

# The Many Types of “Mediterranean” Cuisine

By Kathryn Fillion

So you're searching for a restaurant in Boston on *Trip Advisor* and one of the filter options is “Mediterranean.” What does this mean to you? Are you confused why there's also an “Italian” category if there's already a Mediterranean one? Or are you expecting hummus and falafel to be on their menu? Maybe some Shakshuka or Couscous?

You select that filter out of curiosity and are surprised to find 88 results within 25 miles. Yet none of the restaurants seem to fit a common theme. One called *Barcelona* serves tapas and margaritas while another called *Moona* serves Lebanese food? The fact is, both Spain and Lebanon border the Mediterranean Sea, which spans 970k square miles (sixth behind the Southern Ocean in area) and borders 21 countries. The Mediterranean region can be broken down into four sub-regions by diet: Western, Arcadian, Eastern and North African. Each sub-region has characteristics that distinguish its diet from the other three. That's why you may find a “Mediterranean” restaurant serving yogurt-based dips and another serving cheesy French Onion soup.

I have to admit that I also had a narrow view of what the Mediterranean diet really meant before coming abroad. I always thought of it as largely plant-based and reliant on olive oil and of course, red wine. After having travelled to these four different sub-regions of the Mediterranean over the last two months, I realize there is much more variation within this diet we label as “Mediterranean.”

## Western Mediterranean: Spain, France, Italy, Malta

I have the most experience with the Western Mediterranean region (specifically Italy) as I have been living with a host family while studying the Mediterranean diet in Padua for the past 4 weeks.

## Olive Oil

This region uses the most olive oil of all the regions (with the exception of France, which uses a lot of butter). I can confirm that they do not use olive oil sparingly here. At the bottom of every bowl of veggies my host family cooks is a pool of olive oil. Same with the risotto and pasta. They don't measure olive oil and limit themselves to 1 or 2 tablespoons the way we do in America. They don't even own measuring spoons.



*My first meal in Europe: Trofie al pesto in Rome.*

Pesto is an **olive oil**-based sauce (and by far my favorite). Luckily, I was able to find dishes using pesto on most restaurant menus in Italy. And they weren't necessarily all pasta dishes. Pesto is used on pizza, as a spread on sandwiches or even as a sauce for white fish.



*Pesto pizza from the province of Treviso.*



*Salad with grilled veggies, a soft cheese and “croutons” from my favorite restaurant in Padua, Casa Vecchiato in the Piazza della Frutta.*

This is one of the countless colorful dishes I ate in Italy. What stood out about this dish was the croutons drizzled with **olive oil**. They’re hardly recognizable as croutons when compared to the typical butter-soaked croutons we’re used to seeing in America. This restaurant is also a bakery with many fresh, homemade breads, pastas and pastries. A big focus of the Mediterranean diet is consuming fresh foods, and at the same time not being wasteful. Rather than throwing out bread that wasn’t used by the end of the day, it is common in Italy to toast day-old bread to use as croutons or in bruschetta.

Other dishes I tried that utilized day-old bread included *panzanella* (bread salad) and *torta di pane* (bread cake) - which my host family ate for breakfast.

## Alcohol & Wine

The Western Region also has the noticeably highest alcohol consumption of the four regions. My host family has had a bottle of wine on the table during every dinner we've had together. In the Mediterranean diet, wine is meant to be enjoyed *with* meals, so what kind of food we were eating usually determined whether the wine was red or white.



Roundabout Hostel *in Rovinj, Croatia.*

This sign was hanging in the kitchen of our hostel in Croatia. There's definitely some truth to it -- my host family had wine with lunch when I ate with them on Sundays too, making breakfast the only meal we didn't have wine with on those days.



A part of the drinking culture here also includes *aperitivo*, or a pre-meal drink. It can be compared to the American happy hour, but only somewhat. Whereas we might think of happy hour as the time-frame when you can get drinks at cheaper prices, the Italians have Aperitivo as a way to “warm-up” their stomachs before a meal while catching up with friends. When you order an *aperitivo*, you also always get some type of light snack, usually chips, olives, or nuts.



P31 Aperitivo Green and snacks *from* Caffè Pedrocchi *in* Padua.

## Dairy

In my experience in Italy, cheese has been the most prevalent source of dairy, and they take it very seriously here. There are certain kinds of cheeses that are specific to certain regions well-suited to producing them, like Parmigiano-Reggiano, which is not the same as Parmesan! There is also a long-standing battle between Italy and France for the best cheese.

Italians use cheese in antipasto, salads, risotto, caprese (another favorite) and of course, as the base of pizza. Sometimes my host family will just put blocks of cheese on the table to accompany meals. One of their favorite side dishes is melon and feta with olive oil and pepper. I have been exposed to many different kinds of cheeses (and from animals other than cows) since coming to Italy, both in my host family and while cheese tasting on a fieldtrip to Treviso.



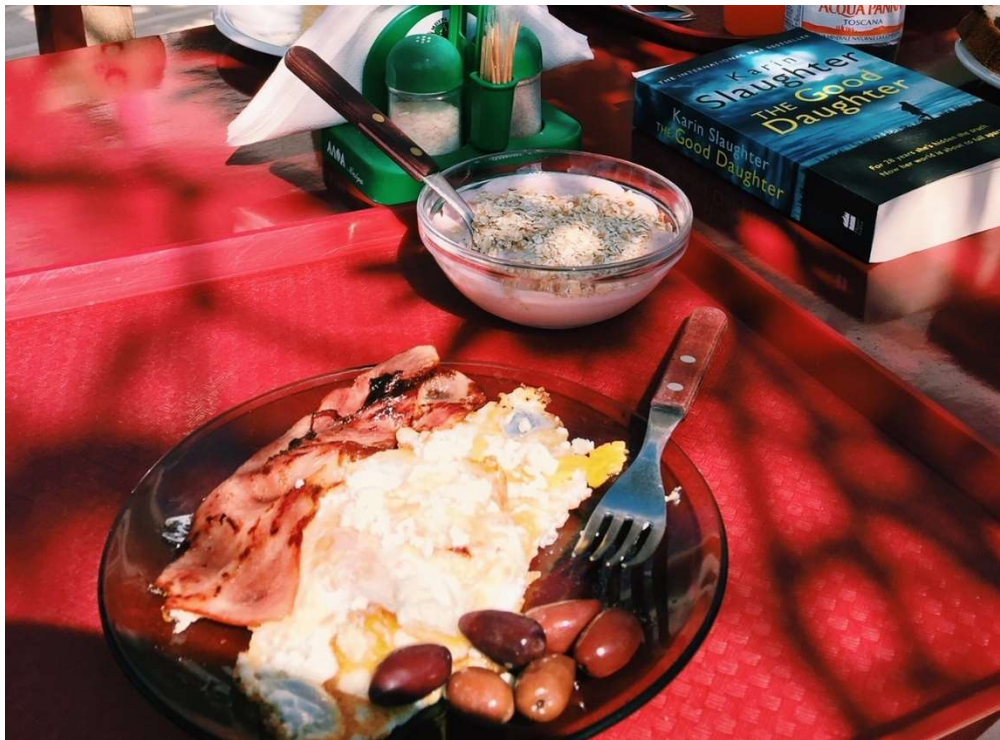
*Cheese tasting at a latteria in the province of Treviso.*

## Eastern Mediterranean: Greece, Lebanon, Cyprus, Turkey, Egypt

After one night in Rome at the start of my travels abroad, I spent five nights in Corfu, Greece. The cuisine in this region was so much more than the stereotypical hummus, falafel and gyros I was expecting (/hoping) to eat every day.

### Breakfast

The hostel I stayed in included breakfast and dinner. Breakfast was the same thing every day and by far the closest thing to an American breakfast I've seen in two months. Made-to-order eggs and bacon. Sprinkled with feta cheese. Side of olives. Small bowl of Greek yogurt with plain oats. Everywhere else I've been in the Mediterranean has had mostly carb-based breakfasts. This could very well have had a Western influence because of the tourists the hostel attracts.



*Breakfast served at the hostel every day in Corfu.*



## Dinner

Dinners were probably where I experienced more traditional Greek foods. Because there was a fixed menu each night, I was forced to try traditional foods I wouldn't have picked out for myself on a menu at a restaurant. Each meal came with a soup, salad, and a main course, usually with some type of meat and more vegetables. I tried salads with yogurt dressings, salads with seafood, main courses like *Moussaka* (a creamy eggplant-based dish with meat sauce that resembles lasagna) and Greek meatloaf.



*Dinner served at the hostel in Corfu: soup, salad, meatloaf, cauliflower & potatoes.*



## Dairy

The most prevalent source of dairy I noticed here was yogurt. They used it for dips, dressings, spreads, a filler in gyros, etc. Every restaurant I went in search of hummus had *tzatziki* (a yogurt-based dip) as their main cold dish appetizer instead!

Here are 2 of my lunches in Corfu which include tzatziki (and hummus, of course):



*Gyros with pork, fries, onions & tzatziki wrapped in pita.*



*Platter of Greek dips, feta, olives, bread sticks (all covered in olive oil) in Old Town Corfu.*

Feta cheese was also a very prevalent dairy source in Greece, mainly seen in salads and stand-alone like on that platter I had for lunch.

## North African Region: Libya, Algeria, Morocco, Tunisia

This region stood out most in its diet, culture, religion and climate. Each of these aspects influences each other and I believe is why I noticed the most difference in the diet while traveling around Morocco.

### Herbs & Spices

Most of the components (i.e. veggies) of the meals I ate were similar to those seen in the other regions, but they were prepared very differently. Here is a picture of some veggie patties I ordered at a vegan café. The patties were covered in some ginger-garlic sauce, on top of roasted veggies drenched in olive oil (not uncommon in the Mediterranean) and seasoned with rosemary and other spices. It was one of the most flavorful things I've eaten while abroad.



*Veggie Patties from Earth Café, in Marrakesh.*

## Fries

Something I was surprised by was how often fries came as a side to meals in Morocco. I saw them a lot in Greek cuisine too (in gyros or as sides). They're not exactly included in the Mediterranean diet, but after looking at the menus in some restaurants, you would think maybe they were.



*Omelet with side of rice, veggies and fries*



*Chicken brochettes with rice, fries and ketchup from Morocco.*

## Drinks/Alcohol

Because these North African countries have a large Muslim presence, little to no alcohol is consumed in this region of the Mediterranean. I feel this is the biggest thing that distinguishes its diet from the Western region, where alcohol is consumed daily. Also noticeable was the higher consumption of tea than coffee. From our *riad* in Marrakesh to the campsite in the Sahara desert, we were offered the traditional green tea with mint leaves and sugar cubes.



## The Adriatic: Croatia, Bosnia, Albania

My experience in this region was very brief, but I will share a few observations. I spent a long weekend in Rovinj, Croatia, which is a northern, coastal fishing town. The cuisine consisted of a lot of seafood and a lot of truffle. It also seemed to me like a mix of Italian and Greek cuisine. Most of the restaurants had pasta dishes, risotto, pizza, Greek salad, etc.

Here is a picture of the feta-loaded Shopska salad we ordered *in addition* to the baked feta we ordered as a side dish to share! This salad appeared on every menu in town and reminded me exactly of a Greek salad (also on every menu) maybe lacking some mixed greens and olives.



*Shopska salad and baked feta from Rovinj, Croatia.*

Here are two dishes that largely resemble dishes I got in Venice a couple of weeks ago.



*Vegetable risotto from Croatia.*



*Seafood risotto from Burano, Venice.*



*Salmon pasta from Croatian-Bosnian fusion restaurant.*



*Smoked salmon tagliatelle from Venice.*



## The Marketplace

The entire town of Rovinj was lined with shops selling handmade goods and local products. What predominated the food market was truffle, olive oil and honey. We saw truffle used for salts, oils, and in dishes such as sauce for gnocchi. Honey was sold as is or made into a liqueur. Vendors at this outdoor market were insistent on getting us to try some of their oils or honey. Even store owners stood in their doorways beckoning us to come in and taste their products.



*Outdoor market in Rovinj, Croatia.*

## Breakfast

The first two mornings, we grabbed breakfast and coffee from a bakery (as I have observed most people do for breakfast in much of Europe). The last morning, we finally found a place that served sit down breakfast with more options than the ham & cheese omelet we saw on 15 different storefront signs. This was a very balanced breakfast with yogurt, fruit, a variety of cereals in the mason jars, orange juice and a cappuccino. There was also the option for the croissant version of this breakfast platter (for the pastry-lovers) as you can see in the top left of the picture.



*Breakfast on the water in Croatia.*



## Some similarities among regions

Some things I noticed that were consistent throughout the Mediterranean region:

- ❖ Olives are used as an appetizer everywhere, whether it's with an aperitivo in Italy or served with the bread before a Moroccan meal
- ❖ They use a LOT of veggies - not just one vegetable per meal
- ❖ They love their cereals – bread, rice, pastries, you name it
- ❖ They know how to season their food (with herbs & spices not just salt)
- ❖ VARIETY and COLOR are key to meals – the food is never boring!



*Salad from our favorite café in Padua, Bar 2000.*

This salad is a perfect example of the variety and color within the Mediterranean diet. Tuna, shrimp, corn, crab, walnuts, mozzarella, tomatoes, carrots, mixed greens dressed with olive oil and balsamic vinegar.



Here's a few more pictures of foods I ate while travelling the Mediterranean.



*Massive ham & cheese calzone from Venice.*



*Salad from a café in Padua.*



*Moroccan salad in Ouarzazate, Morocco.*



*Kataifi- a Greek dessert, similar to Baklava, from a restaurant in Corfu.*



*Tiramisu from the latteria in Treviso.*

## ~Take Away~

As you can see, Mediterranean cuisine consists of more than pasta and pizza or hummus and pita. So keep in mind the next time you're looking to eat out, you may need to narrow down your search to more than "Mediterranean" if you're looking for something specific. Or be open to trying a cuisine from this vast region that you've never tried. You'll be sure to find a healthful menu filled with variety, color and flavor.

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## Citations

<https://www.britannica.com/place/Mediterranean-Sea>

Sahyoun NR and Sankavaram K. (2016) Historical origins of the Mediterranean diet, regional dietary profiles, and the development of dietary guidelines. In, *Mediterranean Diet. Dietary Guidelines and Impact on Health and Disease*, (DF Romagnolo and OI Selmin, editors). Switzerland: Springer International Publishing (Humana Press), pp 47-48.