Morocco, Tunisia, and Egypt.

And yet, if they were to be exposed to the signature dishes of those lesser-known cuisines, most Americans wouldn't find them particularly strange, off-putting, or forbidding. That's because virtually all the Mediterranean cuisines start with a core of wheat (flour), olives (oil), and grapes (wine). From there, they incorporate—in various concentrations and combinations—everything from garlic, ginger, nutmeg, cinnamon, coriander, cumin, fennel, rose petal, and saffron to capers, oregano, parsley, tarragon, basil, tomato, cheese, mint, cayenne pepper, and clove. So the cuisines are both exotic and surprisingly familiar.

Not only is Mediterranean food delicious, but it's also been associated with better health and overall wellness. Studies suggesting that diets rich in Mediterranean staples—fish, vegetables, grains, seeds, nuts, fruits, and monounsaturated fats like olive oil—may help lower the risk of mental decline and Alzheimer's disease surfaced in 2009 in *Archives of Neurology*. The Mayo Clinic calls the Mediterranean diet “a heart-healthy eating plan,” citing a reduced risk of heart disease among those who follow it.

“The [Mediterranean] diet has been associated with a lower level of ... the ‘bad’ cholesterol that's more likely to build up deposits in your arteries. [And] a meta-analysis of more than 1.5 million healthy adults demonstrated that following a Mediterranean diet was associated with a reduced risk of cardiovascular mortality as well as overall mortality,” it states on its website.

In 2014, *The British Journal of General Practice* went a step further: “We may be tempted to start recommending the Mediterranean diet with greater conviction, particularly to those patients who are concerned about, or at high risk of, developing [cardiovascular disease].”

Of course, there is no single “Mediterranean diet”—the region is a patchwork of cuisines with many core ingredients in common. But three of them are particularly voguish today.

Israeli

Israeli cuisine is characterized by small dishes meant for sharing, and by a set of diverse and delicious ingredient anchors: garbanzos, raisins, cumin, coriander, apricots, olives, cucumbers, fresh cheeses, Jerusalem artichokes, sesame, and dates.

There are a number of ways quick serves can deploy elements of Israeli cuisine to their advantage, including harissa, the chili pepper paste that has made significant inroads onto U.S. menus in recent years. With its smoky, spicy flavor profile, harissa can enliven sauces, glazes, marinades, or salad dressings.

Another way to capture some Israeli flavor on your menu would be to grill more fruits and vegetables, a popular technique in Israel that gives produce a distinctive, smoky perfume. Soft cheeses and yogurt are also typically Israeli, and delicious in a variety of applications. Finally, there's shawarma, the Middle Eastern delicacy consisting of a sliced and grilled pile of meat seasoned with cumin, coriander, garlic, paprika, turmeric, clove, cayenne, black pepper, and cinnamon. Applying this unique spice blend to hamburger, chicken, or even pizza would lend a slight Israeli bent or nuance to anything it touches.

Moroccan

Moroccan cuisine is marked by the combination of savory meats and sweet ingredients. Menu developers seeking to incorporate some of its signature elements into their product lines could consider adding molasses, honey, or dried fruit to a brine or a marinade; painting honey mustard spiked with apricot on chicken wings; or encasing chicken or meatballs in phyllo to create a new kind of “pocket.” And then there is merguez, the spicy and highly distinctive lamb sausage that could easily make waves if added to the menuboard.

Turkish

Finally, Turkey's cuisine is typified by the ubiquity of wraps, kebabs, stuffed or fried vegetables, and yogurts and soft cheeses. Turkish cooks and chefs often incorporate mint into savory dishes and yogurt into sauces and beverages. And phyllo is as popular in Turkey as it is in Morocco; using it as a carrier to deliver various combinations of potato, feta, or dumplings with ground beef is one option for a Turkish-themed handheld treat akin to a burrito or handheld pie.

All of which is to say: There's little question that by making judicious choices from among the specific ingredients and ingredient combinations that characterize the Mediterranean region, you can lend a distinctive and flavorful flavor.