

NATIONAL

No Mediterranean diet please... we're Maltese

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Despite living on an island bang in the heart of the region, most Maltese do not follow the Mediterranean diet, according to people who work in the industry.

Though the Mediterranean diet has again just been voted the 'best diet for 2021', the majority of Maltese prefer to resort to an abundance of fried and fatty foods, injected with too much sugar content, according to chefs and health experts.

"Unfortunately, in Malta, food is considered a treat, a feast, just something to fill us up," private chef Karl Mallia said.

"We seem to have forgotten that food is our nutritional way to keep our body in top condition. We tend to eat a very unbalanced diet – a lot of fried stuff, lots of fatty items, lots of sweets and we also drink a lot of sugary drinks and alcohol. The Maltese also love their large portions."

The Mediterranean diet has just been named the 'best diet for 2021' for the fourth year in a row, according to the *US News & World Report*. The report brought together a panel of experts in heart disease and diabetes, nutrition, diet, food psychology and obesity to review research about various diets from medical journals, government reports and other resources.

What is the Mediterranean diet?

The Mediterranean diet won first place and was followed by the DASH (dietary approaches to stop hypertension) diet and the flexitarian diet which tied for silver – both emphasise on reducing or eliminating processed foods and focus on meals full of fruit, vegetables, beans, lentils, whole grains, nuts and seeds.

The Mediterranean diet has been linked to stronger bones, a healthier heart and longer life. The diet features simple, plant-based cooking, with the focus on fruit and vegetables, whole grains, beans and seeds, with a few nuts and a heavy emphasis on extra virgin olive

oil. Fats other than olive oil, such as butter, are consumed rarely, if at all. While fish is a staple, meat makes a rare appearance, usually only to flavour a dish.

But experts say the ingredients are a template of our meals. Meanwhile, obesity in Malta remains a major public health threat, with rates rising in both adults and children to be among the highest in the EU.

Research has shown that around two in five deaths in Malta could be attributed to behavioural risk factors, while one in five deaths are linked to dietary risk, such as low fruit and vegetable intake and high sugar and salt intake.

This emerged from the Malta Country Health Profile published in February 2020 by the OECD and the European Observatory on Health Systems and Policies.

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So what do the Maltese eat?

Mallia, who has been working in the industry for some 30 years, says Malta's typical diet is a far cry from the typical Mediterranean diet.

"Look at the fast-food outlets selling fatty foods – *pastizzi* places have cropped up on every corner. Food is served with heavy creams. People eat lots of bread and huge amounts of pasta. Here a portion of pasta is around 200 to 300 grams whereas in Italy a portion is 100 grams," Mallia says.

The Maltese also tend to accompany their dishes with butter and the feeding habits appear to be transferred to children.

Rafel Sammut, chef and owner of Brijju restaurant, added that many Maltese were probably unaware what the Mediterranean diet consisted of, let alone followed it.

"We live in a globalised world... and when people are cooking at home, I don't think they stop to think about abiding by the Mediterranean diet. They buy things from the super-



Despite the geographical privilege, the Maltese tend to prefer fatty food. PHOTO: SHUTTERSTOCK.COM. Inset: Dr Mario Caruana. Right: Chef Karl Mallia

market rather than going for fresh local produce," he said.

Dr Mario Caruana, a registered dietician, said that while there are no recent studies into the typical diet of the Maltese, experience has shown him most Maltese do not follow the Mediterranean diet.

"There is information all over the place provided by the Health Promotion and Disease Prevention Directorate about what the diet is. Notwithstanding, knowing and doing is not the same thing. In fact, people need more individualised guidelines on how to implement the Mediterranean diet in their daily routine," he said.

Caruana added that many people associated diets with weight loss but changes in eating habits should be adapted to people's lifestyle and any existing medical situation.

He stressed on the importance of data on the typical diet followed by the Maltese.

"This is an important public health area that should be explored and analysed, so we can know which nutrition-dietetic areas need to be explored to make the necessary dietary changes for a healthy population."

Superintendent for Public Health Charmaine Gauci said



the most recent survey into our eating habits was carried out in 2015. As she outlined the most salient findings, she said the food consumption survey showed that Maltese consumed high amounts of sugar, which included sugary drinks and cake.

While fibre intake levels were good, the consumption of fruit and vegetables remained low. There was also a need to reduce the consumption of fat and processed food.

But Gauci is optimistic that targeted campaigns are bearing fruit and that the situation has changed since 2015.