

The Mediterranean Diet And The Deli — A PERFECT FIT

Simple, delicious foods in the deli could help solve America's obesity crisis

BY JACQUELINE ROSS LIEBERMAN

The Mediterranean Diet — based on the dietary traditions of several Mediterranean countries where people were found to live longer and more healthfully than most people in the rest of the world — makes use of a number of delicious foods that delis can offer. That's great news for retailers wishing to attract the growing number of health-conscious consumers.

"Every week there seems to be another study validating the healthfulness of the Mediterranean Diet," says Sara Baer-Sinnot, executive vice president of Oldways, the Boston, MA-based non-profit parent organization of the Mediterranean Foods Alliance.

"The Mediterranean Diet has some magnificent research behind it," asserts Jeanne Sauve, of Portland, ME-based Swardlick Marketing Group, a representative of The Cheeses of France Marketing Council.

The momentum of the Mediterranean trend itself is growing, according to Dennis Droushiotis, managing director, CheesEU, the Cyprus Association for the Promotion

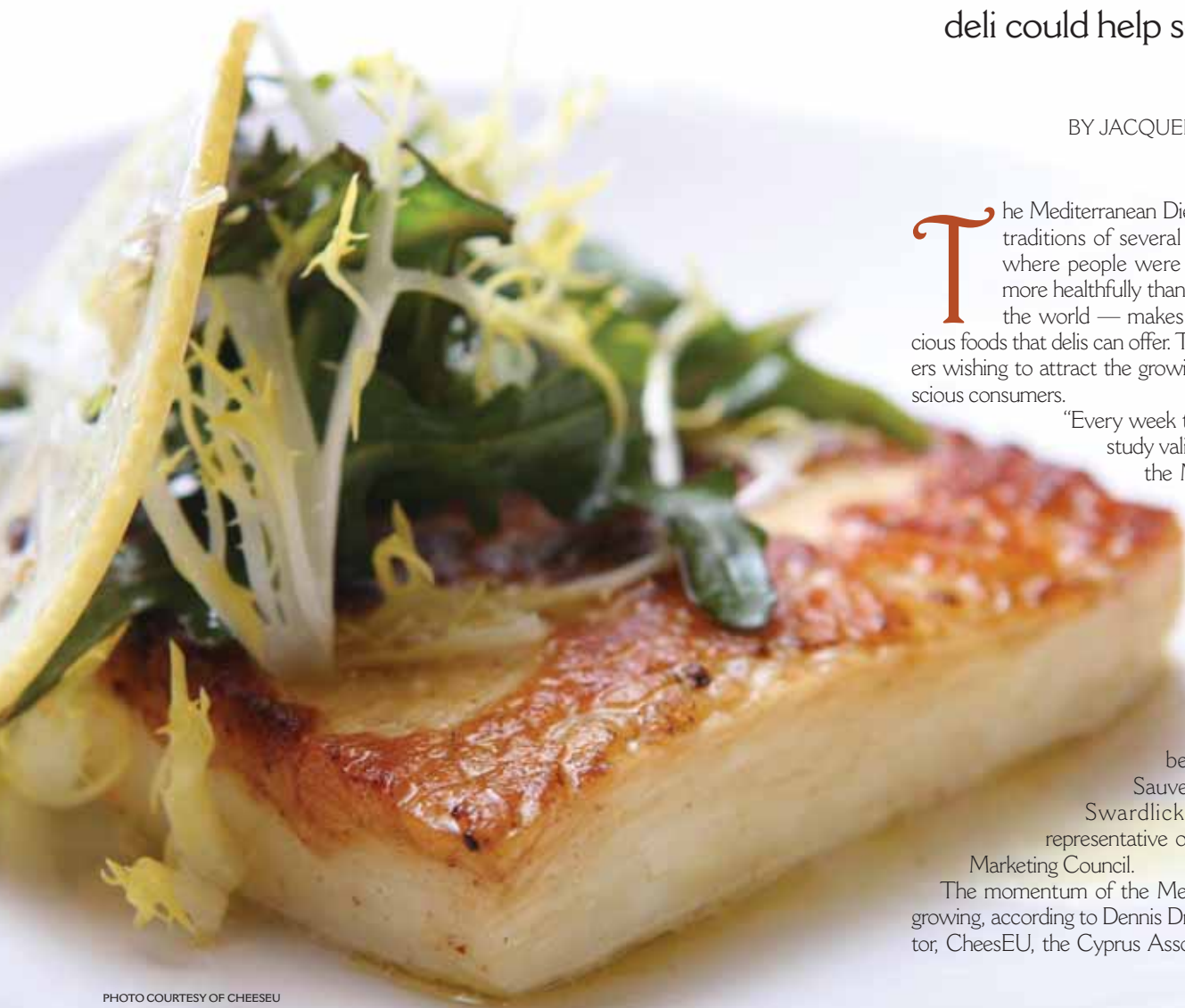


PHOTO COURTESY OF CHEESEU

of Milk Products, New York, NY. "The consumer is getting a bit more savvy. There's been information getting out about eating healthfully," says Droushiotis. "This is something retailers can take advantage of."

"Many people come to delis for a quick meal or for easy snacking ideas — these people are ideal targets for learning about the Mediterranean way of eating," notes Heather Innocenti, director of marketing, G.L. Mezzetta, Inc., American Canyon, CA, specialty food producers.

"I think there's been a big change in the deli in the past five, six years," notes Oldways' Baer-Sinnot. In addition to traditional fat-laden salads in the deli case, she says, "There will be eggplant, Caprese salads, bean salads, interesting vegetables that were not there before. In prepared foods there are so many new, interesting things — grilled vegetables, tabbouleh, hummus." Antipasto bars offering olives, pickled vegetables and dips such as baba ganoush have sprung up in stores around the country, as well.

The Mediterranean Diet is more of a lifestyle plan than what Americans traditionally think of as a diet. Portion sizes are smaller, with emphasis on nutrient-dense foods — especially plant-based foods such as vegeta-



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bles, fruits (including olives) and grains (including breads, rice and grain salads). Lean proteins such as poultry and fish are impor-

tant, as is yogurt, with highly flavored cheeses and meats used as accents and antioxidant-rich olive oil as a main source of

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fat, so that the food is satisfying and exciting while at the same time healthful. A moderate amount of wine is suggested, and social eating and exercise are also thought to play important roles.

"It's not a diet, per se but a way of living and a way of eating," explains Anthony DiPietro, vice president, George E. Delallo Co., Inc, Pittsburgh, PA, a processor and distributor of Italian and Mediterranean foods.

All these things taken together, plus the Mediterranean philosophy of slowing down to enjoy food, makes the Mediterranean Diet appealing to consumers. "It's not just what they eat — it's the way in which they consume it," says Sauve, who notes that The Cheeses of France's slogan is "Savor the experience," something that fits in very well with this lifestyle.

Breads, including lavash, pita, baguettes and other European favorites — thought by many to be carbohydrate-heavy and fattening — are a staple of the diet. "The typical breads used in the Eastern Mediterranean are actually used as utensils. In some cuisines, they don't even use forks," notes Demetrios Haralambatos, corporate executive chef, Kontos Foods, Davidsonville, MD.

The foods of the Mediterranean Diet and the way they're eaten might be considered a guilty pleasure, sans the guilt. "It's a rare thing in life when doing the right thing is pleasurable," says Phil Meldrum, president, New York, NY-based FoodMatch, Inc., which

manufactures and imports Mediterranean and Mediterranean-inspired foods. "In this case, doing the right thing does not require pain and sacrifice."

The simplicity of the foods — with their short, natural ingredient lists — also appeals to a number of consumers. "It's natural. The foods are pretty much picked, grown, cooked and conserved," says Jeffrey Shaw,

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FOODMATCH, INC.

marketing director, Trade Commission of Spain, New York, NY.

"It's a diet that goes back to the way we were eating thousands of years ago," explains Meldrum. "It's healthful comfort

food. Really wonderful, healthful, tasty basic foods that speak to people." At the same time, they allow Americans to have the same taste experiences they may have discovered in restaurants or on trips to places such as Greece, Italy, Spain and France.

Making It Easy

Delis can make it easy for consumers by offering a number of healthful, tasty Mediterranean-inspired items. Hot prepared foods — including meats, fish, chicken, roasted potatoes, rice pilafs and pasta dishes — as well as grilled vegetables and cold salads are perfect meal solutions.

"Cheese is such an integral part of this diet," adds CheesEU's Droushiotis. Keeping a variety of Mediterranean cheeses, which include French, Italian, Spanish and Greek, in the specialty cheese section helps consumers enjoy the many flavors and textures available within the Mediterranean diet. Prepared foods may include grilled tomatoes topped with Halloumi or a salad tossed with Feta.

Sandwiches can fit into the Mediterranean diet, as well. "In the Mediterranean, they toast the bread, add a little olive oil, rub it with a bit of garlic and put ham or cheese on it," says Shaw. In Spain the ham of choice is serrano, a thinly sliced, highly flavorful cured ham. What makes this Mediterranean food healthful is its emphasis on flavor, not volume. "It's not your typical fat sandwich with a lot of ham on it — it's skinny," he says.

PHOTO COURTESY OF FOODMATCH, INC.



As a result, consumers need to be made aware of the value they're getting, which is why sampling is helpful.

Mediterranean and antipasto bars also offer quick solutions for meals, snacks and even parties. "You don't have to do anything — just go to the Mediterranean bar," says Meldrum of FoodMatch. "Instead of worrying about preparation, all you have to worry about is presentation. Go home and put it on platters and you're done in 10 minutes."

According to Meldrum, the beauty of a Mediterranean bar is that customers can enjoy familiar flavors as well new. "It's critical to have at least a minimal selection of a variety of high-quality olives." A bar can offer other familiar foods, such as "peppers and

mushrooms, beans, tomatoes and hummus-es," he adds. From there, consumers may branch out to less familiar items. "Stuffed grape leaves are a wonderful item. Cippolini onions marinated in balsamic vinegar. Artichokes with long stems."

Other quick-and-easy items are constantly being introduced to the market. "Hummus continues to grow at a steady pace, but we have started to bring more items from other regions of the Mediterranean to market. Greek yogurt dips, also known as tzatziki, are gaining momentum as well as some new fresh salads such as chickpea, edamame, and a new orzo Feta salad," says Dominick Frocione, vice president of sales, Cedar's Mediterranean Foods, based in

Bradford, MA.

"Greek yogurt has exploded in dairy departments everywhere and has taken a big chunk of business from domestic yogurt manufacturers," Frocione notes. Plain Greek yogurt can be utilized in a yogurt bar or paired with fresh fruit in the prepared foods section. "Our funky twist on the Greek yogurt phenomenon is a yogurt dip called Tzatziki Greek Strained Yogurt Dip, available in five flavors — cucumber garlic, sun-dried tomato, roasted red pepper, artichoke spinach and celery chive. This dip is high in protein, low in fat and low in calories. Consumers across the country are going crazy for this yogurt dip. It's quickly becoming a ready-to-eat snack paired with veggies or



The Appeal Of Hummus

If one Mediterranean food stands out as a favorite, it's hummus. "Hummus is becoming a widely recognized snack food and is replacing some of the unhealthy high-fat products that are causing obesity," states Dominick Frocione, vice president of sales, Cedar's Mediterranean, Bradford, MA.

In addition to healthfulness, the chickpea dip is known for its taste. "Kids love it, parents love it. It has a wonderful texture," notes Sara Baer-Sinnot, executive vice president, Oldways, Boston, MA.

According to Howie Klagsbrun, vice president sales, Brooklyn, NY-based Sonny & Joe's, makers of hummus and other Mediterranean dips and spreads, "I have not met with a single buyer in the last seven years who has not confessed to me that the hummus category is on fire and showing no signs of slowing down. Both Nielson and IRI report double-digit growth year after year." Americans have only begun to understand the possibilities. "It has been called the ketchup of the Mediterranean," he adds. In some countries, hummus is the condiment of choice, often used instead of mayonnaise on sandwiches.

"Most buyers I speak with tell me hummus is the fastest growing item in the deli case," Klagsbrun continues. "How much space should a store devote to hummus? How much do you want your business to grow?" **DB**

pita chips and a highly sought-after substitute to fatty condiments, such as mayonnaise, cream cheese and salad dressing.”

A Mediterranean Destination

To attract followers of the Mediterranean Diet, as well as those who simply love these foods, “Build a Mediterranean section!” advises Frocione. “If you hype the whole Mediterranean family of products and devote space to make it a destination, then

“BUILD A MEDITERRANEAN SECTION! IF YOU HYPE THE WHOLE MEDITERRANEAN FAMILY OF PRODUCTS AND DEVOTE SPACE TO MAKE IT A DESTINATION, THEN YOU’LL BE SUCCESSFUL. MISCELLANEOUS SKUs SCATTERED AROUND A DEPARTMENT DO NOT BUILD A CATEGORY.”

—DOMINICK FROCIONE,
CEDAR’S MEDITERRANEAN FOODS

you’ll be successful. Miscellaneous SKUs scattered around a department do not build a category.”

Consumer education plays an important role. “Some of the programs we do with our retail partners emphasize pairings and help steer people to things they will like,” says FoodMatch’s Meldrum. This can be accomplished in many ways. “I think signage is important. We provide a lot of different kinds of materials that can get the information to people passively,” he explains.

“Successful Mezzetta promotions at deli counters have included sandwich stickers with product suggestions, recipes cards added on shelves and anything that reminds people that these products are great low-fat ways to add variety to sandwiches,” relates Innocenti.

An educated staff is also crucial. “The retailers need to make a commitment to making sure the personnel in their stores are



trained in how to handle and merchandise these products and answer questions,” recommends Meldrum.

Consumers as well as retailers can visit www.oldwayspt.org to sign up for Oldways’ *Fresh Fridays* e-newsletter, which offers valuable information and recipes for eating according to the Mediterranean Diet. Merchandising kits are also available from the organization as are beautifully illustrated Mediterranean Diet Pyramid posters that explain the Mediterranean ways of eating and living.

“We have a great deal of information on our website that we would love for delis to use,” says DiPietro of George E. DeLallo. In addition to obtaining information for staff members, retailers can repost information on their own websites for customers to read. “Offer them more information online so they can have confidence when going to the store and buying those items,” he suggests.

Displays can encourage sales. Innocenti recommends combining colorful groupings of

shelf-stable items as a collection and promoting them as an essential part of a Mediterranean diet. She also suggests using “Mediterranean-themed décor such as olive branches, urns and topiaries.”

“Beautiful bowls aren’t a big investment. I would think retailers would sell more if the products are in beautiful dishes,” adds Baer-Sinnot of Oldways.

Cross-merchandising items so consumers can put together an entire Mediterranean meal in one spot helps generate multiple sales. “The deli tends to be very close to the produce section,” notes Sauve of Cheeses of France, and both departments can take advantage of that.

Whenever possible, let people try new and interesting combinations before they buy. “That’s where the consumer gets to taste the product and make a decision about buying it,” says CheesEU’s Droushiotis. For example, “Demo cheeses with dried fruit. We’ve even demoed Halloumi with fresh watermelon.”

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