

The Mediterranean diet: the perfect regime for summer



As summer approaches, we find ourselves more aware of what we are eating. It happens because we might want to lose weight or because we are physically more active or maybe because we feel it by instinct. It is our body that, from the first hot days, requests a diet adequate and suitable for the warmer climate and outdoor living.

But what is the correct food regime to follow in this period? The Mediterranean diet has not only been repeatedly confirmed as the best diet for our health, but is the perfect diet for the summer as it's rich in fruits and vegetables – essential sources of water, minerals, dietary fibres, vitamins – as well as its low-energy density, and it is low in animal fats.

Named Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity by UNESCO in 2010, the Mediterranean diet is based on the daily intake of plant-based foods such as olive oil, legumes, cereals and lots of fruit and vegetables combined with a higher consumption of fish compared with red and white meat, as well as eggs and mostly fresh cheeses, nuts and seeds. What makes it perfect for the summer is the presence of olive oil, which is rich in antioxidants, fatty acids and polyphenols, used instead of elaborated condiments or butter that can slow down the

digestion. In summer, the digestion of complex dishes, fried food or highly processed meals can be more difficult, so for this reason light cooking methods such as steam cooking, boiling and grilling would be more appropriate.

This diet is based on a high consumption of cereals, such as pasta, bread, rice and whole grains, and also includes less common cereals such as barley, spelt, buckwheat and millet. It is important to vary the intake of nutritional values and lower the content of gluten. Legumes or pulses like chickpeas, beans and lentils are also very common in this diet.

During the summer season, they are suitable for making fresh dips such as hummus to eat along with raw vegetables, to be mixed with vegetables in cold salads for outdoor picnics, or to be added in cold or warm soups.

Another significant aspect of this diet is the variety of the culinary traditions of countries bordering the Mediterranean Sea. It is precisely this variety of foods that guarantees the full spectrum of nutrients necessary for us. Summer is the season that provides colourful fruits and vegetables with intense flavors, which, along with legumes and whole grains, help to restore minerals like potassium and magnesium lost while sweating and being in the sun. Refreshing

summer fruits, such as watermelon, melons, peaches, figs, loquat plums, cherries and berries, in Mediterranean countries are served at the end of each meal instead of elaborate desserts, as well as being frequently eaten throughout the day as snacks.

When feeling tired or even not hungry we could be induced to eat only fruit as meal, we should bear in mind that fruit on its own is not enough to replace a complete meal and it brings a high load of sugars that, once absorbed, stimulate hunger. Fruit can also be consumed as a drink but it is always preferable a smoothie rather than a juice because juices are deprived of dietary fibres.

Vegetables are present in the Mediterranean diet not only as side dishes, raw in salads or grilled and steamed to be eaten cold but they are also the stars of pasta sauces and soups. Among the vegetables in season during summer which are very common in the Mediterranean diet, we find: tomato, aubergine, courgette, green beans, chicory and lettuce, radish, carrot, broad beans, arugula, cucumber and peppers.

The Mediterranean diet is rich in fish, particularly oily fish, which is a source of omega 3. Fish is often eaten raw – if it is from a reliable and safe source – grilled, boiled or added cold in salads of mixed leaves. Meanwhile, meat is present in

smaller quantities. Meat is consumed in its leaner cuts that permit raw consumption, sliced or in tartare, for the preparation of fresh dishes topped with vegetables.

Ricotta, mozzarella, feta, halloumi and soft goats cheese are present in the Mediterranean diet and eaten in salads or with bread. Good for quick meals, they are rich in calcium and vitamin D which is well absorbed during sun exposure, while matured cheeses offer more energy and are used to dress pasta dishes or to season side dishes.

During the hot season it is essential to keep hydrated. Fresh water should always be the first choice to drink but herbal drinks are a good choice, too. Flavoured waters or fruit juices should be limited because they are very high in sugar. A good idea can be to refrigerate a few bottles with some pieces of a favourite fruit or fresh mint leaves. But let's not forget that the Mediterranean diet also includes the pleasure of dining with a glass of wine, which is an excellent antioxidant – especially red wine. It is also associated with the conviviality of being at the table and

sharing a meal with friends, and this is the real foundation of the principles of the Mediterranean diet lifestyle.

Eating together is not only the simple act of consuming a meal with other people, its meaning extends to strengthening the foundations of an interpersonal relationship, promoting creativity and passing on the identity and values of communities. This is even truer in the presence of children that need to learn early in their life the importance of a healthy approach to food.



Seabass Salad

Serves 4

Ingredients

- 1 whole sea bass (800g)
- 50g pitted Kalamata olives
- 1 red radicchio
- 2 tpb salted capers
- 1 fresh garlic clove
- 1 bay leaf
- 1 lemon
- 3 tpb extra virgin olive oil

Bring to boil a wide pan with free litres of slightly salted water with the bay leaf.

Wash the fish and remove the entrails. When the water is boiling, gently lay the fish and turn the heat down. Cook for 15 minutes, or until the eye is completely white.

Wash the radicchio and drain it. Cut it into two halves straight down the middle. On a chopping board lay the halves cut side down and finely cut it into thin strips. Remove the fish from the water with a skimmer and lay it onto a wide dish. Set aside to cool for 5 minutes. Clean the fish from skin, head, fins and all the bones.

Squeeze the juice of the lemon and mix it in a small bowl with the olive oil. Whisk well and add a pinch of salt and the peeled garlic clove. Rinse the capers to remove the salt and chop it roughly together with the Kalamata olives. Remove the garlic clove from the dressing.

Bring together fish, radicchio, olives, capers and the dressing. Gently mix it.

How to encourage your children to eat more vegetables and fruit

Make it colourful

At mealtime, present vegetables first

Blend them into creative smoothies

Sprinkle fruit with your child's favourite treat (cocoa, honey, coconut flakes)

Serve vegetables in two or three dishes each meal (entrée, soup, side or pasta sauce)

Ask your child often to try new vegetables/fruits

Use fun activities when introducing new food

Set challenges with other members of the family

Involve often your child in food preparation

... and moreover, use this attitude:

"You don't have to like it, only try it"

Kids menu don't exist, one family, one meal

Be patient and determined

Limiting is better than prohibiting

Raffaella Cappello is an Italian mother of two and founder of Seeds for Kids which provides healthy food education for children to private families and schools. You can find her at www.seedsforkids.co.uk