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CRETE

THE CRETAN DIET LOCALLY SOURCED PRODUCTS



Don't look for a pill that can substitute the Cretan diet. There is no such thing (Serge Renaud, 1998)

The Cretan diet has been studied by scientists the world over. The rather surprising findings of those studies have caused a worldwide sensation by documenting the enormous benefits to the islanders' health and the low incidence of several diseases compared to other places on the globe.

Due to its unique biodiversity and special climatic conditions, Crete is a place that favours the growing of excellent native wild herbs and greens. This, along with the pastoral products, has shaped the eating habits of the Cretans for centuries and built the reputation of the Cretan diet as the healthiest diet among the rest of the Mediterranean diets. The dietary pattern of Cretan diet is mainly based on the consumption of olive oil, large quantities of vegetables and reduced meat.

Besides the actual eating habits, however, what makes the Cretan diet unique among other Mediterranean diets is the whole philosophy that comes with it. It is essentially a whole new way of life that encompasses essential social values and habits such as hospitality, family life, fasting and daily exercise, which is traditionally connected with agricultural and livestock-keeping activities.

Of course, modern societies have had to adjust to a faster-paced routine that affects every aspect of human interaction. In this context, consumers put food and food sourcing under ever-increasing scrutiny. Food scandals and issues of hygiene in food production have never been more widespread. In these troubled times, products unique to the Cretan diet offer a safe alternative, as their century-old qualities make them rather unique among modern food trends. And even though tradition is what makes this diet so special, it wouldn't be as effective if it weren't for the use of local, quality produce. The key distinctive feature is the use of simple but abundant ingredients in preparing Cretan dishes.

The purest of ingredients, simple recipes, respect to seasonality, and minimal processing: just a handful of basic principles that make eating the Cretan way a unique experience. Various chain reactions in the global food industry are constantly changing the facts about what we eat. Minimal use of pesticides and sustainable waste management make Crete one of the most sought-after foodie destinations. Green agriculture and product certification help us protect the values passed on to us through this quintessentially gourmet culture. This is why it can't be stressed enough that the Cretan diet isn't only about what we eat; **it's about how we lead our lives and source our produce.**

A basketful of local products

The Cretan terrain offers variety and abundance, due to the diverse relief of the island which combines endless shorelines and mountain ranges to offer a wide variety of products. Cretan olive oil is, of course, the jewel in the crown.





Twenty-two Cretan agricultural and livestock products, plus 13 local wines, have been awarded Protected Designation of Origin (PDO) and Protected Geographical Indication (PGI) status so far, based on the 2021 annual competitiveness report.





Olive oil and table olives

Olive trees and the valuable fruits they yield have been part of Cretan life for more than 3,500 years. Centuries of history form the background of the complex relationship between Cretans, their olive trees, and oil. A long time may have passed since the Minoan era, though the olive tree -fruit and oil alike- is still part of the islanders' lives. Far from being just a product, it stands out as a symbol of Cretan civilization through the ages.

The palace at Zakros features impressive olive harvest frescoes, vases, and whole olives dating from the 3rd millennium BC.





The Cretan elders will often say that **«Even sitting in its shade does you good.»**

The islanders have found various uses for the tree through time, and still use olive wood for heating, lighting, manufacturing household items, and preserving food. Olive oil and table olives are indispensable to any Cretan meal, and Cretans often exaggerate and consume large quantities on a daily basis. Olive oil also appears in every religious ceremony and is crucial to religion from birth to death.



In the 2021 annual competitiveness report, twelve olive oil brands have been awarded PDO or PGI status, and Throuba table olives from Abadia in Rethymnon have been awarded PDO status, too. Crete produces one-third of all Greek olive oil, with 35,000,000 trees covering about 65% of the island's cultivable land. Most of it (about 90%) is "extra virgin oil".



Raw olive oil has been scientifically proven to promote overall health and longevity if used exclusively (excluding the use of other fats for cooking). Natural olive juice contains monounsaturated fatty acids and Vitamin E, which increase «good cholesterol» (HDL) and therefore offer protection against heart disease and other vital organ failures.

Dairy products

The Cretan livestock farming tradition has resulted in a variety of dairy products, among which excellent cheeses, yogurt, and a sort of crumb-like pasta called ksinochondros, all made from goat and sheep's milk¹.

Cretans are particularly fond of dairy products, and no meal is complete without at least one kind of cheese. Cheese is even popular as a dessert when combined with honey. Cheese can always fit into variations of traditional pie recipes - sweet or savory (they go by names like kaltsounia, mizithra pies, sfakianes, lichnarakia, anevata etc.).





Apart from high-quality milk, the defining factor which makes Cretan cheese a top-notch gourmet product is -and will never cease to be - the human factor; i.e., the producer. Cheese makers have preserved traditional cheese-making methods, even in the context of modern, safer facilities, to offer unique traditional cheeses to present generations.

Based on the 2021 annual competitiveness report, four cheeses have been awarded PDO status so far: Cretan graviera, ksino-mizithra, pichtogalo from Chania, and ksigalo from Sitia.

Apart from PDO cheeses, make sure to discover plenty of other white and yellow cheeses, such as anthotiro, mizithra, kefalotiri, malaka, staka, and tirozouli.

¹ Broken wheat boiled in sour milk and allowed to sun dry without machine intervention.

Greens and indigenous herbs

The climate and soil of Crete welcome indigenous greens and herbs throughout the year. Edible wild greens abound in Cretan land, and make for a very distinctive feature of the Cretan diet. As evidenced by traditional recipes, the Cretan diet requires that meat is always served with vegetables and greens. Leafy greens grow in heaths, rocky areas and also close to the shore. Their stems and roots often have a unique bitterish flavor:

The healing value of herbs has always been known to practitioners of traditional medicine, though today we have documented proof of their specific medicinal properties. Botanical studies have shown that the island is one of the richest and most interesting ecosystems in Europe, hosting an important number of indigenous plants. Cretan herbs grow on steep mountains and are collected by experienced collectors and then, they are allowed to air dry and get packed in modern facilities, without any further processing. Some of the species, such as malotira and dittany, are cultivable and can be found in markets worldwide.





Fruit

Fruit-bearing trees, especially citrus trees, thrive in many areas of Crete. Oranges from Maleme in Chania have been awarded PDO status, though other famous varieties include oranges from the planes of Milopotamos and Fodele, cherries from Gerakari, bananas from Arvi, and apples from Lassithi Plateau. At present, alternative crops have been developed and previously ignored products, such as prickly pears, have become standardized.

Dried figs, sultanas and currants have always been crucial both for the islanders' diet and as an exportable product. Their high energy value makes them more suitable for the winter period. Other vine products, such as the sweet and dense petimezi, are also important in the Cretan cuisine as natural sweeteners.





Meat

Cretans used to eat more sheep and goat meat than beef or pork. Small-scale livestock farming and the particular relief of the island called for flocks of smaller animals, usually grazing in mountain pastures. Traditional livestock farming would be nothing special if it weren't for the abundance and nutritional value of the indigenous herbs on which the flocks feed. That's what makes their milk and meat so tasty, and their owners so proud.

Andikristo² is a quite remarkable tradition of roasting lamb and goat meat, mostly followed in mainland Crete and rooted in the shepherds' roasting methods while they resided at the mitata³. White meat is as popular in Cretan cuisine as sheep and goat, coming mostly from domestic animals, such as rabbits and chickens.



² The meat is first generously sprinkled with salt and then roasted for hours and hours opposite (andikri) an open fire. It is a particularly healthy roasting method, as the long cooking time drains the meat of most of its fat. However; it does require a quite skilled roaster.

³ Stone-built lodgings where shepherds stayed during the summer; milking the livestock and making cheese.

Traditional cured meat

Apaki and siglina - specialty smoke-cured pork cuts - and vinegar sausages make for excellent tidbits in the Cretan menu. What makes their flavor so unique is the very particular curing method, which involves smoking the pork over herbs, and thus infusing it with all their wonderful aromas. The procedure evolved out of the necessity to naturally preserve meat and consume small quantities during the year so as to never run out. Creative Greek cuisine is increasingly using apaki instead of imported Italian and Spanish cured meats.







Bread and rusks

Traditional Cretan bread and rusks are an important part of Cretan culture. Among the Minoan finds unearthed in the island are the earliest occurrences of simple barley bread. Quite a few traditional baking methods and recipes have survived to the present day, with some even acquiring a mystic tinge (such as the making of a specific rusk, the eptazimo). The wide variety of Cretan baked goods may be an essential part of the daily diet, though special breads are also associated with religious worship and local customs. Christopsomo is made to honor Jesus Christ, and there are breads specially made for women after birth, for christenings, and weddings (ksompliasta, round decorated breads).

The making of rusks is similar to that of regular bread, but the loaves are cut into slices and baked for a second time to dry out. The Minoans called them «dipiritis artos», which in modern parlance means «double-baked bread». Cretan rusk, dakos, has been awarded PGI (Protected Geographical Indication) status. They appear in many modern recipes, most famously in variations of the trademark Cretan koukouvagia (=owl, for some reason), the simple rusk, tomato and soft cheese salad, which makes rusks well-known beyond the confines of the island.





Honey

Honey, one of the most important products of Crete, wouldn't be what it is without the wealth of fragrant plants and herbs thriving on the island. The product first appeared in ancient times. One of the most important finds from the Minoan era is the golden charm with two facing bees, which indicates that beekeeping activity existed early on.



Honey replaces sugar as a sweetener in Cretan cuisine, and is very often combined with dairy products. The most popular types are thyme and pine-and-thyme honey, which are very fragrant and also very beneficial to human health.





Tsikoudia

Raki or tsikoudia, the spirit preferred by most Cretans, has been awarded PGI status. It appears in every single aspect of social activity and every household on the island. Over time, tsikoudia has become a symbol of kindness and hospitality, a spirit which helps with introductions and starts new friendships. More than just a drink, it's a means of communication between friends and strangers alike. This interesting spirit is produced with single grape marc distillation. Other fruits with a high sugar content are also suitable, such as figs, berries, and prunes, while the final product is sometimes infused with blueberries.

At some point between October and late November, every village will stage the traditional kazania, an open day when distillation becomes a chance for locals and fans of the «burning water», as they call it, to celebrate together. Of course, for those who love hot beverages, rakomelo is the perfect choice. The combination of tsikoudia, honey and spices create a unique taste, ideal for winter. It should also be mentioned that local beer is also brewed on the island, which visitors can enjoy throughout the year.







Fish

Crete may be an island, but its culture is closer to the mainland type. The inhabitants always preferred areas close to the mountains, where they could peacefully develop agriculture, livestock farming, and trade, as coastal areas were exposed to pirate and buccaneer raids. Several small villages, however, managed to survive and even thrive after the tourism boom.



Quite a few famous places on the coast of the Cretan or the Libyan sea offer a variety of really fresh fish.

Kissamos in Chania, Agia Galini in South Rethymnon, Milatos, Elounta and Plaka in Lasithi are all famous for fishing and fish restaurants.



Chochlios

This is another name for snails, a very particular trademark Cretan delicacy. Popular recipes include cooking them with chondros⁴ ; in a tomato, courgette and potato casserole; simply fried; or boubouristi (boiled and then fried with herbs).

⁴ *Broken wheat*



Other crops:

Over the past few years, crops which supplied export trade in older times have been revived, and new, very promising ones have also been introduced.

Carob

Crete has the largest natural carob forests in the Southeast Mediterranean. Carob used to be a key ingredient for livestock feed, but it was ignored for several decades before making a comeback. Its sweetening properties made it an important energy source in the Cretan diet, and it was also used to make flour. Carob is attempting a remarkable comeback to modern markets with innovative products used mainly in bakery and confectionery, thus rooting modern food trends in older traditions.

Aloe

Known as the plant of immortality since the time of Alexander the Great, aloe is being restored to its previous glory, as it has uses in the pharmaceutical industry and natural cosmetics. The soil of Eastern Crete has proven especially suitable for the new crops, and producers are ready to invest in new products with good export potential.



The Cretan vineyard

«Good food is no use without good wine»


This phrase summarizes the trends in gastronomy and life in Crete as, over the past years, Cretan wine is winning over oenophiles from the island and beyond.






Wine is an indispensable part of Cretan food culture and hospitality. Wine making traditions have been kept alive on the island for 4,000 years. Cretans have taken loving care of their vines to make wine or raisins. These two products became quite famous and provided significant leverage for the overall trade of the island, with important exports since the time of the Venetian conquest. Every household in Crete produces its own wine and tsikoudia, in adequate quantities to cover the needs of the family and even give some away to friends. To this age, taking care of the vine is deemed truly important by all families.





Standardized Cretan wine, however, had a hard time gaining the recognition it deserved in international markets. However, over the past decade or so, the tides seem to be turning in favor of the Cretan vineyard: Cretan wine has been spreading, winning awards together with its own special place in the wine lists of prestigious restaurants around the world. Boasting eleven unique indigenous grape varieties, Cretan producers are able to bottle single varietal wines, as well as intriguing blends with other European varieties that grow on the island.

The most famous varieties that have found their way back into our glasses include both whites (vilana, vidiano, dafni, thrapsathiri, malvazia, moschato, plito) and reds (kotsifali, and most importantly, liatiko, and mantilari).



The Cretan Winemakers Network is the first significant cluster of winemakers in Crete, consisting of 30 producers and wineries. The Network has achieved excellent results in promoting and marketing Cretan wine in the global market. This effort is also supported by shared actions and events organized by the winemakers to promote Cretan wines. Producers make the most out of the common promotion strategy and participation in expos, indeed putting the motto «United we stand» into practice.

Follow the wine trails all year round. Learn and live the true wine experience in one of the open Cretan wineries.


For more information visit [**www.winesofcrete.gr**](http://www.winesofcrete.gr)



Crete: a foodie destination

Cretan products and the Cretan way of cooking have claimed their own distinguished place in international gastronomy, due to the use of high quality ingredients with the added benefit of bolstering human health. At the same time, more and more restaurateurs and hoteliers have been including Cretan cuisine in their arsenal of tourism assets. In the same context, the Region of Crete has undertaken significant initiative to showcase and liaise the primary sector with tourism.

Among them is the Cretan Gastronomy Center of the Region of Crete in Rethymnon, which provides gastronomy lovers with useful information about Cretan cuisine, nutrition and traditional recipes, as well as educational programs for all.







Crete as a brand name

A cradle of values

Crete is one of the top favorite tourist destinations worldwide. The Cretan diet is a quite new tourist product in need of a common identity - a uniform branding - that will boost its uniqueness and recognizability.

The Region of Crete has established the brand name of «CRETE» to mark traditional local products following quality controls. The brand endeavors to highlight the quality and traditional character of strictly locally sourced products. Look for products bearing the «CRETE» brand in Greece and abroad.



Two more labels for Cretan Nutrition and Open Wineries have been established with the same purposes, under the same regional umbrella.

The Cretan Nutrition label of quality:

This label is awarded to restaurants adhering to the principles of the Cretan diet and using mostly local products and exclusively Cretan extra virgin olive oil.

The label was established with a view to increase the use of local products by local businesses and introduce foreign visitors to genuinely traditional Cretan cuisine, thus creating a host of foodie ambassadors abroad and, subsequently, a solid foundation for gastro-tourism in Crete.



The “Open Wineries” seal:

Most wineries in Crete are open to the public, hosting organized tours and tasting of local varieties. Wine tourism makes for a significant part of the overall tourism activity all year round. Each year, initiatives organized by the Region of Crete and the Cretan Winemakers Network add to this significant part even more wine lovers who explore the Cretan vineyard, craving to know more about it and meet the producers in person.

The “Cretan Brunch” seal:

Cretan products can be used and combined in many different ways for a healthy, nutritious and each time unique brunch. The “Cretan Brunch” seal certifies businesses such as bakeries, cafes, take-away shops, which offer quick meals (sandwiches, pies, salads, etc.) with Cretan products.

The “Cretan Flavors” seal:

The culinary culture of the island is an attraction for many visitors. At the buffet restaurant of the tourist accommodation with the “Cretan flavors” seal, guests have the opportunity to taste local products, while enjoying a culinary journey through Cretan recipes all day long.



The “Cretan Grocery” seal:

Consumers can purchase certified Cretan products in grocery stores with the **“Cretan Grocery”** seal.

For more information, visit www.agrocrete.com





Festivals of Cretan Products and Events

Throughout the year, the island's visitor has the opportunity to visit a village or a town where a local festival is held featuring a local product or recipe. For example, the festivals of potato, raki, wine, sultana raisins, honey, mizithra, graviera, chochlii (escargots), orange, cherry, apple, chestnut, citrus, carob, frumenty, bread, xerotigan, kaltsouni, sarikopita, pies from Sfakia etc. are held annually, where the visitor has the opportunity to taste local products and traditional recipes and have fun with Cretan music, dance and songs.





The festivals and gastronomy events organized on the island are a unique experience that the visitor deserves to experience. Anyone wishing to get to know Cretan gastronomy and local products should not miss the following events: Earth Festival – People and Products (Chania), Cretan Food Festival (Rethymnon), Cretan Gastronomy Days (Heraklion), Cretan Street Cooking (Agios Nikolaos), Oinotika Wine Fair (Chania and Heraklion) etc.











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Ευρωπαϊκή Ένωση
Ευρωπαϊκό Ταμείο
Περιφερειακής Ανάπτυξης



Με τη συγχρηματοδότηση της Ελλάδας και της Ευρωπαϊκής Ένωσης