

New ways to navigate the Mediterranean in your aisles

How to turn on your customers to the health-boosting fare from this region

Christine Spehar

The heart-healthy and cancer-beating benefits of a Mediterranean diet are no secret to any media-savvy consumer, and incorporating components of the diet into an everyday meal plan can be simple if your customers know which ingredients to look for. "People have been talking about this way of eating since the '60s," says Marissa Cloutier, a registered dietitian and author of *The Mediterranean Diet* (Avon Books, 2004).

Mediterranean magic

Why is the Mediterranean diet so good for us? For starters, it's based on eating an abundance of fruits and vegetables, grains, beans, nuts and seeds, lean protein like fish and poultry, a small amount of dairy, and a little bit of wine. Another important aspect of the diet is that it derives most of its fats from healthy, unsaturated sources, like olive oil.

"More and more studies come out all the time linking this diet to lower risk of heart disease, cancer, obesity, diabetes, a longer life span, everything," Cloutier says.

Some recent studies found:

- Consuming a Mediterranean-style diet, rich in fruit, vegetables and fish, may reduce the risk of death from cardiovascular disease by 30 percent (*American Journal of Clinical Nutrition*, July 2007).
- Children who eat a Mediterranean diet—including fresh fruit and veggies at least twice a day—have 30 percent fewer instances of allergies than those who don't (*Thorax*, August 2007).
- The antioxidant-rich Mediterranean diet is linked to a decreased risk of chronic obstructive pulmonary disease, which is the fifth-leading cause of death worldwide (*Thorax*, May 2007).
- Adherence to a Mediterranean diet is associated with a lower risk of developing Alzheimer's disease (*Archives of Neurology*, October 2006).

The Mediterranean diet is useful in preventing other types of illnesses too. For instance, virgin olive oil, a critical part of the diet, is a "chemopreventive agent for peptic ulcer or gastric cancer," according to a January 2007 study published in the *Journal of Agriculture and Food Chemistry*.

Red wine, another important element of the Med diet, has been touted for a host of health benefits, including heart health and, most recently, dental health. The March 2006 issue of the *Journal of*

See **MEDITERRANEAN** on page 29



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Stay true to region's healthy traditions

MEDITERRANEAN from page 26

Dental Research reports that the polyphenols in red wine may assist in preventing and treating inflammatory periodontal disease, which attacks about 65 percent of Americans over age 50.

Along with eating foods that are staples of a Mediterranean diet, it's also important to consider the Mediterranean lifestyle and philosophy about food. "The Med diet really celebrates what Mother Nature has to offer," says Cloutier. "From a biological perspective, it gives our bodies the exact proportions and amounts of what we need to function at an optimal level. Also, the region's general approach is that food is not the enemy, not a source of stress, but should be celebrated for its life-giving qualities."

While your customers might benefit from taking some of the "American" out of their pace of life, they will also benefit from being careful not to Americanize traditional Mediterranean dishes. Italian is a favorite food among Americans, but most harbor glaring misconceptions about what actual Italians typically eat. "American versions of Mediterranean foods are usually heavy on cheese and animal-based ingredients," Cloutier says. "A pizza in Sicily, on the other hand, might have just a sprinkle of cheese on it, be heavy on tomatoes and vegetables, and [have] a whole-grain crust."

In addition to ingredient variations, American cuisine tends to prioritize convenience, shunning healthy cooking methods like grilling and broiling and choosing the frying pan instead. Furthermore, herbs, spices and condiments—what might seem like superfluous flavoring agents to a busy American on the go—are an integral health-boosting and variety-laden part of the Mediterranean kitchen.

"Chiles; green herbs like parsley, basil, coriander and rosemary; seeds like cumin; pomegranate, garlic, shallots—there's a whole list of spices and herbs that are used in Mediterranean cooking that also offer health benefits of their own," says Lisa Golden Schroeder, founder of Minneapolis-based Foodesigns Culinary Consulting. "American companies tend to sanitize recipes because they don't want to offend anyone's palate; the food ends up being geared toward the least common denominator, and is therefore less nutritious."

Wake up and smell the garlic

When it comes to marketing Mediterranean, it's important to focus on new information about the diet, the region and the flavors it encapsulates. While your customers may think they're familiar with the Mediterranean diet, Sue Moores, a nutrition consultant for natural products stores, says, "I don't actually come across many people who know the true underpinnings of what a Med diet is—they maybe know olive oil and fish, and that's it." Moores and Schroeder suggest the following techniques to educate customers about the Mediterranean diet:

• **Think outside the boot.** "Everyone knows about Greece and Italy, but there are many other countries in the region that use the same healthy ingredients in a variety of fresh and interesting ways," Schroeder



says. "What about Morocco, Libya, Turkey, Egypt, Syria?" Moores suggests dedicating one month to the Mediterranean diet and featuring a new, lesser-known country each week. "Include a traditional dish from that country in your prepared foods section and use maps to visually show customers that the Mediterranean region consists of much more than just Italy and Greece," Moores says.

• **Keep in mind that a Mediterranean diet is bolstered by a traditional Mediterranean lifestyle.** "The importance and value [the Mediterranean culture places] on whole foods, celebrating foods together and eating slowly around a table may have a positive impact as well," Moores says. She suggests incorporating some of these aspects of Mediterranean dining into your marketing strategy by encouraging shoppers to take time with their meals, enjoy food with family and friends, and to have an active lifestyle.

• **Remind your customers what's healthy—and what's not.** "When Americans filter out the true principles—amounts, portion control, key ingredients—of the Mediterranean diet, the diet becomes less healthy. Retailers should bring some clarity to the situation; maybe put up a 'We Think This, When It's Really That' display that shows consumers what they might be doing wrong," Moores says.

• **Take a more comprehensive approach** to highlighting Mediterranean fare by flagging foods throughout your store that have Mediterranean components, including whole grains, beans, figs, spices and yogurt.

• **Carry popular Mediterranean dishes in your prepared foods section so shoppers can see that food from the region is familiar, or at least appetizing.** "Bean salads are well-received, as are those with feta cheese and olives," Moores says. This is especially important for enticing wary shoppers who find it difficult to branch out from typical American foods. Try sampling simple, tasty salads and dips to ease their palates into other flavors and textures. "So many Mediterranean ingredients add flavor and nutrients like olives, herbs, walnuts, pine nuts and cheeses from the region," Schroeder says. "Those are

popular, easy ingredients to sell."

• **Give a cooking demonstration to show how easy making Mediterranean cuisine can be.** "The Mediterranean region uses cooking techniques like grilling and roasting, which bring out flavors of fresh ingredients, are healthy and don't take a lot of time if you know how to handle them. A simple cooking demo

can get shoppers excited to make fast and nutritious meals on their own," Schroeder says. If you don't have the space or staff to hold a cooking demo, design a pamphlet with instructions on simple cooking techniques that can be displayed near your prepared foods section. ■

Christine Spebar is a Boulder, Colo.-based freelance writer.

Authentic products make the mark

To make going Mediterranean even simpler for consumers, Oldways, a Boston-based nonprofit food-issues-advocacy group, has designed the "Med Mark," a symbol manufacturers can place on their packaging if a product fits within specific criteria determined by Oldways. The company has designed a nutritional pyramid for the traditional Mediterranean diet as a guide for manufacturers and consumers to use when determining which foods can be considered part of a Mediterranean diet.



"We went through a huge number of studies and came to the realization that this was the healthiest diet worldwide," says Dun Gifford, president and founder of Oldways. "The challenge, then, was to get consumers to pick up those products, so we created an easy-to-understand, eye-catching symbol." The Med Mark was made available to manufacturers in June 2007. —C.S.

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