

# MEDITERRANEAN DIET 3.0

## From Traditional Food to Sustainable Policies

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This paper will try to sketch the conceptual transformations of the Mediterranean diet from the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century to the present. This undoubtedly popular food model, which combines various food cultures of the Mediterranean, was initially recognized due to its health benefits, contributing to the prevention of cardiovascular diseases. The initial impulse for the global popularity of the Mediterranean food culture, which came from medical and nutrition sciences, has helped simplify, in the long run, the complex food systems of the Mediterranean, which have been recognized as a homogeneous culinary and cultural pattern since the 2000s. After the Mediterranean diet was inscribed on the UNESCO Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity in 2010, the understanding of this food culture changed. Today, the Mediterranean diet is being examined within the context of sustainable development policies and the protection of biodiversity and ecosystems with the aim of developing new long-term political and economic models within the necessary transformations of present food systems towards greener and more sustainable solutions.

Key words: traditional cooking, Mediterranean, Mediterranean diet, intangible heritage, sustainable food policy, sustainable diet

### Introduction

This year marks the tenth anniversary of Croatia joining the *Mediterranean diet* as an inscribed element on the UNESCO Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity, together with Italy, Portugal, Greece, Spain, Morocco, and Cyprus.<sup>1</sup> Although it was nominated in 2008, it was inscribed two years later, together with the *Gastronomic meal of the French*<sup>2</sup> and *Traditional Mexican cuisine*.<sup>3</sup> Two years may not seem like a lot, but food practices had yet to be included on UNESCO's lists in 2008. Although the authors of the *Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage* (2003) did not have culinary arts in mind as one of the intangible expressions of culture when drafting the Convention (Bortolotto and Ubertazzi 2018), the process of *culturalization* of food practices, i.e. expanding the understanding of food as a complex system of meanings or total social fact, paved

1 The *Mediterranean diet* was inscribed in the mentioned list in 2010, at a session in Nairobi when Italy, Spain, Morocco and Greece represented this intangible cultural heritage. The list of countries was expanded in 2013, as Portugal, Cyprus and Croatia joined the inscribed element.

2 <https://ich.unesco.org/en/decisions/5.COM/6.14> (accessed 1. 2. 2023.).

3 <https://ich.unesco.org/en/decisions/5.COM/6.30> (accessed 1. 2. 2023.).

the way for food to be included on the lists of intangible cultural heritage. At first, it would seem that ethnologists and cultural anthropologists, who were most concerned with the food culture,<sup>4</sup> could be quite satisfied with this outcome. However, following Hafstein's argument (2018) that the penetration of folklorist and ethnological knowledge, perspectives, and concepts into the public sphere represents a significant part of modernist reflection, we can also incorporate his idea of *folklorization*, seen as a process that denotes the success of the mentioned disciplines primarily manifested in changing the ways people experience their culture, how they define it, and how they practice it (2018: 128), which brings significant long-term changes in cultural practices deemed worthy of preservation.<sup>5</sup> Today, cultural anthropology understands food as a reflection of identity, culture, and everyday life of communities, and this understanding stands as one of the foundations of UNESCO's approach. More significantly, this kind of understanding of food also made it possible to conceptually connect people and landscapes, which would prove important for the latest articulations of the Mediterranean diet, as will be discussed later.

Anniversaries, especially milestone ones, present an opportunity to look back and examine the Mediterranean diet with an objective outlook, not only as it is described and inscribed, but also what it represents today. What exactly do we try to preserve when it comes to food? How does food fit into a cultural pattern worthy of protection and safeguarding? Consequently, did this inscription influence the understanding of the Mediterranean diet, and if so, did we contribute to its transformation? From the late 1960s, when the concept of the Mediterranean diet was created, which will be discussed a bit later, to date, this cuisine has experienced various transformations and conceptualizations. It went from a healthy model of a traditional diet to a model of a sustainable diet (Dernini et al. 2017; Medina 2021a, 2021b), becoming an intangible cultural heritage along the way. This paper, which does not include a critical look at the phenomenon of intangible cultural heritage and the disputes that arise from it (for example, Kirscheblatt-Gimblett 2006; Hameršak and Pleše 2018; Brulotte and Di Giovine 2014), will try to identify the conceptual transformations of the Mediterranean diet in its dynamic history over the last seventy-or-so years.

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4 Ethnological and cultural anthropological research defines food culture not only as a system of practices, attitudes, beliefs, but also a wide network of communities, individuals, and institutions involved in the production, distribution, and consumption of food (Long 2015), emphasizing the socio-cultural and symbolic aspects of food preparation and eating. For a recent overview of the different approaches of the anthropology and sociology of food, see, for example, Aktas-Polat and Polat 2020.

5 Hafstein (2018) uses the concept of folklorization somewhat ironically, adopting the term from discussions of authenticity, as the ultimate consequence of the success of ethnological and anthropological knowledge in contemporary understanding of the phenomenon of intangible cultural heritage and its preservation. For Hafstein, folklorization, understood in this manner, represents the success of the aforementioned disciplines manifested in changing the ways people understand their culture, how they define it, and how they practice it. However, it also acts as a starting point for the process of heritagization of social practices and relationships that expands the space for the circulation of protected cultural assets, introduces new (institutionalized) holders, and consequently brings up the issue of objectification, commodification, and exoticization of the elements of cultural heritage beyond its original habitus. The discussion on folklorism is not new in Croatian ethnology, where it can most often be found in criticisms of the terms "originality" and "authenticity." For instance, see Ceribašić 2003: 259, 264 etc.

## What does the term “Mediterranean diet” actually mean?

“*Dieta mediterranea non c’è!*” were the words of the Italian anthropologist Ernesto di Renzo as he began his lecture on the concept of the Mediterranean diet in the spring of 2017 on the island of Hvar. “There is no Mediterranean diet!” he exclaimed to the audience at a roundtable on the Mediterranean diet, organized by the Institute of Ethnology and Folklore Research and the Ministry of Culture and Media looking to *popularize* this intangible cultural heritage in the emblematic<sup>6</sup> community of the island of Hvar. Explaining the casual approach in which the cuisines and culinary practices of the Mediterranean are reduced to a singular entity, that is, the process of uncritical simplification of Mediterranean food systems and practices in creating the concept of the Mediterranean diet, Renzo highlighted one of its main problems. Namely, the Mediterranean diet is inscribed in the UNESCO list in the singular form, which, to some extent, assumes the homogeneity of culinary practices in places where even regional food practices include a myriad of small local variations and peculiarities, both in recipes and in the culinary lexicon, to mention only the most obvious examples.

How does one define the Mediterranean diet? Does this mean Italian, Moroccan, Dalmatian, Lebanese, or Portuguese cuisine? Does it include the meals of fishermen, peasants, or ones closer to the urban population and the nobility? Does it belong to the ancient or modern world? Is this the cuisine of Christianity, Judaism, or Islam, because all these religions left their mark on the Mediterranean and combined in intertwined culinary systems? Can it be defined merely as a set of food practices, recipes, and typical products found on tables across the Mediterranean? Each simplified explanation of the Mediterranean diet implies a more or less typical nutritional model based on a large share of plant food, olive oil as the staple (although not the only) fat, and a small share of foods of animal origin, but pays no attention to the social framework, complex system of practices, knowledge, choices, and beliefs related to the production, preparation, and consumption of food. If the Mediterranean diet is a set of foodstuffs and recipes, can its connection with the specific space of the Mediterranean be severed today? Global consumer culture has made Mediterranean products, such as olive oil, wine, and pasta (which is recognized as typically Mediterranean) as easily available in places like Iceland, Sweden, or the United States as they are in Croatia. Why should certain menus be inscribed on lists of the intangible cultural heritage of humanity? Behind the Mediterranean dishes, which actually also holds true for any other local or regional cuisine, there is a long history of production, preparation, and consumption of certain foods, a history of cultural contacts, exchange, and adjustments. The material and symbolic dimensions are inscribed in

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<sup>6</sup> The *Mediterranean diet* on the Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity is represented by the following so-called emblematic communities: Cilento (Italy), Soria (Spain), Chefchaouen (Morocco), Koroni (Greece), Agros (Cyprus), Tavira (Portugal), and the islands of Brač and Hvar (Croatia). For more information on the issue of participation of communities, groups and individuals in safeguarding intangible cultural heritage and the implementation of the *Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage* (2003), see, for example, Blake 2019.

each foodstuff, in every dish and meal that represent the experience of everyday life in the Mediterranean.

This problematic assumption that Mediterranean cuisine is self-evident, when we examine it from the outside, was the guiding idea of the international conference *Mediterranean Food and Its Influence Outside the Mediterranean* held in 2004 in Dubrovnik.<sup>7</sup> At the time when ethnologists Nives Rittig-Beljak and Mirjana Randić organized this conference, Mediterranean cuisine was globally recognized and popular. It was a cuisine of basil, tomato salsa, and pasta, garlic and olive oil, prepared by, for instance, Jamie Oliver in a number of culinary series. In the early 2000s, the success of this global cuisine was enthusiastically supported by publishing houses and TV productions, reinforcing the hedonistic fantasy of the Mediterranean, the imaginary space where merry eaters gather around tables full of opulent dishes. In the British cultural space, this notion can be traced to the 18th century, when the Mediterranean became the “reference point and defining idea of what is beautiful or desirable” (Burning 2018: 4). Risottos simmered on TV screens, and pizza or pasta could be found in every corner of the world. In addition to being tasty and allegedly easy to prepare, research showed the benefits of the Mediterranean diet in the prevention of cardiovascular disease (Trichopoulou 1997). The conference in Dubrovnik had opened a discussion on Mediterranean food almost ten years before the UNESCO inscription, identifying it as a point where different *concepts* and *trends* intersect, as the title of its proceedings reads. Konrad Köstlin (2006) discussed that Mediterranean cuisine came about only after the rise of the concept of Mediterranean cultural space, which we credit to the research by French historian Fernand Braudel (Braudel 1997–1998; Köstlin 2006). Consequently, Mediterranean cuisine is the result of an outside view at the complex system of food practices of different social groups and communities of the Mediterranean. However, the view at Mediterranean cuisine from the inside, offered by one of the editors of the proceedings in the introductory chapter, found numerous micro-locational differences in culinary choices, practices, and tastes, similar but slightly different recipes that can be found across the Mediterranean (Rittig Beljak 2006), like *vitalac* from Brač, which can be found in different variations on Crete and Rhodes (where it is seasoned with oregano, lemon, and pepper), or the *pašticada*, which, in addition to Dalmatia, is also prepared on Corfu and in the Veneto province. Furthermore, this pioneering attempt at a critical discussion of the Mediterranean food phenomenon, which the organizers tried to encourage in humanities, was among the first to point to the problem of the apparent homogeneity of this food culture in media and popular articulations outside the Mediterranean. The hedonistic image of opulent Mediterranean cuisines, mostly represented by Italian cuisine in the media, reveals itself to be an invention of recent history and owes at least some of its success to the touristic popularity of the Mediterranean. All of the above leads us to conclude that the concept of Mediterranean cuisine has been shaped by the outside view over the last half

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<sup>7</sup> The international conference *Mediterranean Food and Its Influence Abroad*, 15th International Ethnological Food Research Conference, Dubrovnik, 27 September to 3 October 2004.

century (Köstlin 2006: 79). By reducing complex culinary systems and food practices into one singular tradition (*Mediterranean cuisine, Mediterranean diet*), a new food landscape was created, based on the metaphor of the Mediterranean as a compact cultural space. But observed from the inside, this foodscape is much more complex than all its pop-cultural representations, which display an insensitivity to social and economic culinary differences within the Mediterranean cuisines. All of them are a result of contacts, exchanges, and adaptation of foodstuffs and recipes. Nives Rittig Beljak (2006: 15, 20–21) saw Mediterranean cuisine as extremely heterogeneous and believed a unifying characteristic or common foundation of Mediterranean cuisines can only be found in dishes of the poor, such as ones made from chickpeas, barley, and fava beans. These are simple and modest Mediterranean recipes that mostly bear witness to frugality and hunger as a constant in the lives of Mediterranean people throughout history. Rittig Beljak recognized the notorious *stone soup* as a measured metaphor for Mediterranean cuisine that indicates hunger as a constant and often-realized threat that led to the creativity and richness of Mediterranean cuisines.

Less than ten years after the conference, on 17 November 2010, at a session of the UNESCO Intergovernmental Committee for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage in Nairobi, the Mediterranean diet was inscribed in the Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity,<sup>8</sup> which, as it seemed, meant that a consensus was reached about what this term implies. The Mediterranean diet comprises “the set of skills, knowledge, rituals, symbols, and traditions, ranging from the landscape to the table, which in the Mediterranean basin concerns the crops, harvesting, picking, fishing, animal husbandry, conservation, processing, cooking, and particularly sharing and consuming of food” (UNESCO 2010)<sup>9</sup> At that moment, the Mediterranean diet was supported by at least half a century worth of medical, nutritionist, and, since the late 1990s, social and humanities research, which laid the foundations for UNESCO’s inscription through mutual dialogue, highlighting the importance of social practices, especially food sharing, as its center point (Medina 2021a). The Mediterranean diet no longer represented a collection of diverse recipes with slightly different foodstuffs, but a complete way (style) of life that takes place in challenging climatic and geographical conditions, in an environment characterized by a lack of fertile soil and water, whose people necessarily turn to the sea as a place of trade, cultural exchange, and food, but also danger. The seasonally uniform and frugal cuisines of the Mediterranean are concealed in the hedonistic utopia of abundance (still) presented by the media, pop-cultural but also cultural-political images of Mediterranean cuisines, where eating represents shared social pleasure, ritually associated with customs of annual or life cycles.<sup>10</sup> The Mediterranean diet, defined from the perspective of cultural anthropology which is at the

8 <https://ich.unesco.org/en/decisions/5.COM/6.41> (accessed 17. 5. 2023.).

9 <http://www.unesco.org/culture/ich/RL/00884> (accessed on 30. 3. 2023.).

10 Even a cursory look at the promotional video for the Mediterranean diet as intangible cultural heritage of humanity shows a romanticized image of the Mediterranean, where are no problems of hunger, rural underdevelopment, landscape degradation, touristic pressure or international migration, to mention only a few. The video is available at: <https://www.unesco.org/archives/multimedia/document-1680-eng-2> (accessed 20. 5. 2023.).

center of food-related heritage policies, represents a *set of skills and knowledge associated with the production, processing, and consuming of food*, provides a wide framework where *traditional diet and economy* are a starting point for development and a way of safeguarding traditional lifestyle in a particular cultural space. In this context, the Mediterranean diet is represented as a way of life that journalist and writer Siniša Pavić (2017) correctly describes when he says that it entails “the environment, the techniques of food production, the preservation of the ecosystem, traditional agriculture, cooking, dining with laughter, in the shade, with family, [...] *balote*<sup>11</sup> and *picigin*,<sup>12</sup> and finally health.”<sup>13</sup>

## The Mediterranean diet and health

The already mentioned definition of the Mediterranean diet from the perspective of cultural anthropology were preceded by numerous medical studies which should be considered the initial impulse of the global popularity of this culinary model. We must not forget that the term Mediterranean diet (greek *diaita* – prescribed way of life)<sup>14</sup> was coined by Dr. Ancel Keys.<sup>15</sup> During the early 1950s, when Keys began his research, the mortality rate from cardiovascular diseases in the United States was two to three times higher than in southern Europe. This dedicated researcher, popularly called Mr. Cholesterol (Dhami and Vaidya 2015), devoted most of his research to the relationship between blood cholesterol and cardiovascular health. The fact that mortality from heart attacks and strokes was extremely rare in the Mediterranean during those years was a compelling research challenge for Keys. In the mid-1950s, Keys began a research project which today is considered to be the starting point for recognizing the health benefits of the Mediterranean diet. The famous, but also controversial, *Seven Countries Study* included 12,000 respondents from Greece, Italy, Yugoslavia, Japan, Denmark, the Netherlands, Finland, and the US. Keys also had access to the results of previous studies examining the nutrition of the island of Crete,<sup>16</sup> which would later become the dietary model we recognize today. A diet based on seasonal vegetables, beans, and cereals, with a low share of foods of animal

11 *Balote, boće*, is a ball sport belonging to the boules family, played in coastal Croatia. Rules are simple, game starts by throwing a small ball called *bulin* (or *balin*), and the goal of the game is to get *balota* balls as close to the *bulin*.

12 Popular game from Split which is played with a small ball, usually peeled tennis ball, on the sandy beach in the shallows. Game is mostly played by five players arranged in a pentagon and spaced apart from twenty feet, are added *balun* (ball), hitting it with palms. *Balun* must not fall into the sea.

13 Pavić, Siniša. “The Mediterranean diet includes more than food itself – it is a lifestyle.” *Novi list*, 6 June 2017, available at <https://www.novolist.hr/life/gastro/mediteranska-prehrana-zahvaca-vise-od-same-hrane-to-je-nacin-zivota/> (accessed 20. 3. 2023.).

14 [https://www.etymonline.com/word/diet#etymonline\\_v\\_8554](https://www.etymonline.com/word/diet#etymonline_v_8554) (accessed 20. 3. 2023.).

15 I would like to thank colleague Moro for the information on the two doctorates, in oceanography and biology, attained by Dr. Ancel Keys.

16 In 1948, the Greek government, together with the Rockefeller Foundation, conducted the first epidemiological study that included research into the nutrition of the island of Crete, intended to improve the living conditions of the population in the post-war period in the long run (Nestle 1995). The results of this study were published in the book *Crete, a case study of an underdeveloped area* by Leland G. Allbaugh in 1953. Princeton University Press.

origin, was used to link certain fats to blood cholesterol levels for the first time. The paradoxical conclusion of Keys' research was that richer nations, regardless of their better access to health care, were in poorer health than the countries of the post-war Mediterranean. Daily consumption of olive oil, a variety of fruits and vegetables with respect to seasonality, and a relatively small intake of foods of animal origin (especially meat) form the basis of Keys' Mediterranean diet. As a living advertisement for the diet and lifestyle he advocated his entire life (he lived to be a hundred years old), Keys spent years in Pioppi, in southern Italy, where, according to him, his greatest teachers were his cook Delia Morelli and gardener Angelo. The foundation for Keys' Mediterranean diet was a varied, simple diet, based on local and seasonal foodstuffs coming from the land and the sea. Although Keys' model is based on a limited geographical area (Greece, Italy, the south of France, and Mediterranean Spain), and does not take into account the historical, economic, social, and cultural aspects of food, it still indicates the social character of eating and sharing food as a crucial factor in understanding the *culture* of the Mediterranean diet.

Based on Keys' research, migration flows (bringing food from home and adapting it to the new places) and the already mentioned popularity of the Mediterranean in representations in the Anglosphere since the 1950s (Jones and Taylor 2001), the Mediterranean diet became a global phenomenon supported by both medical science and the media industry. As was already mentioned, but bears repeating, when viewed from the outside, the Mediterranean diet is a homogeneous term that does not accurately reflect the numerous local and regional cuisines. The pop-cultural production of meaning is not concerned with the simplification used to construct a universal Mediterranean cuisine dominated by olive oil, fish, basil, and tomatoes, and enthusiastically prepared by numerous culinary and travel TV stars. The popularity of Mediterranean cuisine(s) is supported by the fact that medical and nutrition sciences recognize it as an extremely healthy diet. It is a way to prevent cardiovascular diseases (De Lorgeril and Salen 2006) and a number of other health issues such as dementia, depression, etc. (Yin et al. 2021; Shafiei et al. 2019).

## The Mediterranean diet as a lifestyle

Even a quick glance at the pictures representing the Mediterranean diet in dietary pyramids gives us some insight into different understandings and evolution of the food model into a desirable lifestyle. Since the 1990s, the Mediterranean diet pyramid has been expanded with layers that reflect not only new understandings of this dietary model but also the development of research interests that contribute to an understanding of food culture and food systems today. Even if the Mediterranean diet pyramid of the 1990s<sup>17</sup> was the result of medical research, offering a recommen-

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<sup>17</sup> We should mention, for example, the pyramid developed at the international conference on the Mediterranean diet held in Boston in 1993. For more information, see Matalas 2006: 92, Dernini et al. 2012.

dation for proper diet, it certainly no longer functions according to this principle today. Over the last twenty years, food has moved away from the margins of incidental interest for ethnologists, anthropologists, sociologists, and historians, and has become a separate thematic field within various academic disciplines. This is why today's Mediterranean diet pyramids are equally the result of research done in natural and social sciences, and humanities. For instance, in 2008, the new pyramid was presented at a conference dedicated to the Mediterranean diet,<sup>18</sup> and it included new scientific and academic knowledge, primarily insights from ethnologists, anthropologists, and sociologists who researched the diet in parallel with doctors. The base of the pyramid shows that the foundations of the Mediterranean diet are social practices (shared meals, walks, dancing...) that only seemingly have nothing to do with food.<sup>19</sup> However, by then, food had already been recognized as a medium through which society communicates its values, and its role is not merely the maintenance of life that drives people to produce and consume food. The 2008 pyramid contained not only a proposal for a healthy dietary model but also took social frameworks and social practices into account. More specifically, it included insights from social sciences and the humanities, which at the time examined symbolic and identity practices of the Mediterranean food. The transition from dry medical recommendations and nutritional tips to a diet based on sociability and pleasure is partly the result of research from the cultural-anthropological perspective into food which, keeping in mind the hedonistic shift in the media image of this diet, influenced all Mediterranean food pyramids that followed, emphasizing that it is much more than the food itself. It is a lifestyle!

## Mediterranean diet – from a lifestyle to a recipe for saving the planet

Although the cultural anchoring of the Mediterranean diet within the heritage policies does not seem to be a return to compromised or lost seasonality and localization of food practices, but rather as a matter of cultural identities of communities, their strengthening, and (self)representation, today ten year after the inscription we are witnessing conceptualization of the basic Mediterranean diet ideas in new frameworks,<sup>20</sup> such as those of rural development, protection of cultural landscapes, the importance of a seasonal diet, small-scale local production, and conviviality as a guarantee of the transfer of knowledge and values. Even though the latter is undoubtedly part of the institutional safeguarding and protection of intangible culture within

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18 In 2008, Cambridge, Massachusetts hosted the 15th Anniversary Mediterranean Diet Conference organized by Oldways, a non-profit, non-governmental organization dedicated to the promotion of healthy food choices, and The Mediterranean Foods Alliance association.

19 A new graphical representation of the Mediterranean diet pyramid from 2008 is available at: <https://oldwayspt.org/news-media/press-releases/oldways-releases-updated-mediterranean-diet-pyramid> (accessed 29. 3. 2023.).

20 <https://mediterraneandietunesco.org/about/messages/> (accessed 20. 3. 2023.).

the purview of, in principle, cultural policies, we can see that today's emphasis is often placed on the localization of the Mediterranean diet and protection of cultural landscapes as its natural habitus. In this regard, local production and consumption are understood as the foundation for developing highly depopulated and less developed areas, based on concepts of *sustainable diet* and *sustainable development*. By basing the narrative of the Mediterranean diet on the notion of *sustainability*, this food system, which is, in reality, compromised and often abandoned (Nestle 1995), is hoped to act as a panacea for numerous burning global problems. The Mediterranean diet, depending on the views and level of the actors engaged with it, is offered as a solution to the problem of cardiovascular health or obesity epidemic, or offered as a tool for rural development that protects local production while contributing to the strengthening of green food policies and/or protecting biodiversity.

Current global food policies, put forth in the activities of the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO), have provided significant and continuous support to the Mediterranean diet in recent years. The range of themes connected to it today, for example, can be seen in the document "Mediterranean food consumption patterns: diet, environment, society, economy, and health" from 2015, by the FAO and CIHEAM Bari,<sup>21</sup> which was drafted following the ideas developed during the EXPO exhibition held in Milan 2015, dedicated to the topic of *feeding the planet*. The basis of examining diet at this level was:

[...] to highlight the role that the current food consumption patterns play in food and nutrition security, public health, environment protection and socio-economic development in the Mediterranean region. The ultimate aim is to stimulate a multidisciplinary dialogue among the Euro-Mediterranean scientific community on the sustainability of current food consumption and production patterns in the Mediterranean region and beyond, to identify the research activities and policy actions needed to move towards more sustainable Mediterranean food systems. (CIHAEM/FAO 2015: 1)

Therefore, the basic intention of this document, as stated, was to encourage a multidisciplinary dialogue within the academic community on the sustainability of current food patterns, equally related to both food production and consumption. Thus, it comes as no surprise that today the range of new topics related to the Mediterranean diet includes current food practices of the people in the Mediterranean area (which place them at the top of European statistics on obesity), public health, sustainability of food systems (with regard to the planned growth of the world population), to the ecological footprint of agro-industrial systems or the problem of food waste. The call for a transformation of global food systems is contained in the notion of a sustainable diet presented in the *Sustainable Diets and Biodiversity. Directions and*

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21 CIHAEM The International Centre for Advanced Mediterranean Agronomic Studies, Bari, Chania, Montpellier, Zaragoza. CIHAEM was founded in 1962 with the intention of strengthening cooperation in the area of higher, agricultural education in the Mediterranean and ratified by an agreement between seven countries (Portugal, Spain, France, Italy, Yugoslavia, and Turkey).

*Solutions for Policy, Research and Action* collection several years earlier. Sustainable production and consumer practices are those with:

[...] low environmental impacts which contribute to food and nutrition security and to healthy life for present and future generations. Sustainable diets are protective and respectful of biodiversity and ecosystems, culturally acceptable, accessible, economically fair and affordable; nutritionally adequate, safe and healthy; while optimizing natural and human resources. (Burlingame and Dernini 2012: 7)

As early as 2012, only two years after UNESCO's inscription, FAO espoused the Mediterranean diet as one of the most sustainable diets (Burlingame and Dernini 2012; Petrillo 2012; Dernini and Berry 2015), which has enabled a new approach to this intangible cultural heritage in the long run. Only now the Mediterranean diet was placed within *conscientious* policies, green economies, or the development of rural areas far from mass tourism or large-scale agriculture (Moro 2016: 656). Elisabetta Moro sees the Mediterranean diet as an anthropological pattern that comes from a food culture but admits that "rhetorics, and social politics have transformed simple food as a symbolic operator, a community factor, a marker of identity" (2016: 656), where tables are metaphorical field in which communities are constantly constructed. Thus, traditional food has offered, through cultural policies of safeguarding intangible cultural heritage, its social, economic, cultural, and symbolic potential to global food policies, aimed primarily at new environmental challenges. It is quite clear that today when climate threats are recognized (too) slowly, food patterns must undergo a transformation into more sustainable and greener solutions. Taking a step back, towards local and seasonal eating habits, seems like a logical start. This is why the Mediterranean diet today should not be practiced for its health benefits or the values of cultural heritage, but for the benefit of the ecosystem, biodiversity, and the planet. If we understand the Mediterranean diet today as an agreed menu for saving, or at least helping, the planet, one could easily agree this diet is not only food, but an intellectual product which is the result of diverse local food cultures and practices (Moro 2016: 657). By placing the Mediterranean diet between myth and reality (Moro 2016), between the imaginary foodscape and the one which will have to feed more than nine billion people by 2050,<sup>22</sup> an understanding of the role of this food culture must be expanded, especially because of the transformative potential it may have in reducing the influence of our food patterns and practices on the environment. Policy makers can use the intangible cultural heritage of the Mediterranean diet as a type of special, *culturally acceptable* economic resource by placing it at the center of recent, global food recommendations. Thus, the simplified, culturally and politically validated food patterns of the Mediterranean diet now necessarily transcend the context of (food) culture, presenting "a model of lifestyle, an educational pattern, a unique heritage... a very farsighted economic development..." as empha-

<sup>22</sup> The projection for the increase in world population by 2050 is available at: <https://www.un.org/en/global-issues/population> (accessed 5.4. 2023.).

sized by Moro in her examination of the tendencies and conceptualizations of the Mediterranean diet (2016: 660).

## Cum grano salis

Without losing its firm cultural and anthropological footing in UNESCO's heritage policies, today the Mediterranean diet is presented as a tool of sustainable development whose success we will see in the years that follow. This food culture, no longer present in the everyday lives of the Mediterranean inhabitants, testifies the erosion of traditional food patterns and the consequent growth of health problems. Year after year, statistical data infamously place Mediterranean people among the most obese Europeans (WHO 2022a and 2022b),<sup>23</sup> and action plans for the development of Mediterranean countries emphasize that "Mediterranean agricultural and rural models, which are at the origins of Mediterranean identity, are under increasing threat from the predominance of imported consumption patterns. This trend is illustrated in particular by the decline of the Mediterranean dietary model despite the recognized positive effects on health" (UNEP/MAP 2005: 16). Given all of the above, it is not surprising that over the last decade we have witnessed the importance of cultural value or health being relegated in favor of preserving the ecosystem, biodiversity, cultural landscapes, and the sustainability of our food choices. Today, the Mediterranean diet is anchored in the global challenges of sustainability and the green transition, i.e., food and environmental policies. This means that the Mediterranean diet should be observed primarily as tailor-made intangible cultural heritage which easily adapts to new conditions and new requirements.

Participating in the Croatian nomination process since 2010, and later in the activities of the informal network of emblematic communities from 2014 to the present, the small team of the Institute of Ethnology and Folklore Research served as academic and professional support to the Ministry of Culture and Media and was given an exceptional opportunity to monitor activities from the inside, the different approaches and good practices that seek to popularize, revalorize and safeguard the Mediterranean diet in all seven countries. Thanks to our participation in the work of this informal network with continuous field research, we are able to monitor the development and issues in connection with the concept of the Mediterranean diet itself, which also provides insight into the various levels where its modern life takes place. Each of the countries has its own approach and accents, its safeguarding and popularization plans, as well as projects to develop and manage this intangible cultural heritage. Being involved with the work of the network has also yielded in-

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23 WHO. 2022. *Childhood Obesity Surveillance Initiative (COSI) Fact sheet highlights 2018 – 2020*, available at: <https://www.who.int/europe/publications/m/item/childhood-obesity-surveillance-initiative-cosi-fact-sheet-highlights-2018-2020> (accessed 31.3. 2023.) or WHO. 2022. *Report on the fifth round of data collection, 2018–2020: WHO European Childhood Obesity Surveillance Initiative (COSI)*, available at: <https://www.who.int/europe/publications/i/item/WHO-EURO-2022-6594-46360-67071> (accessed 31. 3. 2023.).

sight into the often obscured network of local initiatives and institutional support on which different efforts to spread the basic ideas of the Mediterranean diet take place. The Mediterranean diet in heritage and cultural policies serves as a mobilizing narrative of the unity of specific cultural space, characterized by the millennial history of contacts and influences, which at least in principle tries to offer a framework to understand different local, regional, and national identities (Quiroz 2015). But the “conceptual transformation” (Medina 2021a) of the Mediterranean diet, i.e., its placement in (new) frameworks of green (transition) food policies, requires additional critical and analytical efforts aimed at a deeper understanding of the relationship between food, landscapes, and individuals, as well as the essential connection between cultural, political, and economic issues. The endorsement of the Mediterranean diet provided by UNESCO’s inscription also represents a challenge (in the long run) to understand the relations between the goals of global policies, such as the UN 2030 Agenda (UN 2015) containing the main goals of sustainable development, and local practices, i.e., the significant role of local communities which the *Convention for the Safeguarding of Intangible Cultural Heritage* (2003) has as a core tenet. The case of the Mediterranean diet significantly moves from the bottom-up practices of safeguarding intangible cultural heritage one could expect and comes as a success of a widespread network of actors at different levels. Annual meetings of the informal network of the Mediterranean diet countries, attended by representatives of the relevant ministries and the emblematic communities, which I have been participating in since 2015, provide a chance to gain better insight into different levels of safeguarding this intangible cultural heritage, but even more significantly, they give an opportunity to exchange good practices between the seven countries. Various institutional and non-institutional actors join the safeguarding efforts at the national and local levels. For example, in Spain, the safeguarding and popularization of the Mediterranean diet is the responsibility of the Ministry of Culture, representatives of UNESCO, the academic foundation *Fundación Científica Caja Rural*, but also local policy in cooperation with the local community, educational, and cultural institutions. The popularization of the Mediterranean diet in Soria, primarily seen as a means to implement preventative public health policies, is carried out, among others, by establishing urban gardens<sup>24</sup> or naming streets after the elements and communities of this intangible cultural heritage.<sup>25</sup> Portugal also employs a wide network of partners from the public and private sectors, local associations, educational, and cultural institutions involved in the popularization, revalorization, and management of the Mediterranean diet. At the level of local policy in Tavira, Algarve, exceptional mobilization activities bring together, for example, the University of Algarve,<sup>26</sup> the Museum

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24 [https://cadenaser.com/emisora/2018/04/25/ser\\_soria/1524653680\\_391819.html](https://cadenaser.com/emisora/2018/04/25/ser_soria/1524653680_391819.html) (accessed 22. 5. 2023.).

25 <http://fundacioncajarural.net/en/fundacion.html> (accessed 22. 5. 2023.).

26 During the Portuguese coordination of the informal network of Mediterranean diet countries, the annual network coordination is a responsibility shared by all of these countries as each in turn takes on this task; and an international, academic conference “The Cultural Heritage of the Mediterranean Diet” was organized on 9 and 10 May 2017 in Faro. The conference program is available at: <https://www.minhaterra.pt/wst/files/I12967-PROGRAMAXPT.PDF> (accessed 22. 5. 2023.).

of the City of Tavira,<sup>27</sup> local food producers, and the hospitality sector,<sup>27</sup> as well as cultural workers and associations, who all gather at the “Mediterranean Diet Festival” held in Tavira every year September since 2013.<sup>28</sup> Additionally, the Portugal Council of Ministers founded the Mediterranean Diet Conservation and Promotion Group<sup>29</sup> in 2014, and the “Centro de Competências para a Dieta Mediterrânica”<sup>30</sup> in 2018, which made this intangible cultural heritage a national, strategic issue for Portugal. Cultural anthropological studies of food often call for rejecting the idea of apoliticality in our food choices, which seems particularly justified when trying to understand the relationship between the concepts and practices that arise from the Mediterranean diet. Even a quick look at the latest Mediterranean diet pyramid published in 2020 reveals new points of interest that are inscribed in this fundamentally cultural pattern.<sup>31</sup> The current pyramid, along with all the previously mentioned layers, introduces the issue of food system sustainability, thus emphasizing the role of seasonality, preserving biodiversity, local production and consumption of food, and reasonable use of natural resources, especially soil and water. Traditional cuisines of the Mediterranean can now represent a necessary step back to a better future, and not just an opportunity for communities to represent themselves or improve their market value.

At the end of last year, the Mediterranean diet was the highlight of a panel held at the United Nations in New York, titled *Mediterranean Diet – Lifestyle for a Sustainable Future*.<sup>32</sup> This event, organized as part of last year’s Italian coordination of the informal network of emblematic Mediterranean diet communities, with the help of the Italian Ministry of Agriculture<sup>33</sup> and the permanent missions of Italy and Morocco at the UN, has shown the width of access, political and economic agendas that are becoming proactive agents for the Mediterranean diet. Removed from everyday Mediterranean life, the Mediterranean diet sets ambitious, global goals, but also paradoxically shows a lack of power in the fight against globalized, industrialized food and changes in eating habits. Transformations of the Mediterranean diet concept, from traditional food to intangible cultural heritage and a sustainable diet, speak more of present preoccupations than about food models, practices, and choices. As we leave the questions of the relationship between cultural and food policies aside, and the complex relations between the environment and people open, we should question how the current popularity of the Mediterranean diet relates to the anxiety

27 For the museum’s activities in safeguarding and popularization of the Mediterranean diet, see: <http://museu-municipaldetavira.cm-tavira.pt/?q=dm> (accessed 23. 5. 2023.).

28 More information on the festival: <http://www.dietamediterranea.pt/?q=pt/node/759> (accessed 22. 5. 2023.).

29 [https://inovacao.rederural.gov.pt/images/imagens/GTInovacao/17-Protocolo\\_CentroCompetenciasDietaMediterranica.pdf](https://inovacao.rederural.gov.pt/images/imagens/GTInovacao/17-Protocolo_CentroCompetenciasDietaMediterranica.pdf) (accessed 22. 5. 2023.).

30 <http://www.dietamediterranea.pt/?q=pt/ccdm/quem-somos> (accessed 22. 5. 2023.).

31 <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC7728084/> (accessed 7. 4. 2023.).

32 For more information on the event itself, held on 18 November 2022, as well as an integral video, see: <https://media.un.org/en/search?f%5B0%5D=topic%3A387&f%5B1%5D=topic%3A556&f%5B2%5D=topic%3A718&f%5B3%5D=topic%3A963&f%5B4%5D=topic%3A1077&f%5B5%5D=topic%3A1148&f%5B6%5D=topic%3A1240&f%5B7%5D=topic%3A5878> (accessed 29. 3. 2023.).

33 Ministero delle Politiche Agricole, Alimentari e Forestali – MiPAAF.

of modern eaters as the most common expression of food scares in the well-fed West (Jackson 2015), which are often expressed with the development of more robust ethical consumer practices favoring short supply chains, local food consumption, and food sovereignty issues. A holistic approach to food culture, which is at the core of the Mediterranean diet, enacts its modernity by playing with (culinary) nostalgia and the comfort of the (beautified) experience of everyday Mediterranean life. But today this food culture is as imaginary as it is based in reality.

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## OMMENTS

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### Response to Jelena Ivanišević: Mediterranean Diet 3.0 – From Traditional Food to Sustainable Policies

In this comprehensive overview, Jelena Ivanišević makes three important points with regard to the Mediterranean diet and the ways in which we have come to understand it. First, she challenges the singularity of its description by demonstrating how this diet, which UNESCO inscribed in its Representative List of Intangible Cultural Heritage in 2010, is never just *a* diet. This is achieved, as she argues, “by reducing complex culinary systems and food practices into one singular tradition,” which, in itself, is also based on “the metaphor of the Mediterranean as a compact cultural space” (p 40). Such an “imaginary foodscape” is the result of decades of Western understanding of the Mediterranean as a space of leisure, often through the romanticization of its landscapes and the glorification of its poverty. These contributed, as the author further argues, to the reductive representation of the Mediterranean diet as the food of simple, poor, and honest people. We don’t have to look further than Jamie Oliver’s TV shows about Italy, or Rick Stein’s cooking in small Greek and Turkish villages, to see a glimpse of this, as Oliver foregrounds *le nonne* as the true guardians of the Italian food culture and tradition, offering through their lifestyles a solution to the problems of the modern world. As Hollows (2022: 142) points out, this kind of romanticization of peasant food cultures, not just in the Mediterranean but elsewhere too, goes hand in hand with the overall ‘foodie’ understanding in the West of poverty as something to be celebrated and elevated (for this, see Johnson and Baumann 2015) in an effort to leave behind industrialization and return to nature. This urge is governed by images of the pre-modern, 19<sup>th</sup>-century Mediterranean as the setting for upper-class travel to Italy and Greece, visiting beautiful but poor, dry, and empty land, and encountering people with “exotic” habits to be reported back home. Extending Ivanišević’s critique, we could further ask how the Western understanding of the Mediterranean diet today is linked to long-existing cultural associations with the Mediterranean as a space of holidays, romance, and health. Such associations conveniently sideline (erase, forget) a rep-

resentation that belongs to an entirely different discourse that also seeks to define the Mediterranean in terms of poverty and its relationship to migration, where the sea itself is understood as the “graveyard of migrants,” commonly reported about negatively on the European side of the Mediterranean and conveniently ignored elsewhere.

Ivanišević’s final point concerns the changeability not so much of this diet, but of how it is justified. Initially framed primarily in terms of it being the healthy diet of a certain style of life, the Mediterranean diet is now seen more as a sustainable diet that “today should not be practiced for its health benefits or the values of cultural heritage, but for the benefit of the ecosystem, biodiversity, and the planet” (p 45). This is an interesting, but not surprising discursive shift, well demonstrated in the article, which shows how dietary advice is established, functions, and ultimately, is transformed as part of the larger discourse units to which it is connected. By doing this, it assumes a move from its universality (the Mediterranean diet should be eaten by everyone because it is healthy) to locality (the Mediterranean diet should be eaten by the people of the Mediterranean because it is local to them and therefore its consumption reduces its environmental impact).

In the last two decades in the West, the need for environmental sustainability has overshadowed the focus on health among the food-related discourses inherited from the 20<sup>th</sup> century. As the Mediterranean diet has now become seen as a sustainable diet, it is assumed Mediterranean eaters are asked to move “back to a better future” (p 48) and reject the progress of the last century: no more foods imported from far away, no more multinationals and their global brands, no more tomatoes in December! To *le nonne*, who have always eaten from their garden, and in winter, tomatoes only in the form of *la salsa* which they themselves preserved in summer, this is self-evident; for this, they do not require their cooking to be called a Mediterranean diet; it is their family cooking, regional and unique. For the rest, what of this Mediterranean diet? Ivanišević rightly assumes this discursive turn to be yet another fad of global political elites that “speak more of present preoccupations than about food models, practices, and choices” (p 48) or of the practicalities of feeding families in the Mediterranean region, where its food system interacts with the interests of global multinationals, and where UNESCO protected ‘traditions’ meet fiercely with both the need for progress and preservation of established and tested ways of doing things locally across the Mediterranean. A comprehensive analysis of the existing literature into what Mediterranean populations eat today, for example, suggests adherence to the Mediterranean diet is currently not more than moderate, with a significant variation between regions, such as Italy’s industrialized North and rural South, not to mention the evident differences between the European Mediterranean as compared to the African or Asian sides (Obeid et al. 2022). Such a move away from traditional diets may be found in other locations too, as populations supplement traditional menus with available international offerings, including those made by global food chains. In such circumstances, there may be little space for a politically driven return to the olden days, especially if those days are associated locally with poverty, hunger,

and migration. Rather, a sustainable diet – in any location, not just the Mediterranean – can only be successful if it takes into consideration the present practices of the population and adapts them, for the future, to a more sustainable model – one which derives from the possibilities of the local environment and traditions, while not denying the present realities, tastes, and aspirations of its populations.

Communications, including those from governments and international bodies, will undoubtedly have an influence on how successful these shifts towards more sustainable diets will be (Johnston et al 2014; Culliford, Bradbury, and Medici 2023). Messaging about topics, such as sustainable diets, and the issues around contemporary food systems, however, are complex, and the audiences diverse. A study into the effects of the framing on the promotion of the Mediterranean diet, for example, demonstrates these dilemmas, identifying how attempts to persuade people to adhere to this diet depend on both the positiveness of the message and a clearly identifiable end gain (Carfora, Morandi, and Catellani 2022, also Rowe and Alexander 2018). Promoting the Mediterranean diet means, among other things, also promoting a reduction in the consumption of meat – a luxury food associated for centuries with the wealthy and comfortable lifestyle of the upper classes, that is central to deeply engrained and traditionally held perspectives around not only class but also gender, as meat consumption is stereotypically associated with masculinity. These ideas are, at least in the Western world, now slowly changing as vegetarian and especially vegan foods are increasingly being marketed to men (see for example Hollows 2022, also Contois 2020). In the contradictory cacophony of voices available to Mediterranean audiences, deriving from a variety of sources (governments, multinational advertising, lifestyle media, and so on), all offering food advice of sorts, the idea of the Mediterranean diet as a homogenous metaphor for a complex set of real-life practices may not be the ideal vehicle through which a more sustainable diet could evolve.

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## The Mediterranean Diet – A Response

Before the rise of modern medicine, nutritional theory was at the center of most physiological systems. It has also been more prone to fashion and fad. While the broader medical orthodoxy shifts slowly with the gradual application of the latest therapeutic discoveries by professional physicians, dietary advice can change rapidly and violently because implementation is relatively easy, and the public is often eager for dietary advice. This means that nutritional theory is a more salient bellwether of

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shifting cultural ideals. In other words, if a large robust body were the cultural ideal, mainstream nutritional theory would reflect this in specific recommendations, emphasizing meat and dairy products, caloric density, and fats. As cultural and social norms idealized a slimmer less muscular body for office-bound workers, calorie reduction, and cutting out fats and sugars, became common advice. This doesn't even account for weight-loss diets, body-building diets and other nutritional subcultures. It simply means that nutritional advice is socially constructed and changes according to the values of the particular society that creates it.

Dietary advice also tends to swing from complete trust in progress and science in some periods – think of the late 19<sup>th</sup> century through the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century when vitamins were discovered, food pyramids framed, and people believed whatever experts claimed, contrasted with periods that distrust science. Think of every so-called “natural” diet that calls for a return to simple unprocessed food, however that is culturally defined. For Jean-Jacques Rousseau in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, that meant bread, milk, and vegetables. For Paleo-Dieters it means heavy reliance on protein and cutting out carbs, under the assumption that this is how we evolved to eat before the Neolithic Revolution. In all cases, natural is however we imagine our diet before everything went wrong.

The Mediterranean diet, from the time it was first conceived in the era of Ancel Keys in 1948 to the height of its popularity later in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, was profoundly a rejection of conventional nutritional advice, turning to the simple, unmodern diets of Crete and Greece, Southern Italy and eventually the greater Mediterranean. This was a plant-based diet, with emphasis on grains, fruits and vegetables, very little meat and fat, except for olive oil, a glass of wine a day, and practically no sweets or processed junk food. The fact that this was a diet of post-war poverty that would change once relative prosperity returned was largely ignored. That people in these areas lived to 100, escaped cardio-vascular disease, exercised a good deal, and seemed to live simple happy lives was far more important. For Western Medicine, this was a romantic ideal of how we all ate before the Industrial Revolution, before the diseases of modern life took their toll. Since the goal of Western Medicine was explicitly and almost exclusively longevity and low incidence of heart disease, nutritional scientists had concrete evidence to claim that this was the ideal diet for everyone.

Promotion of the diet ignored that people around the globe have subsisted on very different diets throughout history and have survived, this particular cuisine was considered scientifically superior. Eventually, a few other longevity diets were praised as well, like Okinawa and Seventh Day Adventists in Loma Linda California, and what came to be called blue zones where people were untouched by modern industrialized food with its emphasis on meat. The Mediterranean diet gradually influenced mainstream nutritional guidelines, again because longevity and avoiding heart disease were the explicit goals.

Nor should we forget that at its core this was both a gastronomic ideal of simple honest peasant fare, a cultural ideal that prompted people like Ancel Keys himself to visit the Mediterranean and even live there, and most importantly a reorientation

of dietary advice away from fats, sweets, cheap processed foods, and everything the modern industrial food system could supply. These were exactly the foods, incidentally, that were rationed in both World Wars, so they could be sent to feed soldiers – wheat, beef, and sugar were nutritional ideals. The Mediterranean diet was its exact antithesis.

Nor should it be forgotten that the success of the Mediterranean diet in the popular imagination was largely a success in marketing certain products like olive oil, wine, and European cheese. These were at best marginal in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century outside particular ethnic groups but became culinary staples in the latter 20<sup>th</sup> century.

These nutritional ideals were of course idealized from the outside, mostly from the US and Northern Europe, inscribing the Mediterranean lifestyle with an allure of happiness, leisure, a style of growing and processing food, and eating socially that modern life outside the Mediterranean had banished. When UNESCO designated this as intangible cultural heritage, it was an attempt to preserve a food system, albeit very heterogeneous in its details, from within – not as a nutritional ideal, but as a way of life under siege, to be preserved like an endangered animal.

It is not surprising that more recently, as this article points out, the discussion of the Mediterranean diet has turned increasingly toward sustainability, seasonality, and the communal benefits of eating locally. These too are another iteration of the critique of everything wrong with the modern industrial food system that ships food around the globe heedless of the environmental cost of doing so or its contribution to climate change. The traditional Mediterranean food systems provide a foil for industrialized agriculture, the use of pesticides and fertilizers, and especially the modern behemoth of the meat and dairy industry. Once again, this is a romantic evocation of the past, or an attempt to slow down the wheels of change away from a heedless and destructive addiction to global scale, efficiency, and corporate profit.

On the other hand, one might argue that this is anything but a wholesale turning back of the clock. It is an effort to preserve the positive elements of the food systems of the past while restructuring the most unsustainable practices of the present. Whether this is possible or not is another question entirely. But if we look at how the Mediterranean diet has impacted our ways of thinking about food, there is no doubt that a whole new range of ingredients have become staples, and plant-based diets are held up as an ideal, even though in practice meat consumption continues to rise globally. Perhaps only relatively affluent people can afford the Mediterranean diet, ironically.

But the real question remains: is there such a thing as the Mediterranean diet? I don't mean one homogenous simplified diet, which no one ever pretended existed. I mean are there people who still live and eat this way, and if there are, for how long? And even if the diet remains nutritionally sound in principle, can it realistically withstand the onslaught of modern industrialized food?

I believe the answer is no. We may retain elements. Sophisticated bourgeois palates will continue to pay extortionate prices for artisanal olive oil, rare cheeses, tinned fish, or whatever the latest gastronomic fad might be. But will they be able to

recreate the social and cultural setting that gave rise to the Mediterranean diets? Will they be constrained by the poverty and isolation that preserved these foodways until recently? Perhaps most importantly of all, will people take the time, or even have the time to walk to the local grocery, cook from scratch at a leisurely pace, and share food with family and friends over a bottle of wine on a regular basis? If these are the real core of the Mediterranean diet, then perhaps these are more important systemic problems than eating more vegetables and using olive oil.

That is to say, my cynicism over dietary faddism is much less critical than my faith in the power of gathering socially over food, cooking it using local ingredients, and understanding where our food comes from. All of which are much more important than importing Mediterranean luxury items. That also means if Mediterranean people can preserve their food systems, fantastic. But it would be impossible to simply transfer those intangible cultural properties to other places completely out of context. Should we cultivate comparable diets that include these elements? Absolutely. I also believe that there is a conscious effort on the part of food manufacturers to engender social anomie. They can simply sell more product if people are disconnected and eat, on the move, foods that are quick and convenient, packed with bold flavors, and encourage you to eat more. Ultimately this is why obesity, late-onset diabetes, and other dietary diseases are on the rise globally. They are the cost we pay for letting corporations feed us.

My call here is therefore not for a specific Mediterranean way of eating, but a diet suited to your place and time, made with ingredients that grow where you are, by people who live in your community, and cooked by people for others, to be shared in ways that are suitable for your culture. And if we can take into consideration the environment, human and animal welfare, and the long-term health of the planet, then all the better. This is a tall order, but I think it starts in the kitchen – by simply cooking and feeding others.

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Mediterranean Diet: From Health to Sustainability through Culture, or on Cultural Models Interpreted from the Urgency of the Present Moment

We know today that the *Mediterranean* is a sociocultural and political construct based on geographical entity. And any discussion about food in the Mediterranean involves also social and cultural construction. Food and eating behaviors in gene-

ral fall within the frameworks of the societies that produce and recreate them, and therefore within specific sociocultural systems.

While we construct our conception of the Mediterranean based on certain parameters, which are strongly defined by geography and climate, they are also defined by cultural projections and stereotypes that are difficult to avoid. We use these to create differences and similarities, and we also define them in relation to agriculture, livestock farming, and food. This means that it is possible to say that despite being geographically close, certain cultures and/or religions, such as the northern, southern, or eastern Mediterranean, are very different and even conflicting; or on the contrary, they are not so distant and even have a type of family relationship, which gives them their identity and ultimately brings them together (Caro Baroja 1956).

However, the Mediterranean is and has always been a place of communication and contact. As Fernand Braudel noted (1981), the routes in this *Inland Sea* can be found on land and at sea and are linked in a system of circulation that has driven all types of relations between the various societies that have developed on its shores. The Mediterranean is therefore, on the one hand, an important crossroads and a vast center for integrating and redistributing influences – not only in food – received from the four cardinal points; and on the other, an exceptional field of acclimatization, where products, most of which still exist today, from other places both near and far, have found a suitable environment for their cultivation or breeding, and thereby expect to be accepted and implemented within local food systems.

But this ability to integrate items is no coincidence. It should be remembered that many of our cuisines are the product of processes rather than recipes. They thus have a gift for adopting new raw materials to the methods that they have always used. For example, as observed by González Turmo (1993), over time many Andalusian stews have introduced vegetables or meats that they did not previously use, without changing their essentials.

Mediterranean diet 3.0, 4.0 or even more...

As Dernini (2008) points out, the Mediterranean diet is observed today as a whole lifestyle that makes visible cultural identities and diversity, providing a direct measure of the vitality of the culture in which it is embedded. In this regard, the Mediterranean diet is an expression of a Mediterranean style of life in continuous evolution throughout time, and it is constantly recreated by communities and groups in response to changes in their environment and history. As a part of these different cultures, the Mediterranean diet provides (local, regional, national...) identities and continuity for Mediterranean societies.

Furthermore, with the modernization of agriculture and the globalization of foods that took place in the second half of the twentieth century, concepts such as sustainable diets or human ecology have been neglected in favor of the intensification and industrialization of agricultural systems. More recently, in the last three decades, the growing concern over food safety has motivated a renewed interest in or-

ganic foods (Herrin and Gussow 1989) and locally produced and sustainable foods. This fact is particularly interesting in the Mediterranean area (Medina 2015), where international movements such as Slow Food, among others, are based on the defense of local production, biodiversity, and sustainability, where both sociocultural and biological aspects are included.

Nevertheless, the Mediterranean diet is still being considered politically as an independent item, and not as part of a significant social and cultural Mediterranean food system. Health or food consumption is still considered separately from agricultural or fisheries production, economics (sales, import-export, etc.), or the maintenance of traditional structures of distribution and commerce (González Turmo and Medina 2012). In this framework, while good nutrition should be a goal of agriculture, it is imperative that concerns of sustainability are not lost in the process. Many dietary patterns can be healthy, but they can vary substantially, for example, in terms of their resource cost or their environmental impact.

In 2011, the Mediterranean diet was identified by FAO and CIHEAM (the International Centre for Advanced Mediterranean Agronomic Studies) as a joint case study for the characterization and assessment of the sustainability of dietary patterns in different agro-ecological zones, with specific regard to the sustainability of Mediterranean food systems. Under the auspices of FAO and CIHEAM, the Mediterranean is today going to be observed as a 'sustainable food system' in the Mediterranean area. The present framework (4.0) includes the following points: (1) Nutritionally adequate, safe, and healthy; (2) Low environmental impact – Protective and respectful of biodiversity and ecosystem; (3) Culturally *acceptable*; (4) Accessible, economically fair, and affordable.

Ivanišević talks about "3.0", although she only does so in the title. I presume that these three elements include culture, economy, and sustainability (assuming that health is already contained therein). The 4.0 indicated by Dernini et al. (2017) includes health in its conception. However, we do not know what it may include in the future. Will we talk at some point about a 5.0 or a 6.0, incorporating new elements into the analysis?

Nevertheless, and within the three social, environmental, and economic sustainability pillars, four mutually interdependent, thematic sustainability dimensions of the Mediterranean diet were also identified: nutrition and health, environment including biodiversity, sociocultural factors, and economy. As an outcome of this interdisciplinary and multidimensional sustainability approach, the following four benefits were highlighted in one single comprehensive Med Diet 4.0 framework, with country-specific variations: major health and nutrition outcomes, low environmental impacts and rich in biodiversity, high socio-cultural food values, and positive economic return locally (ibid.).

This Med Diet 4.0 methodological approach, by considering country-specific and regional variations within the Mediterranean area, tries to contribute to understanding what constitutes a sustainable diet in the different agro-ecological zones. Nevertheless, as often happens, cultural aspects have been relegated to the background.

Regarding culture, it is only required that it should be “acceptable” (and not “coherent”, for example) for the populations involved, and this acceptability implicitly allows eventual up-down forced changes or modifications for cultural changes in favor of other main elements, such as nutrition or the environment (Medina 2019b).

Where are we going?

Like its cultures, the cuisines of the Mediterranean are different, diverse, interconnected, and changing; continuously evolving, and continuously receiving external influences that accompany their own internal developments. What is always clear is the difficulty of ‘building’ the idea of a common food (or diet) for all the countries or cultures of the Mediterranean.

Attempting to find common elements between them is a difficult exercise (which is also a construction). Evidently, as it involves a shared space like the Mediterranean, with strong interactions and a long-shared history, it leads to some positive results. However, these results cannot be reductionist, nor can we expect the different situations to fit our preconceived or desired models.

It is, therefore, impossible to speak of a community of shared ingredients across all the countries in the Mediterranean basin, or of identical cuisines or dishes. However, we can speak primarily in terms of a community of common culinary techniques and preparations, of local adaptations that are similar in some cases, of production and sales structures that have some shared characteristics, and even some manners of consumption that, when taken as a whole, enable us to talk of a more or less common Mediterranean culinary system (Contreras *et al.* 2005) and that confer some degree of *family relationship* on the various cuisines surrounding the Mediterranean, which has been called the Mediterranean diet since its declaration as intangible cultural heritage by UNESCO in 2010.

Nevertheless, we must always bear in mind that the Mediterranean diet is part of an interdependent social and cultural system and must never be considered as a separate element, as has often been observed, especially from the health sphere and in relation to some selected products. This food system is a complex network of interdependent cultural aspects, and we must remember that all the links in the chain must be protected (Medina, 2015), from production to the dish, including distribution, sales, cooking techniques, consumer behavior, etc. As Ivanišević points out in her text, the “conceptual transformation” of the Mediterranean diet (i.e., its placement in new frameworks of green [transition] food policies) requires additional critical and analytical efforts aimed at a deeper understanding of the relationship between food, landscapes, and individuals, as well as the essential connection between cultural, political, and economic issues.

What we know today about the Mediterranean diet has undergone various changes that have taken it from a conception linked, at its origins and for some decades, solely to health, and made it an element of culture, a lifestyle, after its declaration as intangible cultural heritage by UNESCO in 2010 (and its expansion with

three new countries in 2013, which is a quite particular fact in relation to UNESCO's intangible cultural heritage). Since that point, the Mediterranean diet has adopted a new path, guided by FAO, as a sustainable diet, focusing on sustainability and locality as the cornerstones of its new identity. We can therefore see how the Mediterranean diet has undergone a conceptual transformation over the years, which has taken it from health to sustainability, by way of culture (Medina 2019).

However, it is also evident that the focus on health has never really declined in its importance, but instead has been adapted to the times and modified to suit new food trends. Nevertheless, it remains the primary focus. On the other hand, we tend to forget that any transition towards sustainability requires the prism of different local cultures, with particular attention to the entire food chain becoming possible. And usually, we focus only on the environment and forget about the social and cultural (Medina 2023). As Ivanišević also points out (very wisely, by the way) in her text, those “transformations” of the Mediterranean diet concept, from traditional food to intangible cultural heritage and a sustainable diet, speak more of present preoccupations than about food models, practices, and choices (p 48).

However, the Mediterranean diet is currently facing a major challenge: the commitment to safeguarding, which has been made by the seven countries that presented or subsequently adhered to this declaration. This challenge, which goes far beyond the realm of public health or mere sectoral policies, is at the very core of the protection of food systems as cultural heritage. And this is not easy.

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## Comment to Jelena Ivanišević's “Mediterranean Diet 3.0 – From Traditional Food to Sustainable Policies”

The aim of Jelena Ivanišević's paper is to sketch the conceptual transformations of the Mediterranean diet from the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century to the present.

Her work gives the opportunity to recollect all the main historical and theoretical information concerning the recognition of the MD as an Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity (2010). Her approach is, from the beginning, theoretically aware of all the implications food cultures have for communities and institutions. In fact, the author chooses to distinguish the Mediterranean diet as a food model designed

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by science from the Mediterranean diet as a common food culture and practice of the Mediterranean countries.

The final aim of the paper is to examine the role of the Mediterranean diet “within the context of sustainable development policies and the protection of biodiversity and ecosystems with the aim of developing new long-term political and economic models within the necessary transformations of present food systems towards greener and more sustainable solutions.” About this subject, I thank the author for mentioning my paper “The Mediterranean Diet from Ancel Keys to the UNESCO Cultural Heritage. A Pattern of Sustainable Development between Myth and Reality” (2016).

It is quite interesting the reference referred to Hafstein’s argument (2018) “that the penetration of folklorist and ethnological knowledge, perspectives, and concepts into the public sphere represents a significant part of modernist reflection” (p 37). As well as the proposal of the author to “incorporate Hafstein’s idea of *folklorization*, seen as a process that denotes the success of the mentioned disciplines primarily manifested in changing the ways people experience their culture, how they define it, and how they practice it” (2018: 128). Indeed, the anthropological competence during the elaboration of the 2003 Convention was not as strong as it had been years before, when a magister of anthropology, Claude Lévi-Strauss, was the main UNESCO advisor for the topic intangible cultural heritage (Moro 2023 and D’Alessandro 2021). But it is surely true that anthropologists have influenced the application of the 2003 Convention, especially in what concerns food cultures’ recognition. Indeed, a special commission of five anthropologists, mandated by UNESCO, gathered at *La Maison des Cultures du Monde* in Vitré (France) on October 4<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup>, 2009 to give a judgment as to whether food heritage was implicitly included in the official definition of Intangible Cultural Heritage. The unanimous verdict was affirmative (Moro, 2014: 81–82; 2023).

Jelena Ivanišević, with this paper, tries also “to identify the conceptual transformations of the Mediterranean diet in its dynamic history over the last seventy-or-so years” (p 37). In this, the author refers to the statements of the Italian anthropologist Ernesto Di Renzo during his lecture on the concept of the Mediterranean diet in the spring of 2017 on the island of Hvar. His arguments are very old and have already been surpassed by a new approach to this topic. Denying the existence of the very concept of the Mediterranean diet, which for the last seventy years in the international lexicon means the plural heritage of the countries situated around the Mediterranean Sea, is today a mere rhetorical device. It would be like denying that the ancient Greek philosophy existed, arguing that Plato thought differently from Aristotle. That’s why Di Renzo’s statement “*La dieta mediterranea non c’è!*” is, in my opinion, senseless. First, because the historical origin of the Mediterranean diet is well known (Niola 2019). Second, because the Mediterranean diet is wider than a list of recipes; the Mediterranean diet, as defined in the UNESCO Nomination File, goes much further than the question of culinary traditions, and recipes are mentioned very seldom. In fact, the UNESCO Dossier focuses its attention on social practices, agricultural techniques, beliefs, celebrations, harvesting, etc. Further-

more, the file writer, Prof. Pier Luigi Petrillo – recent President of the UNESCO International Commission of Experts for the Intangible Cultural Heritage – proposes the idea of a relationship between landscape and table as the central point of the document (2021; 2019).

In this part of the article, it would be useful to distinguish more clearly the opinions of the author from the statements of her colleague Di Renzo. In any case, all those indirect quotations are precious, because they suggest that the time has probably come for the “Denialism of the Mediterranean diet” to be analysed as a phenomenon that deserves specific study.

About the important contribution of Fernand Braudel to the “rise of the concept of Mediterranean cultural space,” I suggest taking the 18<sup>th</sup> century as a starting point, when archaeological discoveries in Italy, Greece, etc. started to attract the attention of the most important intellectuals of Europe, even if until recent times Mediterranean food, particularly Italian, was not at all included in the list of the positive expectancies of the travelers of Grand Tour, as recently reported by Dieter Richter (2021).

It is outstanding the analysis of the process permits to the author to state “today’s Mediterranean diet pyramids are equally the result of research done in natural and social sciences, and humanities” (p 43). Furthermore, it is extremely relevant that the new Mediterranean pyramid was redesigned in 2020.

A new role is assigned to the virtuous lifestyle named Mediterranean diet: “The Mediterranean diet, depending on the views and level of the actors engaged with it, is offered as a solution to the problem of cardiovascular health or obesity epidemic, or offered as a tool for rural development that protects local production while contributing to the strengthening of green food policies and/or protecting biodiversity” (p 44). The main promoter is the FAO, with the support of institutions like the CIHAEM (International Centre for Advanced Mediterranean Agronomic Studies) institutes in Bari, Chania, Montpellier, and Zaragoza.

The author points out that a large international academic and political process favored the present idea that new topics pertain to the Mediterranean diet, including public health, the sustainability of food systems, the ecological footprint of agro-industrial systems, and the problem of food waste. I would add a new topic, to be included in the previous list, which is the “universal right to safe and nutritious food” through a democratic distribution system.

The role of the Institute of Ethnology and Folklore Research, for whom the author works, with support from the Croatian Ministry of Culture and Media, is quite relevant for its production of scientific reflections on the Mediterranean diet, with Ivanišević writing, “[We] are able to monitor the development and issues in connection with the concept of the Mediterranean diet itself, which also provides insight into the various levels where its modern life takes place.” (stranica) The author also illuminates the endorsement of the Mediterranean diet provided by UNESCO’s inscription, which represents a challenge to understanding the relations between the goals of global policies, such as the UN 2030 Agenda (UN 2015).

At the end of the article, Jelena Ivanišević poses a very sharp and smart question, when she writes:

Removed from everyday Mediterranean life, the Mediterranean diet sets ambitious, global goals, but also paradoxically shows a lack of power in the fight against globalized, industrialized food and changes in eating habits at home. Transformations of the Mediterranean diet concept, from traditional food to intangible cultural heritage and a sustainable diet, speak more of present preoccupations than about food models, practices, and choices. As we leave the questions of the relationship between cultural and food policies aside, and the complex relations between the environment and people open, we should question how the current popularity of the Mediterranean diet relates to the anxiety of modern eaters, as the most common expression of food scares in the well-fed West (Jackson 2015), which are often expressed with the development of more robust ethical consumer practices favoring short supply chains, local food consumption, and food sovereignty issues. A holistic approach to food culture, which is at the core of the Mediterranean diet, enacts its modernity by playing with (culinary) nostalgia and the comfort of the (beautified) experience of everyday Mediterranean life. But today this food culture is as imaginary as it is based in reality. (p 49)

Since a good question in science is better than a good answer, because it gives a long-run vision of a problem, in my opinion, the “conceptual transformation” of the MD (Medina 2021) is a logical and positive aspect of a living Cultural Heritage. As researchers, we should probably not ask that the Mediterranean diet save the planet, but rather simply provide us with suggestions and inspirations to understand how food ideology (including traditions, beliefs, practices, passions, obsessions, etc.) grows and develops. One lesson, no doubt, that the Mediterranean cultures have given to the world so far is that most of the time, thinking is more important than acting.

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## The Musealization of the Mediterranean Diet

Can the concepts of “global” and “local” go together? More precisely, is it possible to replicate something regional, recognized as a unique local value<sup>36</sup> and designated as a UNESCO heritage treasure, on a global scale? And how desirable would such an

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<sup>36</sup> The discussion of the singular and/or plural form of Mediterranean diet is left for later.

action be, even if it were possible? “One size fits all” does not apply to the Mediterranean diet. What proves useful in the Mediterranean and on its coasts is not the best recipe for, e.g., the diet of people living in Sweden, Paraguay, Cambodia, or any other country that does not lie on the shores of the Mediterranean Sea or even some countries that geographically actually belong to the Mediterranean. The lead text by Jelena Ivanišević, “Mediterranean Diet 3.0 – From Traditional Cuisine to Sustainable Policies,” touches upon these observations, although the debate on specific challenges it presents is not as intense as we would expect. This does not diminish the analysis by Jelena Ivanišević regarding the current state of the Mediterranean diet as a UNESCO-recognized phenomenon of intangible heritage, including all of its positive aspects, as well as the challenges presented.

Even though beginning a commentary with a joke is academically unconventional, in this instance, it is somewhat appropriate to paraphrase a relatively common joke about the Mediterranean approach to business and life compared to the Western European one. Essentially, the punchline contrasts the average (poor) Mediterranean fisherman who, as his family has done for decades (or even longer), simply catches fish along the Mediterranean shores and prepares them for his family. A Western European guest<sup>37</sup> comes along and suggests that this is not a successful way of doing business. In the guest’s opinion, the fisherman should sell some of the fish he catches for a profit instead of sharing everything he has with his family and friends. Then, by repeating this process, he could earn more and more money to eventually buy a larger fishing boat and continue expanding his fleet of fishing vessels, which would guarantee him significant profits. The fisherman responds by asking how this would change his and his family’s quality of life. The Western European guest suggests that the increased income would ultimately allow the fisherman to spend a significant portion of his time socializing with family and friends. The fisherman calmly replies that he does not need that whole cycle when he already leads that kind of life. It is clear that the joke is partially based on stereotypes, with the average hardworking Western European focused on maximizing earnings and the Mediterranean person<sup>38</sup> primarily focused on quality, or more precisely, enjoying life’s (small) pleasures. Regardless of the level of generalization, the joke touches upon several aspects through which the idea of the Mediterranean diet is marked or overlooked as a distinctive (heritage) phenomenon.

On one hand, as the lead text clarifies, the initial fascination with the Mediterranean diet was entirely driven by its (at that time) well-documented health benefits. These benefits included significantly reduced risk of heart attack and stroke, lower cholesterol levels, and overall cardiovascular health improvement. This is precisely why the Mediterranean diet has become, as the author correctly points out, a global phenomenon supported by medical science and the topic of more and more diverse media promotions<sup>39</sup> identifying it as being of interest to viewers. This

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37 It would be more appropriate to call him a tourist.

38 Both categories (Western European person; Mediterranean person) are generalized to a great extent.

39 Primarily culinary TV shows, later adopted by social networks and other internet channels.

interest stemmed from the promotion of a healthy lifestyle, but it may have also been influenced by a simultaneous reduction in the quality of healthcare services in some countries. This aspect should be further explored and examined in order to determine whether the global promotion of the Mediterranean diet was primarily motivated by the “nostalgic” presentation of the Mediterranean or if the medical/nutritional dimension had taken precedence. Without a doubt, the typical (Mediterranean) nutritional dietary model, based on a significant share of plant-based foods, olive oil as a key fat source, and reduced intake of foods derived from animals, as noted by the author of the lead text, is not harmful to health; on the contrary, it is beneficial. However, the question remains whether the Mediterranean diet can entirely rely on the aforementioned health-based argumentation as the main tool for its promotion and acquired popularity. Can research solely in the field of health continue to be persuasive enough, given that today’s statistical data show that the prevalence of prominent diseases, reduced by practicing the Mediterranean diet, is nowhere near what it used to be?

At the same time, as the author of the lead text points out, the idea of the Mediterranean diet has only recently expanded beyond the purely medical-nutritional aspect, primarily through ethnological and anthropological research. It now involves aspects of everyday life that differentiate the Mediterranean diet in much more detail and help us better understand it. For example, people in the Mediterranean have traditionally practiced the daily siesta, a period of rest typically in the afternoon, which is often forgotten or consciously ignored.<sup>40</sup> I remember a situation when I visited an interpretation center near the city of Manresa with colleagues from the University of Barcelona.<sup>41</sup> After the visit was over and we finished our lunch, we boarded a local train for Barcelona where, within five to ten minutes of departure, all my colleagues around me, nearly ten of them, dozed off while I expected lively discussion we had during lunch to continue.<sup>42</sup> Given that I have not conducted independent research nor found results from other academic studies that unequivocally show that people living on the Mediterranean coasts and islands have different physiological (or mental) needs, I can only conclude that I witnessed a situation in which my colleagues experienced an activation of a certain level of archetype,<sup>43</sup> a behavior pattern within the daily routine of Mediterranean inhabitants. Similar to observing the Mediterranean diet solely through its nutritional values, it seems that research into the question of daily afternoon rest primarily highlights the health benefits of such a practice. We do not doubt these benefits, but what is often overlooked in such research is the modern, fast-paced way of life that no longer allows the majority of people, whether on the Mediterranean coasts, islands, or most other places, to engage in this practice in

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40 Today, many people still practice it to the extent that their fast-paced modern lifestyles allow.

41 Manresa is approximately a 2-hour train ride away from Barcelona.

42 My origins are from here as well, even though as a third generation removed from the Mediterranean coasts, my way of life has evidently not developed this habit.

43 I am aware that this is a simplified explanation and it is primarily used to illustrate the ideas I am presenting.

the same way.<sup>44</sup> When we look at other parts of the world,<sup>45</sup> it becomes clear that, in the vast majority of cases, if not all of them, the traditional Mediterranean practice of daily afternoon rest cannot be implemented due to entirely different daily routines. This underscores why, for a long time, the overall Mediterranean way of life was not seen as important, though the use of certain foods was consistently highlighted.<sup>46</sup> This has led to a hybrid state in which the Mediterranean diet becomes more attractive globally, as people are drawn to the demonstrated positive health effects<sup>47</sup> if they consume common Mediterranean foodstuffs, while all other aspects of the typical Mediterranean way of life are often overlooked. The role of ethnologists and anthropologists in the study of the Mediterranean diet is undoubtedly more demanding, as they must note that the phrase “Mediterranean diet” is far from clear and simple, as it is often portrayed. The benefits of such a diet are undeniable, but at the same time, they do not arise simply from substituting sunflower oil with olive oil, for example, but from a fundamentally different outlook on overall lifestyle habits. Furthermore, they argue for the protection of local communities that still embody the original ideas of Mediterranean daily life as these ideas gradually disappear. The world we live in today has significantly changed incredibly quickly over the past few decades. For example, the concept of the indigenous local fisherman on the European side of the Mediterranean is nearly non-existent today, or, using UNESCO terminology, we could say that they are an extremely endangered species. Former fishing vessels have been transformed into those suitable for tourism, or they are decommissioned with relatively generous subsidies from the European Commission to achieve the envisioned (although not sufficiently well-thought-out) agenda of sustainable fishing. Fishing is just one category directly related to the promotion of the ideas (benefits) of the Mediterranean diet.

If we step away from discussions centered solely around the practical utility of the Mediterranean diet, and even those concerning the impossibility of implementing it unless it is conceptually expanded to include other practices in regions where it is most popular,<sup>48</sup> two more levels of challenges addressed by the lead text remain. The first is the (more or less successful) recognition of the Mediterranean diet by UNESCO and its inclusion on the Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity. The second is the idea that the Mediterranean diet, as it is currently inscribed, contributes to UN global agendas on sustainability and sustainable development.

Regarding the first level, a series of arguments have already been presented earlier in this text. The conclusion, albeit preliminary, could be that the inclusion of the

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44 None of my colleagues who dozed off on the train on the way back to Barcelona has the opportunity for an afternoon rest during the remaining days of the week, when they work in university offices.

45 Western Europe, the North American continent (especially the United States), and other regions where the concept of the Mediterranean diet has gained popularity.

46 The first association with the Mediterranean diet in non-Mediterranean regions almost always involves the use of olive oil and a higher consumption of fish compared to red meat.

47 That have been confirmed by research.

48 To be recognized as Mediterranean everyday life, instead of solely the Mediterranean diet.

Mediterranean diet on the UNESCO Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity, as currently defined, might have been premature and lacking in several aspects. Defining Mediterranean everyday life vs. solely its diet would add much precision, though I am quite aware that this path is not straightforward and is often influenced by politics. Thus, we agree with the observation from the lead text that it is desirable for the Mediterranean diet, as a practice of preparing food, to be included on this UNESCO list. However, this inclusion should not and cannot be an excuse preventing the concept from being further refined or, ideally, redefined under the term “Mediterranean everyday life,” which is an overarching and far more precise term that encompasses a range (or all) of the practices that define the Mediterranean way of life.<sup>49</sup>

With regard to the second question, the contribution of practicing the Mediterranean diet in its current form compared to sustainability policies, I am more skeptical than the author of the lead text, including some of the comments mentioned earlier.<sup>50</sup> Sustainability or, more precisely, sustainable development in today’s (global) society does not depend on a broader application of the concept of the Mediterranean diet, or even the expanded concept of Mediterranean everyday life that we suggest here. Rather, it depends on the fundamental recognition that local production and consumption of food is a key concept of sustainability. Blackberries readily available in London, fish recently caught in the Mediterranean Sea, or olive oil in Toronto are not sustainable development concepts, no matter how much certain current policies may promote them. A key component of sustainable development is grounded in the interests of the local community. Everything else must follow from that, although, unfortunately, this is not always so, including the case of the Mediterranean diet. There is no Mediterranean diet but rather Mediterranean diets, as the author of the lead text mentions by quoting Italian anthropologist Ernesto di Renzo.

Considering all the presented arguments, what are the possible options? Perpetuating traditional Mediterranean life, unfortunately, isn’t one of them, as seen in the false images of the Mediterranean way of life, whose key characteristic is olive oil. Ironically, to some extent, the concept of the Mediterranean diet, as it is currently presented, might be best preserved if it becomes musealized. In other words, it should be presented as a permanent exhibit in a museum of the Mediterranean diet in Croatia.<sup>51</sup> Through this specific medium, a familiar form in Europe for over 250 years,<sup>52</sup> we can interpret the complexity of the Mediterranean diet. Though I am aware of how blasphemous it may sound to place intangible heritage within the framework of a museum institution,<sup>53</sup> considering everything mentioned in the lead text and our response, it is evident that the practice of the Mediterranean diet is disappearing, and it can currently be found only in rare “oases” in the Mediterranean

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49 From foodstuffs to daily afternoon rest and a number of other elements.

50 E.g., regarding local fishing vs. global.

51 Or in Greece, Spain, Cyprus, etc. Ideally, there would be a network of such museums throughout the Mediterranean.

52 Which has since become globally accepted.

53 Although this would not be the first such instance in Europe, or even in Croatia.

in its entirety.<sup>54</sup> In such situations, a museum solution<sup>55</sup> is not the worst option; on the contrary, it can be a valuable catalyst for new interest and a deeper understanding of why (and how) this way of life is worthy of admiration and emulation in our own lives.

In terms of sustainability, as in many other aspects of today's world, there are two sides to the coin. The ideas of "seasonality, preserving biodiversity, local production and consumption of food, and reasonable use of natural resources, especially soil and water" (*stranice*) mentioned in the lead text are highly desirable, but also incompatible with the practically global popularity of the Mediterranean diet. In other words, every gain also carries with it a loss. If we want to be completely objective, practicing the Mediterranean diet is primarily a "playground" for the affluent who can afford it.<sup>56</sup> Unfortunately, people who live in the Mediterranean are increasingly becoming less privileged in this regard, and we could even speak of a form of ecological imperialism to some extent. Though it is not as drastic as in some other developing countries, it is nevertheless certainly present. This does not mean that we should abandon the idea of sustainability in the Mediterranean diet but rather we need to think about its scope much more intensively (and differently).<sup>57</sup> Additionally, the fundamentally noble and desirable idea of improving the health of (one part of) humanity<sup>58</sup> should not be realized at the expense of the quality of life of the communities that originally practiced the Mediterranean diet. Unfortunately, for many years, scorpionfish from the Adriatic Sea have been sent to markets in Western Europe, while our markets offer fish from Tunisia, so ultimately, no one consumes "fresh" fish. Much like no one practices daily afternoon rest.

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54 That unquestionably includes comprehensive practices from everyday life, not just foodstuffs.

55 Here, we assume a contemporary museum concept including, for example, cooking and food tasting experiences as part of the permanent exhibit, as well as appropriate working hours or spaces for daily afternoon rest, and so on.

56 Excluding sardines, which are still relatively affordable. Not to mention daily/afternoon rest.

57 As is currently happening in the fields of ethnology and anthropology.

58 Based on practices of the Mediterranean diet.

# R EPLY

## Jelena Ivanišević

The history of the concept of the Mediterranean diet is well known and thoroughly researched. Every author who has written about it agrees that it was the invention of Dr. Ancel Keys (Matalas 2004; Dernini 2012, Queroz 2015, Moro 2016, Medina 2021a, and others), a researcher who saw in the impoverished cuisines of post-war Italy and Greece of the mid-20th century a potential response to the public health challenges of contemporary Western society. Originating from health research, the Mediterranean diet was easily transmitted beyond its symbolic and geographic boundaries, gradually being shaped into a nutritional pattern that incorporated and concealed the experiences of hunger and poverty at its foundations. Albala and Tominc clearly outline the mechanisms that shaped the diet of the poor into a hedonistic and gourmet food culture of the Mediterranean, primarily emphasizing the romanticization of the popular food practices predating the Industrial Revolution. As highlighted by Albala, the dietary practices of the Mediterranean are inscribed with, albeit entirely modern, values of pre-modern diets from a time “before everything went wrong” (Albala). However, values such as *genuine, simple, and honest food* reveal less about past dietary practices and customs and more about present concerns and trends. Indeed, as emphasized by Albala and Tominc, dietary advice is socially constructed and cannot be observed outside current social, cultural, economic, and political frameworks. Nutritional advice reflects current dietary preferences and fears, especially those described by some authors as the contemporary consumer’s anxiety (Jackson 2015) and increasing distrust in the contemporary agro-industrial food system.

Suspicion and anxiety in the well-fed West significantly influence everyday dietary choices and practices, often articulated as criticism or resistance to the dominant agro-industrial foodscape. Concerned food consumers, faced with products originating from an inestimable supply chain, are left to develop various alternative means of food provisioning and embrace everyday cooking as an act of resistance against fast, convenient food. Consequently, Albala is more interested in the Mediterranean diet as a new branch of criticism against the modern food system rather than its cultural-political validation in the context of UNESCO protection. The idea of home, local, and seasonal food before the dietary revolution in the mid-20th century is represented by the poor post-war menus of southern Italy and the island of Crete. Moderate and frugal peasant cuisines, where choices were primarily influenced by necessity rather than desire, encapsulate both hunger and resourceful-

ness. Thus, one can easily agree with Ana Tominc, who highlights that this was a diet we knew would irreversibly change as soon as other circumstances improved. By concealing hunger and poverty, the Mediterranean diet simultaneously constructed its “new” content based on the idea of an imaginary Mediterranean as a space of leisure, a relaxed lifestyle, and food as a social ritual. It is no coincidence that the Mediterranean diet, especially in its heritage interpretations, condenses precisely around the concept of conviviality – sharing food and communal dining, recognizing sociability as a fundamental value of its food culture. Medina astutely observes that our perceptions of the Mediterranean and Mediterranean cuisines are inseparable from stereotypes, such as the notion of a relaxed lifestyle and the joys of leisure. This lifestyle, as presented in media depictions of Mediterranean cuisines – which are the result of prolonged and ongoing processes of adopting and adapting new ingredients, dishes, and flavors – becomes a holistic principle on which today’s narrative about the Mediterranean diet as a specific expression of a culture’s vitality is built. Hence, it might seem that UNESCO’s approach is, in fact, protecting the “life under siege” brought about by new dietary and cultural patterns from the developed West.

The criticism of modern food systems inherent in the concept of the Mediterranean diet sets a new framework encompassing global goals such as ensuring stability in the safe supply of nutritious and culturally appropriate food, as well as safeguarding natural resources and biodiversity. Simultaneously, the Mediterranean diet, presented as a panacea for various contemporary challenges, not only fails to demonstrate an ability to combat the change of traditional food practices, even within its own boundaries, but even contributes to perpetuating food inequalities with its global popularity. This point is raised by Albala when rightfully questioning who can even afford high-quality Mediterranean artisan products. The popularity of the Mediterranean diet not only increased the symbolic value of typical foodstuffs but has also had a long-term impact on their prices. The issue of food justice, although theoretically addressed in the global goals of the FAO’s food policies (such as Agenda 2030), upon which it relies, currently remains insufficiently emphasized in the present, often apologetic, arguments for strengthening sustainable food models such as the Mediterranean diet. One possible direction for further research in the future of the Mediterranean diet lies not only in understanding that it is difficult to predict how long the current enchantment with this food model will last but also in problematizing new forms of “ecological imperialism” (Babić) brought about by the commodification and simplification of the Mediterranean way of life. Whether the Mediterranean diet, as a set of complex practices of daily life (from food production to consumption), is merely another fad of the global political elites or a necessary initial step in the *green transformation* remains a subject for future debate.

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