

Dr. Stefanos Kales

“Greek food, the essence of the Mediterranean diet”



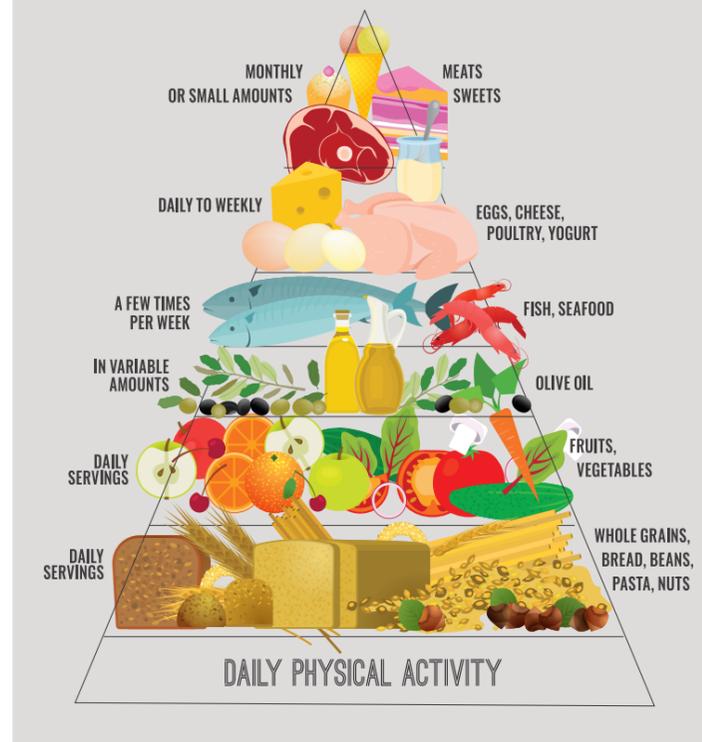
What are the benefits of the Mediterranean way of eating? Is olive oil a “miracle” ingredient? And do Greeks indeed do it better as far as dietary trends are concerned? A Harvard expert weighs in.

The international epidemics of obesity and type 2 diabetes mellitus as well as an endless supply of unhealthy, processed food products, there has been renewed interest and strong market trends for traditional Greek foods well beyond the borders of Greece and the Mediterranean. Obviously, the renowned appeal of Greek cuisine is not limited to its potential health benefits. Greek cooking is known for its diverse flavors, colors and aromas. Moreover, in contrast to many diets that focus on calorie counting and eliminating certain food groups entirely, traditional Greek nutrition emphasizes moderation, allows wine, and can form part of a sustainable, yet very enjoyable and indulgent lifestyle. Ambrosia magazine sat down with Dr. Stefanos Kales, an Associate Professor at Harvard Medical School and the Harvard TH Chan School of Public Health who serves as the scientific organizer of Mediterranean Diet & Health, a unique food/wine and nutrition experience being held this October 16-20 at the Sani Resort in Chalkidiki, Greece.

What is the Mediterranean Diet?

Varying, yet similar diets have been consumed for millennia throughout the Mediterranean ba-

sin. In its modern form, the Mediterranean diet is most closely associated with the traditional dietary patterns of rural Greece and Southern Italy during the 1960s. At that time, it was first formally described by the pioneering American scientist, Ancel Keys who observed that Mediterranean eating was associated with lower risks of heart disease and longer lifespans compared to typical US and Northern European diets. The Mediterranean eating pattern is typified first and foremost by olive oil, which is used generously for most food preparation/cooking and is consumed as the primary dietary fat. Second, the Mediterranean diet involves a high intake of diverse plant foods, including olives and olive oil, fruit, vegetables, legumes (e.g. lentils



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and beans), unrefined (wholegrain) cereals, nuts, and seeds. The consumption of fish, seafood, fermented dairy products (yogurt and cheese), poultry, and eggs is moderate. Wine is commonly taken in moderation with meals, while the consumption of red meats, processed meats and sweets is far lower than in Western diets.

So is the Mediterranean Diet the best diet?

I am going to say yes. I think that both science and common sense make this a very defensible answer. First, compared to most medicines, supplements and popular diets, the Mediterranean diet has a solid safety record of several thousand years. Second, there are distinct advantages compared to other healthy eating options. Mediterranean eating has less salt than Asian diets and includes olive oil and wine. Third, most people simply cannot or will not follow most rigid diets for very long. Mediterranean diets are tasty, appealing and enjoyable and therefore, they can be adopted sustainably over the long-term as a lifestyle.

What exactly is the Greek Diet, and how is it different from the Mediterranean?

I would not say that Greek diet is different than Mediterranean diet, because it is by definition a Mediterranean way of eating. However, the traditional Greek diet does have some unique

characteristics. First, Greece has the highest per capita consumption of olive oil worldwide, almost 25 liters a year. Strained Greek yogurt is another unique component. Nutritionally, it has a higher protein and lower sugar content than most yogurts. In my opinion, many companies outside of Greece try, but fail to reproduce the real thing. Greek cuisine offers many more stand-alone, plant-based meals than many of our neighbors. These include dishes consisting of olive oil, garlic, onion, tomato and herb-cooked vegetables and beans or pulses, as the main feature, accompanied by salads and olives. Additionally, all of the various types of greens are another stand-out component. It is also worth mentioning that Greek olives come in many varieties and preparations, however, as far as I know, all of the methods used in Greece preserve most of the olive fruit's polyphenols, whereas some of the methods employed elsewhere (e.g. lye) may result in many or most of the polyphenols being lost.

While it should be obvious that one can eat very healthy Mediterranean foods in the Spanish, Italian and Middle Eastern contexts, and some of the elements of Greek uniqueness overlap with other countries, I believe the Greek gestalt when taken all together is the most versatile and consistently provides very healthy options. ■



Mediterranean Diet & Health A Nutritional Odyssey in Greece

Experiential Conference with American and Mediterranean Scholars
Sani Resort, October 16-20, 2017



Travel to Greece with the award-winning PBS television show, *The Cooking Odyssey*, leading international experts and Harvard University faculty for a hands-on, mouth-watering immersion course on the health benefits of the Mediterranean Diet, right where it was born. With world-renowned scholars as your instructors and the Aegean Sea as your classroom, enjoy interactive learning combined with a once-in a lifetime experience of legendary Greek hospitality, healthy & delicious food and wine, warmed by the Greek autumn sun and surrounded by the famed sights, sounds and flavors of Greece, old and new.



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