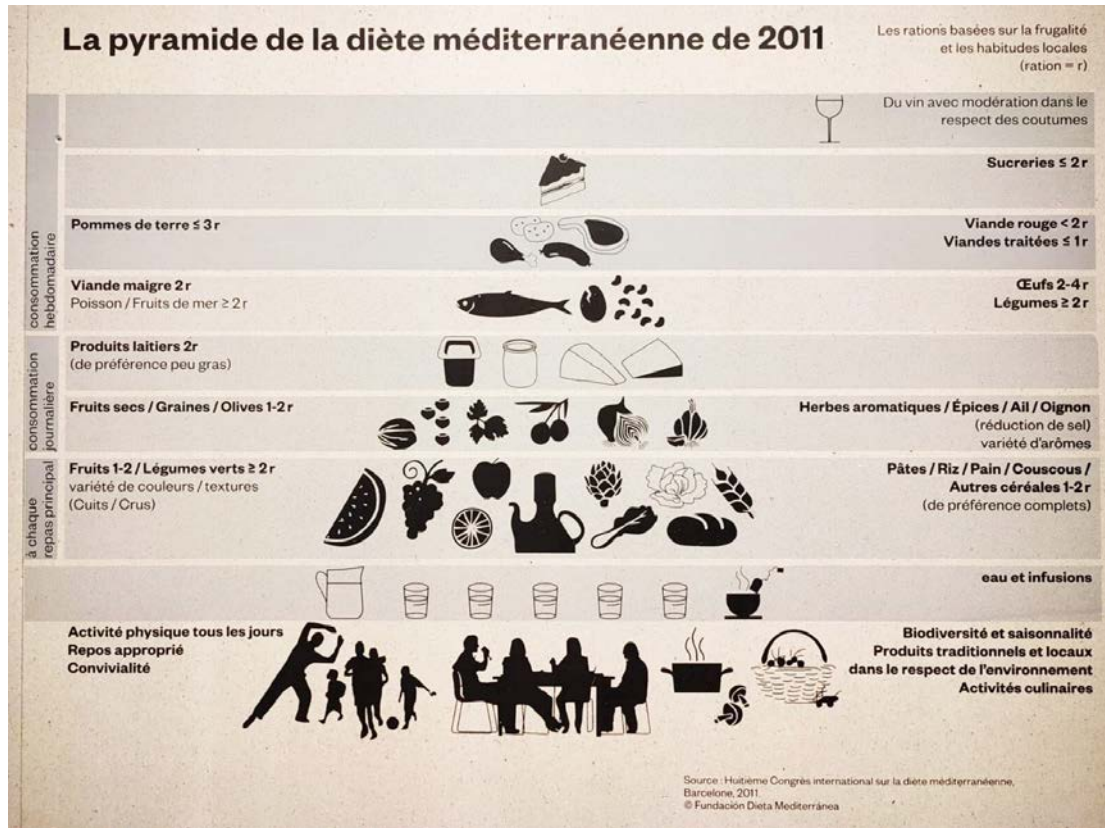


“Le grand Mezzé”: An exhibition about the Mediterranean diet



An exhibition in the Mucem (Musée des Civilisations de l'Europe et de la Méditerranée)

The Galerie de la Méditerranée is the Mucem's exhibition space for semi-permanent exhibitions. From 19 May 2021 to 31 December 2023, its first section hosted the “The grand Meze” exhibition.

We are all familiar with the recommendation to “eat five fruits and vegetables a day”, but who knew that it took its inspiration from the “Cretan diet”, also known as the “Mediterranea diet”? This concept, created in the 1960s by the American epidemiologist Ancel Keys, was inscribed in 2010 in UNESCO's Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity, thus promoting its recognition and globalisation.

The Mediterranean diet is the result of a construct that has always been enriched with external contributions throughout history. But how can we define and preserve geographical and cultural culinary authenticity, while sharing it with the greatest number? Moreover, how to protect a diet without preventing it from evolving? And finally, how can it remain permeable while at the same time also remaining authentic? These are the questions posed by the exhibition “The grand Meze”, which

took us from field to plate, and from traditional Mediterranean culinary know-how to globalised food standards.

The Mediterranean diet today is, in fact, synonymous with two simultaneous and antagonistic trends: on the one hand, its globalisation, and on the other hand, the necessary reappropriation in the Mediterranean of its production and cuisine. The exhibition invited us to grasp its specificities as well as how it has evolved.

Interview with Edouard de Laubrie, curator of the exhibition

Mucem (M.): In what context was the exhibition, “The grand Meze”, devised?

Édouard de Laubrie (E.L.): Since the 1990s, food crises have multiplied throughout the world and preoccupation around food has also become a concern in wealthy nations, with food industry health dramas happening with increasing regularity (Mad Cow’s Disease, Bird Flu, the horse meat in lasagne scandal, infected milk and other infant food products, etc). An agricultural malaise is ever more prevalent and shows the limits of an excessively industrial production system that respects neither agricultural resources nor agricultural workers. This phenomenon is global and consumers no longer know what to eat.

In the last quarter of the 20th century, the “Cretan diet” became fashionable, with an emphasis on local, mainly vegetarian products, together with its unsurpassed accompaniment: olive oil. The success of this diet became so global that in 2010 and 2013, what is now called the “Mediterranean diet” was inscribed in the Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity. This was a consecration, given that it was the first time that a transnational diet of food was labelled by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO). Moreover, it was the first case to include both a cultural and dietary dimension.

In March 2019, Algeria, Morocco, Mauritania and Tunisia submitted a joint application for couscous, a culinary speciality of North Africa, to be inscribed on the World Heritage List. In June 2019, the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) warned of the loss of cultural, social, environmental and heritage value in relation to the erosion of sustainable diets, particularly the Mediterranean diet.

For the United Nations, the decade 2019-2028 is the decade of family farming, which needs to relocate and re-humanise agricultural production — and equally so in the Mediterranean. Given how topical the subject is, the Mucem had to address the issue of food in the Mediterranean, which, as we can see, goes far beyond this geographical area. Despite the immensity of the subject, the

exhibition offers some keys to understanding over time the fundamentals of this diet, its constant evolution, and some of its very contemporary issues.

M.: The notion of a “Mediterranean diet” is at the heart of the subject: can you clarify this concept?

E.L.: Beginning in the 1950s, increasing numbers of Americans were dying of cardiovascular disease, the causes of which were not understood. The epidemiologist Ancel Keys (1904-2004) noted that Mediterranean populations were remarkable for their longevity and good health.

For Keys, this was explained by their diet, which was mostly vegetarian, based on the consumption of cereals and legumes, fruits and vegetables, a limited amount of fish, dairy products and meat, enriched with many condiments and spices, and sprinkled with water, wine and herbal teas. Olive oil as opposed to animal fat was the main vehicle for this good health.

For Keys, the culprit that caused cardiovascular disease was cholesterol. To demonstrate the validity of his argument, he carried out the “Seven Country” study in which he established a link between traditional Mediterranean eating habits and a significant drop in the incidence of mortality due to coronary heart disease. Even if the methodology and results of Keys’ studies were questioned by part of the scientific community, he synthesised Mediterranean dietary patterns and established the concept of the “Mediterranean diet”. As early as the 1970s, Keys published books for the general public on the subject, which were a worldwide success and which made the Mediterranean diet a global food model.

M.: Is there really a dietary form common to all the populations of the Mediterranean?

E.L.: In fact, Mediterranean dietary habits are not homogeneous; there is no single Mediterranean diet, but rather a number of Mediterranean diets that gather around an extremely varied range of products. It is also necessary to go beyond nationalistic perspectives of cuisines, which is a creation of identity (with cuisines that are Greek, Lebanese, Moroccan, etc), in favour of determining wider geographical areas.

The environments of the Mediterranean area are, first of all, extremely diverse. Moreover, during its history, this geographical area has been dominated by a succession of invading forces, which have each contributed to the enrichment of its cultures, foodstuffs and cuisines: the Greeks, Carthaginians, Romans, Arabs,

Byzantines, Ottomans, Spanish, Portuguese, English, French, etc. Religions have also shaped food traditions by favouring certain foods while forbidding others.

Lastly, social and economic factors also need to be taken into account in societies that remain very compartmentalised. Generally speaking, the composition of diets differs from country to country. In southern countries, it is essentially made up of vegetables with cereals supplemented by legumes as a source of protein and a small amount of meat products. Conversely, in northern countries, animal products make up a much larger proportion of diets, and even in Italy, for instance, the consumption of cereals, fruits and vegetables is higher in the south of the country than in the north. Finally, in Balkan countries, the composition of diets is somewhere in-between: richer in animal products compared to southern countries, but with more cereals and legumes compared to northern ones.

M.: Since the 1990s, the Mediterranean diet has become a worldwide phenomenon... for better or for worse?

E.L.: In order to visualise and disseminate this Mediterranean food model more widely, a pyramid was created in 1992 by the United States Department of Agriculture: foods placed at the base of the pyramid were those to be consumed more frequently and in greater quantities, while those at the top were to be consumed in smaller quantities.

In 2011, a new pyramid of the Mediterranean diet was created, which integrated not only food but also lifestyle (from the Greek *diata*), ie physical activities and social contacts during meals taken collectively.

From November 2010, then in 2013, with the increase in the number of countries it touched and its recognition by UNESCO, the Mediterranean diet acquired worldwide cultural recognition far beyond the simple dietetic perspective on which it was founded.

At the same time, in the context of world population growth and the urgent need to set up sustainable agricultural systems, the FAO (Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations) has been promoting the Mediterranean diet as a nutritional, health, economic, environmental and social food model. World demand for Mediterranean products is growing exponentially: olive oil, tomatoes, strawberries, etc. And so, their cultivation must be extremely intensive to satisfy the "world demand for the Mediterranean". This is one of the paradoxes of the agro-food industry which, through over-cultivation, is destroying agricultural land and freshwater resources in many Mediterranean regions, particularly in Spain, Portugal, Italy and France. In addition, farmworkers who work on these farms experience deplorable living conditions and the products grown are of mediocre quality.

Another paradox is that the Mediterranean diet has left the Mediterranean and that cardiovascular disease, obesity and diabetes have now largely conquered its populations, eager for the food models of wealthy nations, which give pride of place to industrially made foods, ones that are rapidly prepared and consumed, and those that are rich in fat, salt and sugar.

M.: In this context of globalisation, the exhibition raises the question of a necessary reappropriation of diet in the Mediterranean...

E.L.: Although numerous scientific studies confirm that the Mediterranean diet represents a healthy dietary model in terms of nutrition and health, it is paradoxically becoming less widespread in Mediterranean countries where problems of under-nutrition, especially in the south, coexist with being overweight, obesity and chronic diseases caused by the consumption of particular foods that are common to the whole Mediterranean area.

Poor dietary behaviours are due, among other things, to a high intake of saturated fats and refined carbohydrates found, for instance, in industrial foods and beverages, a low intake of fibre, and a propensity to be sedentary. Thus, the dietary diversity that characterises the Mediterranean diet is greatly diminishing.

The reasons for the disappearance of the Mediterranean diet are multiple and go beyond what is strictly related to food: loss of biodiversity, degradation of natural resources, contamination by pesticides, climate change, high energy and water consumption, heavy dependence on imports, urban pressure, poverty, the vulnerability of many rural and urban communities, etc.

Scientists are now proposing the concept of a “sustainable diet” that takes into consideration all criteria — from landscape to plate, is a model of agriculture and food consumption with integrated, agro-ecological production systems and a consumption pattern that is richer in plant foods than in animal products.

M.: Through this theme, this section of the exhibition addresses a vast chronological period — from the Neolithic era to the present day. What are its objectives?

E.L.: The aim of this section of the exhibition is to show that, due to its geographical position in the world and the successive civilizations that have come to make it up, the Mediterranean is an exceptional agricultural and culinary melting pot. Since Neolithic times, this area has been a crossroads where plants, animals, men and know-how have converged. Due to its geography, climate, and

trade routes by land and sea, it has never ceased to be a zone of acclimatisation and transit, despite geopolitical tensions.

The inclusion of the Mediterranean diet on the UNESCO list could, like any form of heritage conservation, freeze this food treasure to a moment in time. Moreover, the phenomenon of globalisation is abusively reducing the Mediterranean diet to a few emblematic products. In fact, the opposite is true, as the Mediterranean continues the enrichment of its diet as it has done since the 16th century with products from the Americas and as it does today with foods and cuisines from the Far East. Conversely, Mediterranean cuisine has also been exported around the world with local adaptations, some of which may surprise.