



The Heritage of the Mediterranean diet



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The important educational constituent of the Department of Pharmacy, Health Sciences and Nutrition at the University of Calabria has long been focusing on the historical and cultural origin of the Mediterranean Diet, but also at its current dimension, assumed as an integral part of modern evidence-based medicine.

The work carried out particularly in recent years has highlighted the Mediterranean Diet as a model of Health Pedagogy that must be handed down to the new generations through a training effort aimed at involving the school system, starting

from primary education to the higher grade level.

In this direction, the Department of Pharmacy, Health Sciences and Nutrition at the University of Calabria has specifically activated two educational courses of significant cultural and scientific relevance: the Masters in “Nutrition and Nutraceutical Integration “ and “Expert in Control of food certification” , which encompass a complementary and current relevance of learning outcomes in line with the basic concepts of the Mediterranean Diet, able to interpret the potential of the entire socio-economic regional agro-food chain.

The theme of the Mediterranean Diet assumes, in any case, an international value and a major significance in terms of training research, advanced entrepreneurship and biodiversity as confirmed by the contribution made by Vandana Shiva to this debate as the first ambassador of the food

needs of Third World countries.

I would like to remember that in April 2013 in the occasion of the twentieth anniversary of the Faculty of Pharmacy, Health Sciences and Nutrition, the University of Calabria awarded Vandana Shiva the first honorary degree in Nutrition Science. The link between the Mediterranean Diet and biodiversity, now universally recognized, comes from a long scientific-anthropological itinerary that began in the late '50s thanks to the contribution of the American Ancel Keys, one of the greatest nutritionists of the last century. The American scientist has revolutionized the knowledge of social medicine by being the first to deepen the understanding of the relationship between abnormal lipid metabolism and the onset of vascular diseases, which at that time struck around 70% of the male population of the United States. Of this eating pattern with its low-fat feature characterizing

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The discovery of the Mediterranean Diet in the world is due to the intuition, in 1945, of the nutritionist Ancel Keys on the correlation between diet and chronic and degenerative diseases.

In the late 50s, Keys started “The Seven Countries Study” (conducted in Finland, Holland, Italy, USA, Greece, Japan and Yugoslavia) to document the correlation between lifestyle, diet and cardiovascular diseases.



Nicotera (Calabria)
 Crevalcore (Emilia)
 Montegiorgio (Marche)
 Pioppi (Cilento)



the healthy Mediterranean Diet, Keys identified in the southern part of Italy the paradigm: a nutraceutics “ante litteram”. The scientist’s relationship with Calabria started precisely in the most famous of his studies, the Seven Countries Study, a comparative study of the diets of seven different Mediterranean and non-Mediterranean countries, namely, Greece, Yugoslavia, Italy, Japan, Finland, the Netherlands and the United States. The investigation took its origins within the rural community of Nicotera, which thus became the model of the Mediterranean Diet in the subsequent chain of studies and research.

Over time, the model has not only maintained its food characteristics, but has highlighted a process of mythical ancestralization rooted in the gestures and habits of the community studied, without altering the more literal philological meaning and the modernity of the concept Diet as a lifestyle.

The prototypical communities identified have, therefore, a cultural and territorial heritage that still

widely makes the area outstanding due to the typicality of its products, while at the same time becoming the expression of good behavioral and dietary commitment addressing adequate political choices.



This kind of food “archeology” is currently expressed through new forms in terms of local marketing, as well as through old and new food typicality.

The placement of the Mediterranean Diet in the socio-cultural and economic context of this region begins right from Calabria in 2002/2003, with the first and the second forums on food culture that convened nutritionists and anthropologists from

that an appeal was made, aiming at strengthening the sustainability of the agro-food systems in order to reduce the increasing erosion of the diverse heritage of the Mediterranean food cultures.

In recent years, researchers, scientists, experts and representatives of national and international organizations have gathered together to jointly discuss the evolution of the Mediterranean Diet, reviewing and updating its figurative original model of the food pyramid with a frequency of climbing upwards from the bottom to the top of the various categories of foods of which it is composed.

This model, which was presented in November 2009 in Parma by the Inter-University Centre of Studies on Mediterranean food cultures, was also opportunely contaminated by national variants of the different Mediterranean countries in the prospect of preparing the UNESCO dossier. In November 2010 in Nairobi, the dossier acknowledged the Mediterranean Diet as intangible cultural heritage of humanity, following the application submitted by Italy, Spain, Greece and Morocco.

The Communities directly acknowledged by the UN agency were the Cilento for Italy, Koroni in Greece, Chefchaouen in Morocco and Soria in Spain. Subsequently, at the UNESCO meeting held in 2013 in Baku in Azerbaijan, the countries of Cyprus, Portugal and Croatia also joined the partnership. Nowadays, the UNESCO dossier considers the Mediterranean Diet as a cultural heritage in constant evolution, an expression not only of food freshness and seasonality, but

17 Mediterranean countries for the first time. This ongoing process of reflection was completed in 2005 at La Sapienza University of Rome during the third Euro-Mediterranean forum on food cultures. It was on this occasion

primarily of the ways in which to offer them, present them and share them at the table in the context of a convivial frugality. The UNESCO recognition and the following increased worldwide visibility of high-quality and extensive scientific evidence on its beneficial effects in terms of longevity, life quality and in the prevention of a broad spectrum of chronic degenerative diseases, ensures that the Mediterranean Diet is currently experiencing an unprecedented historic moment. We must, however, remain vigilant without just retaining a “mythical” knowledge of a model of food culture, which must cope with current issues related to obtaining and processing food in our geographical area. It is thus necessary to make the Mediterranean Diet an element of resource valorization, as well as valuing it as a rebirth of the areas which identify themselves in the cultural and anthropological process of this pathway. Of course, this implies avoiding degrading processes of deculturation and the degradation of agriculture encouraged by globalized food production, but also disseminating intense scientific activities, which have shown a clear relationship between nutrition and health. For this reason, we need to launch a project of “re-education to the Mediterranean food culture”, by taking effective action in the schools of all the countries of the Euro-Mediterranean partnership especially at nutritional and gastronomic levels. The recent revival, implemented by the regional executive government within the reset programming of

EU funds 2014-2020 for the entire agriculture and agri-food chain will soon produce its fruit in the light of this consideration.

On this basis, the initiative of our department can be concretely oriented to create an educational training network, in particular with the countries that have dealt with the publication of the UNESCO dossier in 2010. It is necessary to draw the attention of the younger generations towards the evolution of the Mediterranean food culture, characterized by a complementarity and variety of products, whose identity and quality are not only able to promote the conquest of new markets, but can achieve the idea of a Mediterranean agro-food system to be built gradually through synergies expressed both by public institutions and private enterprises.

In our opinion, the food industry in the Euro-Mediterranean context has two fronts to sustain. On the one hand, the promotion of the “Made-in-Italy” brand, which requires support for our business initiatives of internationalization, and for the establishment of an agency, which enhances our products, safeguarding them from the risk of counterfeiting. This should be considered as “Italian Sounding”, that is, the market area dealing with the products that simulate a local origin, amount to about 54 billion euro: double the export value of Italian food products, which amounts to about 23 billion euro. A parallel market, which must be fought decisively.

In Calabria, the structural problems of our agriculture concern generational turnover, the reorder of land and



technological innovation, which are crucial to maintaining adequate standards on strategic and design levels. Let us consider still an achievable agriculture in the regional context, expression of a social capital understood as a complex of extra economic ties typical of local production systems, able to integrate traditional knowledge with technical scientific specialist skills.

Yet, on the other hand, we need to closely cooperate with countries neighboring the Mediterranean area as they are able to meet these challenges, supported by adequate economic and especially technical resources.

In other words, it is crucial to ensure that the domestic demand for food sovereignty overlaps with that of food quality and safety, regarded by EU citizens as an essential right to hygiene health, and that new technical barriers to Mediterranean exports from the EU market are avoided.

Therefore, biodiversity, food culture, scientific and civil passion are the ways in which we consider our territories can be protected. It is hence in this way that our project may be tied with Vandana Shiva's ecological thinking. We believe that the food culture around the modern model of the Mediterranean Diet in itself claims the right to biodiversity. This is likely to be eradicated by a speculative kind of monoculture, and thus, especially claims the right

to food sovereignty, understood as self-determination of food production to satisfy one's own needs, based on autonomous agricultural policies capable of blocking abusive, speculative interferences.

The respect for food sovereignty is not a bucolic utopia locked in tradition, but a developmental strategy that has witnessed successful examples. In Brazil, subsistence farming has been transformed into small-business agriculture, which in less than 10 years, has subtracted 36 million citizens from hunger and extreme poverty. It has increased subsidized credit tenfold to family-based agricultural economies, driving the use of 30% of local products in school canteens.

On this basis, Vandana Shiva's absolutely original holistic intuition helps us see how our relationship, compatibly with the planet and all human beings, should strive to protect biodiversity as the natural source of food democracy, and the only instrument capable of influencing the present moment and transforming the future of this wide humanity so close to us, but that has yet to free itself from the basic needs of its existence.

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SUPPLEMENT

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live better

Lthe culture of the Mediterranean Diet



Illustration by George Middleton

