

The Mediterranean Diet as a Heritage Object

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Over the centuries, the exchange of ideas, values and practices in the Mediterranean basin has developed the eating and culinary habits of the Mediterranean peoples and cultures. Thus, at present there is a set of complex and interactive food systems in the basin to be identified and which make up the Mediterranean diet, so valued and recognised worldwide. The safeguarding of this food and culinary heritage is only possible through an exercise in shared identity. To this end, consumers on both shores must adopt the role of social actors, responsible for their own food and cultural wealth.

Food heritage also encompasses objects, sites, practices, representations, expressions, knowledge and skills, which are the result of the ongoing historical action of social communities and groups. The daily recreation of such a necessary activity, in interaction with nature and society, has given rise to forms of exploitation, exchange networks and flows of knowledge, which have promoted human creativity and communication.

Food systems, so threatened by the globalisation of the agrifood market, therefore deserve to be safeguarded as intangible cultural heritage. Only in this way will they be holistically considered and preserved. If the argument was only applied to food it would be partial: food forms part of heritage, it is a tangible, yet perishable, good but diet is more than this. Similarly, if the argument was only applied to a territory with a specific food system, it would be incomplete as well as inefficient. Food heritage is certainly linked to the defence of the landscape. Food and cultural landscape can be considered inherent realities. However, at present

it is almost impossible to delimit the territory which must fully nourish a human population. Globalisation has blurred the boundaries which identified food with territory. The defence of food heritage cannot be limited, therefore, to the protection of determined foods or the territory in which they are produced. Similarly, an efficient policy cannot be lost in the diversity of products within a food system, whatever it is.

Those food ambits capable of representing a symbolic conception of the order of things, expressing a valuable message for humanity, being culturally meaningful, manifesting themselves as an acting force, and transcending universally, must be holistically researched and preserved as intangible cultural heritage. Only in this way is it possible to be aware of, protect, appreciate and promote the cultural richness that human beings have developed around food. This is the case of the Mediterranean diet.

Mediterranean people have historically based their diet on the exchange of ideas, values, practices and habits, which are recognised by communities, groups and individuals as their

own. They have interactively woven their dietary style, whether through the dissemination and adoption of habits or through the definition of their own habits in relation to those of “others”, either from the other shore or from the neighbouring village. Thus, the Mediterranean people have needed and related to each other as much as they have competed. Closeness and plurality are, therefore, the two complementary sides of the Mediterranean diet.

The environment, history, food, knowledge and meanings are shared. But the result for the palate, the meals created through culinary mediation, despite sharing the same culinary system, inevitably lead to the rich plurality of the Mediterranean cultures. This is why, in order to understand what gives the Mediterranean diet its closeness and distinctiveness, it is necessary to start by describing its culinary system.

The methods of combining their ingredients, seasonings and procedures, which have passed from generation to generation still define the way of cooking and eating and are recognised as their own by the Mediterranean people

The culinary system in the Mediterranean has been historically defined through the following set of ingredients, seasonings and procedures: as a basis, cereals, mainly wheat, but also barley, rye, millet and spelt; and pulses: broad beans, chickpeas, beans, and lentils; among the secondary ingredients, a little meat, mainly from goats and sheep, fish on the coast and a wide range of vegetables and fruit, historically mostly imported. As seasonings, we have fats, olive oil and beef and pork lards, and many aromatic herbs and spices, including thyme, oregano, rosemary, cumin, coriander, rue, basil, parsley, mint, nutmeg, pepper, saffron, clove and cinnamon. Finally, we have the following culinary procedures: pickling, refining,

dressing, roasting, kneading, whisking, sifting, cooking, seasoning, browning, breading, rolling, stewing, frying, cooking au gratin, covering with pastry, baking, marinating, crushing, larding, cutting, grating, battering, shaping, basting, sautéing, stuffing, sprinkling, grinding, chopping, soaking and spraying.

However, Mediterranean people of all times have not eaten the same, not even in combinations as repeated as those of bread, oil and garlic. These ingredients, seasonings and procedures have not been evenly distributed in the long history of such a wide world. But these differences are compatible with belonging to the same system.

Out of the culinary system we extract, in their turn, the typologies, which are specific combinations of ingredients, seasonings and procedures repeated over the centuries. In this way, before we reach the recipe or the dish, we must stop to consider, from an analytical point of view, the typology, which is only a reference. In the case of the Mediterranean, we have as references baked bread, fried pastries, boiled semolina with oil, etc. There are many kinds of bread, many kinds of pastries, many kinds of semolina and countless kinds of couscous, just to cite a few, but each one forms part of its typology.

The culinary typologies of the Mediterranean are, therefore, those prototypes which have been disseminated among the peoples and have endured long enough to finally characterise their cuisines. Some already existed in the classical world; others have their origin in the Jewish, Christian or Muslim medieval cuisines; others come from the incorporation of American products in the Modern Age or even in the Contemporary Age; others were conceived in the regional cuisines of the 19th and 20th centuries. In any case, especially successful in the Mediterranean cuisines are the methods of combining their ingredients, seasonings and procedures, which have passed

from generation to generation, and still define the way of cooking and eating and are recognised as their own by the Mediterranean people. I have been able to identify twenty-nine culinary typologies shared by the Mediterranean people:

- Cereals (wheat, semolina, balls, sheets, noodles, pastas, pancakes, bread), dressed with fats, herbs, spices and dried fruits, either sweet (sugar, cinnamon, vanilla, dairy products) or savoury (meat, fish and vegetables), and moulded, kneaded, steamed, baked, fried or basted.
- Cold or tepid soups or stews, of bread, oil, garlic or other spicy and/or sour seasonings.
- Thick soups and stews with vegetables, fish or meat and bread or pasta.
- Thick porridge and purées of pulses, cereals or vegetables.
- Dry or watery rice stews with vegetables, meat and/or fish.
- Cooked pulses seasoned with fats, herbs, vegetables and, sometimes, with meat or fish.
- *Entomatados* of flour, rice, meat or fish, stewed, fried or baked.
- Seasoned and sautéed, stewed or grilled wild vegetables and plants.
- Raw, cooked or grilled vegetables or accompanied with sauces for salads, optionally with fruit.
- Vegetables stuffed with minced and seasoned meat.
- Boiled, poached, fried eggs or omelettes, as well as sauce thickeners, for breading and seasoning.
- Ground, seasoned and stuffed meat.
- Minced meat and fish, round-shaped and fried, stewed or baked.
- Meat or fish brochettes with optional seasoning and vegetables.
- Chopped or torn meat and fish, seasoned with savoury, sweet and/or spicy mixtures, stewed, roasted or baked.
- Stuffed, stewed or baked meat and fish.
- Meat in large pieces, seasoned, roasted or stewed.
- Cereal sheets or dough, stuffed with meat or fish and baked, forming empanadas and savoury pies.
- Fried seasoned fish, meat and vegetables.
- Tripe and offal, seasoned, roasted, stewed or baked.
- Stewed escargots.
- Game stews with aromatic herbs.
- Preserves of meat in fat, olives in brine, marinated or seasoned; baked, dried or pickled vegetables; fruits in syrup, compote or brine, which can be used as seasonings.
- Dairy derivatives in sauces, soups, salads and dishes cooked au gratin.
- Sauces and oils flavoured with herbs, as seasonings.
- Fresh and dried fruits in savoury meat and vegetable stews.
- Fried pastries and bread.
- Baked pastries, with dried fruits and honey or syrup.
- Sugared dried fruits, nougats or sweet fried food.

Some of these typologies, such as the cooked pulses or game stews with aromatic herbs, among others, can be identified in other culinary systems, but not with all the ingredients, seasonings and procedures with which we have previously characterised the Mediterranean culinary system. In fact, these ingredients, seasonings and procedures are those which, when combined, generate distinctive typologies for each culinary system; in this case, the Mediterranean.

A culinary system can be found, therefore, in many cuisines and dishes. This does not imply the existence of similar cuisines as, based on this system understood as an abstraction,

the possibilities of combination are many and each way of selecting the proportion in which its different elements are grouped can produce distinct cuisines. Similarly, the techniques of a determined cuisine can produce many culinary results: one only has to select one fat over another, add more of a specific seasoning or ingredient or only change the texture or temperature for the same dish to have a different taste. This is why the journey from culinary systems to cuisines and subsequently to techniques can be understood as a process of multiplication and, finally, of atomisation.

The Mediterranean diet is, in short, the recognition and manifestation of the shared identity which holistically comprises the food system and is the result of the daily recreation of some necessary and shared practices, transmitted from generation to generation, based on respect for human cultural diversity and creativity.

It is necessary to disseminate messages which enhance this identification and makes consumers into social actors, capable of safeguarding their food heritage

However, there is no doubt that it is not a simple food model, which can be defined with the mere enumeration of its most characteristic foods. Given that it is an ambit of marked ecological and productive contrasts, the cradle of civilisations of the three main monotheist religions, of universal political and administrative models, of endless trade exchanges and ceaseless fights for control of routes and areas of influence, the analysis must be multidimensional and diachronic. The Mediterranean has been and is a complex, plural, interconnected and vibrant region. The description and characterisation of its diet cannot ignore this level of complexity (González Turmo and Mataix Verdú, 2008).

The methodological proposals have been set out. The networks are being developed. It is now time to produce messages allowing the identification. It is necessary to develop a discourse which is aware of the diversity and, at the same time, accurate in the choice of univocal signs where all can feel represented. It is necessary to disseminate messages which enhance this identification and makes consumers into social actors, capable of safeguarding their food heritage. Food and, in this case, the Mediterranean diet must reclaim the consideration they deserve in human activities.

The main criterion cannot be the quantity of food produced but its global quality, which also includes flavour and variety, environmental respect and appreciation of the work of food producers. Without this ambition, the defence of food as heritage is not possible. These objectives, equally necessary and difficult, require international support enhancing national and supranational policies, capable of returning dignity to the majority of people who produce food for the rest, as well as making the young the active inheritors of their food heritage. The safeguarding of food can and must be the driving force of these kinds of initiatives. We must regain the respect for food, and defend the diversity developed thanks to the work of women and men over the centuries.

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