

8 Healthy Food Tips The Cretans Knew First

The diet world is a very crowded place, and advice is constantly changing. But, very slowly, we're coming to realize what the physicians of Greek antiquity well understood – that “food” is far more than something we put in our mouths and swallow. In fact, the ancient diet of the Cretans is once again gaining favor.

What is the Cretan diet?

A eureka moment early in our own society's attempts to understand the relationship between food and health took place 70 years ago. In wealthy America, heart disease was on the rise. A U.S. researcher, Ancel Keys, discovered that in war-torn Europe, especially in poverty-stricken Crete, heart disease was relatively rare. He concluded that it was because of the Cretans' diet and way of life. The timing of his study has since been criticized (the Orthodox Church observes many fasts and, in the 1940s, these were strictly adhered to), but the general good health of the people was there for all to see.

I first visited Crete just 20 years after Keys. I was there as a student volunteer on an archaeological dig. It took me more than a day to reach the dig (there was, then, less than 40 miles of tarmac road on the entire island). It was a two-hour walk to the nearest village, and this Crete wasn't much different from the island Keys experienced. In the weeks I spent there, I felt much healthier than I had at home in London. I knew that the reason for this was the food, and the sharing of our tables with friends and strangers. In short, it was because of the Cretan diet.

Sorting fact from fiction isn't easy

In the intervening years, a great deal has been written about the benefits and dishes of various diets, especially the Mediterranean diet. The subject of food attracts huge research grants and promotional fees from commercial companies. Unsurprisingly, the core finding in that original research on Crete – the link between local foods, food production, enjoyment of food and good health – has disappeared under a pile of lab-inspired markers and recipes.

Today, some of us can buy Cretan olive oils and cheeses in our stores. These give us the good flavors of the island and the advantage of being able to consume cheeses made with milk from animals that have roamed free over herb-covered hills, but it isn't the whole story. We can follow the Cretan diet (from the Greek, *diaita*, meaning "way of life") to our advantage wherever we are by enjoying a large diversity of foods that are grown or gathered locally, that are at the peak of their seasonal (nutritional) best and that excite us with their different flavors and textures. This holds true for fish and meat, too. They both have seasons, based on the breeding habits of the animals and fish, and their ability to feed well.

Thus, what are now the two most serious Orthodox fasts – Lent (March, lamb-breeding season) and August (when it's hot and the land is parched) – have their roots in a way of life that was followed long before Christianity. This attitude to true sustainability (which ensures future life) exists on Crete even when food is plentiful, and some of the most appreciated island foods are what we generally consider to be "lesser" fish and meats – octopus and other seafood, tiny fish, snails, offal and small game.

What the Cretan diet can do for you

But we're not Cretans, so why should we want to follow their diet? There's one particular reason why I like to: It means I can rely on my own judgment as to whether something is "good

for me,” as I can always check the 4,000 years of food wisdom that has passed down from those smart, early inhabitants of Crete, the Minoans. Following a few simple tenets, and stocking your pantry with some quality ingredients, you, too, can create for yourself the Cretan diet.

Use olive oil like a Cretan

Until a generation ago, Cretans consumed around five times more olive oil than other Greeks, and Greeks consumed per capita the most olive oil in the world. To an islander, all olive oil is extra virgin, and only consumed in the year of its production. There’s plenty of evidence now that olive oil (extra virgin and fresh) is a “super food,” so much of the Cretans’ good health can be traced to its copious use in island kitchens. For those of us without an olive tree, it’s not quite so simple. Extra virgin olive oil is not only expensive, it’s rare for the current season’s product to reach our stores. So we lose out on what is its greatest value for us. One solution is to build a relationship with a producer and buy direct.

Love those green leaves, the wilder the better

A neighbor of mine on Crete was able to identify more than 60 wild greens and herbs. She knew exactly where and when to find certain species, and how they were best served. She was well known locally for her remarkable skill, but every Cretan cook could – and many still can – identify a dozen or so wild greens. Wild greens contain more, and a greater variety of, nutrients than garden- or commercially grown greens. Many of the best garden greens, as far as nutrients and flavor, end up on the compost heap – beet, turnip and radish greens. Farmers markets are now a good source of these greens and others, and many of us enjoy foraging in the countryside, wherever we are. Turned into salads or side dishes, Cretan-style, with plenty of olive oil, they make very good eating.

Look for sheep-milk and goat-milk cheeses

Not only do Cretans have an admirable capacity for consuming olive oil, they are also among the world's largest consumers of cheese. But their cheeses are different from many available in our stores. Made with milk (mostly sheep, some goat) from animals that eat a melange of wild herbs and greens, and graze outside year-round, they possess nutrients that are missing from cheeses made with highly processed factory-farmed milk. If you can't buy Cretan cheeses, seek out cheeses made with milk from pasture-raised cows or goats.

Measure herbs with your hand, not with a spoon

Measuring spoons are unknown in traditional Cretan kitchens. Your hand is the perfect measure for herbs and spices. You see what you are adding to a dish and, with dried herbs and spices, the heat of your palm releases their wonderful aromas, in the process delighting you, the cook.

Sweeten the natural way

Honey is another "super food" that Crete has in abundance. With only a few days a year without sunshine and much pesticide-free land, bees have a good life on the island. Honey is more than sugar-sweetener – it has nutritional and medicinal qualities, too. But only when the bees have a healthy environment. A good substitute is local honey from bees that have enjoyed pesticide-free pollen.

Give your gut a helping hand

Yogurt made from the milk of animals that have grazed on herbs or grass and the necessary "friendly bacteria" is a very different food from the commercial yogurts that have a shelf life of weeks. Its bacteria are alive and ready to do their good work, keeping your gut in good order. These bacteria are even more valuable to us now, with so much of our foods being highly processed.

Cretan yogurt, made from sheep/goat milk, is thick, creamy and utterly delicious but, at the moment, travels only as far as Athens. It's easy to make your own at home; for the best results, use full-fat organic milk. Other ways, Cretan-style, to keep your gut healthy is to include naturally fermented (wine) vinegar, pickles, fish and cured olives in your culinary repertoire.

Drink like a Cretan, too

Existing right at the heart of the ancient "wine world," it's no wonder wine is as much part of a Cretan's diet as olive oil. Like olive oil, wine to a Cretan is a drink made that year from grapes nearby (village wine) and consumed with gusto. Appreciated as it is, village wine takes getting used to, so it's good news that, today, some of the island's wineries are winning medals on the world stage. Well-made, modern Cretan wines are particularly interesting when made with the island's unique, and sometimes ancient, grape varieties. On Cretan tables, wine and food are inseparable. Wine is a digestif, and a way of welcoming all to the table – there's always plenty of it on Cretan tables.

Staples for the 'Cretan shelf' of your pantry

Olive oil: extra virgin

Olives: brine-cured, young and green, salt-cured, plump and fleshy, sweet and tiny

Capers and caper leaves, salt-packed

Red wine vinegar

Sea salt, fine and coarse

Spices: allspice, ground; cinnamon, sticks and ground; coriander seeds, whole and ground; cumin, whole and ground; black peppercorns; sumac, ground; nutmeg; cloves; vanilla

Dried herbs: rigani (Greek oregano), marjoram, rosemary, thyme, sage, bay leaves

Dried fruit: currants, small dark raisins, large plump sultanas, figs, prunes

Honey: Cretan mountain sage, orange blossom, Hymettus

Nuts: whole unblanched almonds, walnuts in the shell, pine nuts, unsalted pistachio nuts, hazelnuts (filberts)

Seeds: melon, pumpkin, sesame

Dried pulses: garbanzo beans (chickpeas), white beans (great northerns, cannellini), green lentils, brown lentils, yellow split peas, butter (large lima) beans, black-eyed peas

Preserved lemons

Preserved fish: salted anchovies, sardines packed in olive oil or brine, tuna packed in olive oil, oil-cured bonito (lakertha), sun-dried or smoked mackerel or octopus, smoked eel

Preserved grape leaves

From your refrigerator or freezer

Cheeses: graviera, aged kephalotyri, manouri, myzithra, brine-stored feta

Yogurt: sheep milk, good-quality cow's milk

Fresh or frozen filo sheets: you can store fresh filo for up to 2 days, frozen filo for up to 4 weeks

In your herb garden

Flat-leaf parsley, cilantro (fresh coriander), thyme, rosemary, bay laurel, marjoram

Fennel, dill, mint (many varieties, including "garden," small-

leaf), small-leaf basil, sage, lovage, savory, chives

Rose- and lemon-scented geranium leaves

Beet Greens With Latholemono

Beet greens are only one of a huge variety of wild or garden greens Cretans bring to the table. You can substitute turnip greens, radish tops, amaranth greens, water spinach, ruby chard or mustard greens (charlock) for the beet greens, and use a sauce of olive oil and red wine vinegar in place of the lemon juice.

Prep time: 5 minutes

Cooking time: 2 to 5 minutes, depending on the green

Total time: 7 to 10 minutes

Yield: 6 for a meze serving, 4 as a side dish

Ingredients

1 1/4 pounds beet greens

For serving

5 tablespoons extra virgin olive oil, or to taste

Coarse-grain sea salt and cracked black pepper to taste

Lemon wedges

Directions

1. Rinse the greens in several changes of cold water. Remove any tough stalks from the greens and tear the leaves into bite-size pieces.

2. Steam the greens. Or place them in a non-reactive saucepan, add 4 tablespoons boiling water, and cook, stirring once or twice with a fork, for 1 to 2 minutes. Take care not to

overcook. Drain well in a colander, pressing the greens against the sides with a wooden spoon.

3. To serve, transfer the greens to a platter and lightly fork them to lift and separate the leaves. Add the olive oil and sprinkle with a generous amount of salt and pepper. Serve warm or at room temperature, with lemon wedges.

Note: Prepare turnip greens and radish tops the same way as beet greens and cook 3 to 4 minutes. Break off the tender sprigs of leaves from water spinach and mustard greens and cook 4 to 5 minutes. Amaranth greens and young ruby chard take only 1 to 2 minutes to cook. Take care not to overcook.