

THE ESSENTIAL GREEK FOOD BASKET

In every culture, there is a handful, or rather a basketful, of foods that make up its national table. They define its cuisine, and reflect its geography, agricultural heritage, and interact with other cultures.

In Greece, where the sea is never far and sunshine is abundant, the typical foodbasket contains generous amounts of fresh seafood, grains and vegetables, as well as olives, olive oils and herbs infused with the ripe, full flavors of earth and sun. In the traditional diet, meat is used sparingly. The net result is a cuisine that is low in saturated fat and cholesterol, and full of flavor.

What follows is a sampling of the key foodstuffs that give Greek cuisine its fresh flavors and distinctive character:

Olives: Olives are as important as the sea to Greece's identity. There are dozens of varieties, some names by place, others by type. Some are brine-cured, others are cured with salt or steeped in vinegar.

Olive Oil: Greek olive oil is dark and fruity. Among the best are olive oils from the Peloponnese and western Crete. It is the lifeblood of Greek cuisine.

Oregano (Rigani): The quintessential Greek herb, rigani perfumes hillsides the country over. A must with lamb, fish and the classic Greek salad, it is excellent, too, sprinkled over feta with a drizzle of olive oil.

Lemons: Together with olive oil and rigani, one of the most basic and important elements of Greek flavor.

Mint: Mint is to Greeks what basil is to Italians. It is used to flavor meatballs and cheese pies and to make herbal teas.

Honey: Dark and thick, thyme-, pine- or heather-scented, honey is used mostly in Greece's famous, syrup-drenched sweets. It is also excellent mixed with thick, strained yogurt and walnuts, and is sometimes used to sweeten tomato-based stews.

Cinnamon, Allspice and Cloves: These are ingredients that no Greek tomato sauce is complete without. These sweet, exotic cross the boundaries between sweet and savory dishes, and are used to season meat, stews, sauces, baklava and cakes alike.

Feta Cheese: Feta is usually aged over 90 days, packed in brine and available in soft, mild and peppery varieties. It is the key ingredient in Greek salads.

Yogurt (Yiaouti): Greek yogurt is thick and creamy, and made from either cow's or sheep's milk. It is in two varieties, strained and unstrained, and most commonly used as

an accompaniment to spicy and stuffed dishes, as a base tzatziki (a cucumber dip), and mixed with honey.

Nuts: Almonds and walnuts, most closely associated with honeyed desserts, also find their way into savory dips such as melitzanosalata (eggplant dip), taramosalata (caviar dip often made with almonds), and skordalia, a pungent garlic sauce made with almonds, walnuts or bread.

Breads & Grains: Bread is the staple food of every Greek; no table is complete without a fresh and hearty country loaf, often prepared with sourdough starter. As for grains, rice and pasta are frequently used, but more traditional are bulger wheat for salads and pilafs, and trahana, a tart-flavored couscous-like pasta product added to thicken wholesome soups and stews, or cooked alone with a little olive oil.

Fish & Seafood: From sweet-fleshed cephalapods like squid and octopus (stewed or grilled) to simple fish, (whole on the bone and baked, grilled or fried), fruits of the sea are as basic to the Greek table as fresh vegetables and grains.