

Oldways Offers New Ways to Think About Holiday Feasting

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By Jennifer Huget
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Imagine a holiday feast rich in taste, texture, scent and color. A meal designed to be eaten slowly and deliberately, leaving plenty of time between forkfuls for talking with friends and family -- and for savoring sips of good red wine.

Then imagine that the assortment of food before you draws on an ancient tradition, a way of life and of eating that has now been credited with promoting cardiovascular health, warding off diabetes and dementia, fostering healthful weight maintenance and boosting brain power.

Too good to be true? Read on.

We've been hearing about the Mediterranean diet since just after World War II when nutrition researchers noticed that people living on Crete seemed exceptionally healthy and long-lived. Those benefits appeared to derive at least in part from the way people ate in that region. The whole grains, olive oil, nuts, fruits and vegetables, fish, cheese and wine on which they dined every day seemed to do their bodies good.

More than half a century later, we're still discovering ways in which this simple approach to eating, so foreign to many Americans, can help us stay healthy. Just last week, research was published in the [Journal of the American Medical Association](#) showing that following a Mediterranean diet (though it was not labeled as such in the study) allowed Type 2 diabetics to better control their blood sugar than did a high-cereal-fiber diet.

I've been flirting with the notion of going Mediterranean for some time now. But I hadn't found quite the right source of simple and appealing recipes and menus to smooth my transition from my fairly healthful but solidly American way of eating to this sunnier style.

Apparently I'm not alone.

Then, this fall, I was introduced to Oldways, a Massachusetts-based "food think tank" that has been promoting the Mediterranean diet for 15 years. Oldways is funded by trade associations, individuals, foreign government agencies, and private and public businesses. Some sponsors, such as the Pacific States Marine Fisheries Association and [Whole Foods Market](#), seem to be natural allies in the Oldways campaign; others, such as [Frito-Lay](#) and Coca-Cola, are more surprising partners.

In September, Oldways held a symposium at which experts discussed the diet with an eye toward making it more accessible to Americans. The event provided occasion for the unveiling of a Mediterranean diet food pyramid, patterned after the [USDA](#) Food Guide Pyramid.

At the base of the new pyramid: suggestions to "be physically active" and to "enjoy meals with

others." The bulk of the structure is devoted to plant-based foods, from grains (mostly whole grains), beans and nuts to legumes, seeds, herbs and spices, with the instruction to "base every meal on these foods." Other recommendations: Eat fish at least twice a week (a guideline espoused recently by the [Food and Drug Administration](#) in its controversial statement that fish's health benefits outweigh any risk posed by mercury contamination). Consume poultry, eggs, cheese and yogurt in small portions, and meats and sweets "sparingly." Wine is recommended in moderation (grape juice is a good substitute for non-drinkers). Water is to be drunk regularly, in place of less-healthy beverages such as sodas.

I asked the folks at Oldways to plan a Mediterranean-diet-style holiday feast to share with Eat, Drink and Be Healthy readers. They supplied us with recipes from their new book, "The Oldways Table" (Ten Speed Press) and have posted a [meal plan](#) on their Web site.

When Oldways co-founder K. Dun Gifford walked me through the menu, I expected to hear the same kind of jargon that always gets kicked around when we're talking about healthy eating these days.

But aside from mentioning the omega-3 fatty acids that fish can deliver, the conversation was all about food -- not calories, fiber or vitamins. I found that very refreshing. As Gifford says, "We don't eat nutrients -- we eat food."

The Oldways approach also makes small concessions to the American palate to make as unfamiliar foods more appealing: for example, the addition of soy sauce -- certainly not central to the Mediterranean cuisine -- to a salmon recipe.

I can't wait to try this meal: From the pre-dinner nibbles (including spiced pecans, an olive tapenade and good crumbly cheese) to the warm gingerbread with vanilla gelato at the end, this food is meant to be enjoyed at leisure.

And when you've finished eating, you're not likely to have the kind of regrets so many of us feel after stuffing ourselves on, well, stuffing and all the other high-fat, high-calorie foods we're accustomed to eating during the holidays. As Gifford says, your guests won't even notice that there are no rolls and butter on the table.

For recipes and more information about the Mediterranean diet, visit Oldways at <http://www.oldwayspt.org> or the Mediterranean Foods Alliance at <http://www.mediterraneanmark.org>. Check out today's Checkup blog, in which Jennifer looks at recent science surrounding the Mediterranean diet. Subscribe to the weekly Lean & Fit nutrition newsletter by going to <http://www.washingtonpost.com> and searching for "newsletters." And e-mail your thoughts to Jennifer at checkup@washpost.com.

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