

Cows, Pigs and... Witches!

On Meat, Diet and Food in the Mediterranean Area

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ABSTRACT

There is a popular belief, fuelled partly by nutritionists and partly by fashion, that there is such a thing as a “Mediterranean diet”; and this is held forward as a prescription for healthy eating and an admirable lifestyle. What is curious about this belief is that meat, and particularly pork, seems to be mysteriously excluded. This article redresses the balance.

INTRODUCTION

Not long ago, in the mid nineties, I happened to be working on a book on Mediterranean food habits (Medina, 1996). Its purpose was that of offering a clear, interdisciplinary global perspective on this topic, in an open-minded approach, and deconstructing the myth.

The very title of the book, *Mediterranean Food*, was by no means haphazard. From an anthropological point of view, food turns into a frame of reference, a wider concept than that of *diet* or *nutrition*, which encompasses on the one hand, nutritional processes and on the other dietetic regulation and control, as well as the whole socio-cultural fabric implied by a lifestyle-oriented perspective. Thus, the book aimed at reaching far beyond the term *diet*, and focused on food from a socio-cultural point of view, considering it not only as a medical and nutritional phenomenon, but as a multidimensional fact.

Given the nature of the book's premises, which were linked to the study of lifestyles, every chapter inevitably included innumerable references to meat. A whole chapter was devoted to pork and various ways of preparing it in the Mediterranean area (Fàbrega, 1996). This triggered immediate criticism and comments on the part of some doctors and specialists in nutrition. Without going into detail, suffice it to say that all comments revolved around one specific point: how can meat, worst of all pork, be included in a book on Mediterranean *diet*?¹ From their point of view, there could be nothing more alien to this *diet* than the saturated fat of meat, most especially pork. Such criticism puzzled me and caused me to reflect. In the following pages, I will try to explain what I mean by this.

“MEDITERRANEAN DIET” AND MEAT

As has happened with other geographical areas, the Mediterranean² – today, more than ever – has been revisited, reinvented and conceptually reconstructed as a symbolic space and a cultural referent. From the perspective of food, as well as from other perspectives, the Mediterranean area has been examined, appreciated and given due recognition, although at the same time, as a direct consequence of this process, it has been rendered rural once more, and somewhat folkloric. All aspects of the Mediterranean, such as production, climate, habits and so on, have become for Western societies and a few other societies, a model of health and of an enviable lifestyle.

Nowadays, the *Mediterranean diet* is internationally recognised and promoted as a recommendable and healthy regime. A recent article in the Spanish press made the following comment: “in recent years the

mediterranean diet has suffered from the fluctuations of gastronomic fashion: after having suffered for a long time from disdain and ostracism on the part of nutritionists, it has become a sort of panacea, defended by many as a real alternative to modern gastronomy...”³

However, in as far as it is a *diet* – and consequently, according to the general meaning of the word, a *food regime*⁴ – there has been a tendency to isolate such a regime and alienate it from cultural aspects, other habits and lifestyles, to which ingestion is necessarily connected and from which it cannot easily be separated.

Very often, chiefly among doctors and nutritionists, certain foods have been almost “deified” as essential elements of such diet, as is the case of legumes, greens and vegetables, fruit, cereals and olive oil. Ros (1996: 341), for example, defines the traditional Mediterranean diet as rich in vegetables, legumes and fruit, fish and olive oil, with a moderate consumption of wine and a relatively low intake of dairy products and sugars, and practically no industrially processed foods. Thus, according to this author, the most recommendable and healthy foods for the prevention of cardiovascular disease would be, among others, cereals, fruit, vegetables, legumes, fish, dried fruit, nuts and olive oil.

Yet, other foods have been ignored or eliminated from such a “dietary model”. In this sense, the least recommended foods – according to the same author – are, among others, *whole eggs, solid dairy products, sweets and desserts, sausage, offal and patés, veal, beef, lamb, pork and ham (lean meat), chicken or beef sausages, venison and game*⁵ (1996: 343-344). He also points out that the most appropriate food habits seem to be those included within the traditional “Mediterranean diet” (345). From a different, yet coinciding point of view, the above-mentioned newspaper article⁶ draws attention to the fact that “although Spain benefits from the Mediterranean diet, our food habits also have some nutritional shortcomings, such as the abundance of *meat, sausage and fats*”.⁷

Thus apparently, from a nutritional point of view, certain foods, among which meat – especially red meat, pork and its by-products – play an outstandingly negative role for our health. Not only are they not considered to be part of the Mediterranean *diet* in their own right, (they would not fit into the above-mentioned definition of the *traditional Mediterranean diet*),

but they are on the blacklist of dietary recommendations and have even become “a nutritional problem”.

From such a perspective we witness, as Hubert argues (1998: 157), the “construction of a representation in the realm of science”. However, if the issue is considered from a broader perspective, that of *food habits*, it will become more compatible with a commonsense view.

MEDITERRANEAN FOOD AND MEAT

There is no denying that meat in its many forms, in spite of the scarcity of it forcibly imposed by historical and economic conditions, is an essential part of food habits and lifestyles in the geographical area considered to be home of the Mediterranean diet. More so if one considers, with González Turmo (1993: 33) that Mediterranean society has been eminently carnivorous, even when meat consumption was confined to dishes based on minced meat, in an effort to increase the volume of insufficient quantities and make good use of the less appetising bits.

From time immemorial, meat has been extremely important in the food habits of Mediterranean societies. As Romero de Solís argues (1993: 52), whereas among the Hispano-Iberian tribes of the coast the staple food was bread, among the plateau and mountain inhabitants, it was meat. González Turmo points out (1993: 32) that until the 17th century pasture, and consequently cattle and game, abounded all over Europe. In Sicily, for example, game was so abundant that it was cheaper than anything that could be found in the marketplace. It is around the mid 15th century that, due to increased ploughing for more cereal cultivation, meat started to become scarce in Europe.

Goat, mutton and, from the 15th century onwards, also pork, have been the most commonly consumed meats. In spite of long periods of shortage, meat consumption in a Mediterranean country like Spain was greater than in other European countries which were more populated and made greater use of cultivated lands (González Turmo, 1995: 222).

Traditionally, meat has not only been an important element in the diet of Mediterranean populations, but also in their social and cultural lives: their annual cycle,⁸ their representations of the world, their imagination,⁹ or

important aspects of social organisation, such as gender roles and distinctions. De Garine observes that in trying to formulate “the Mediterranean lifestyle”, it is necessary to mention the characteristics which preside over the social organisation of food production: that is, food preparation and consumption, and the corresponding gender-based work distribution. If men are responsible for the sacrifice of domestic animals, their slaughter and sometimes salt preservation, women are responsible for all activities relative to preparation and preservation, as well as for the choice, which is often creative and always personal, of dressings and accompaniments. Likewise, the planning of food purchasing is typically a female task (de Garine, 1993: 22).

The presence and importance of various kinds of meat not only in the diet, but also in the portrayal of various Mediterranean societies, becomes evident through gender-based differentiation in consumption. Meat has traditionally been associated with men – both symbolically and in fact. According to González Turmo (1995: 221-222), meat has always been considered an indispensable element in a manly diet, and it has always been reserved for men during periods of shortage. The presence of meat had to be ensured at all costs. Likewise, D. Lupton (1996: 104-106) and A. Willets (1997: 112-115) point out that certain foods are regarded as specifically masculine, and they highlight in this respect *red meat*.

A SCARCE FOOD IN THE MEDITERRANEAN

But there are differences between implied ideals and preferences; and it cannot be denied that meat has traditionally been a food that has often been scarce in the Mediterranean, particularly in the 16th and 19th centuries. Yet it is necessary to make some observations on this point.

First of all, meat has been scarce not only in the Mediterranean¹⁰ area, but also all over Europe. It cannot be ignored that when specialists in nutrition refer to a *traditional Mediterranean diet*, they are thinking of food available to the lower strata of the population in particular, to those who had more limited access to economic resources. Historically speaking, for people belonging to these social classes meat has never been abundant. But this is true both of the Mediterranean and the rest of the continent.¹¹

Secondly, and closely related to what has been said in the previous point, comes the fact that the limitation of meat consumption has never been voluntary, but always conditioned by shortage. Its cultural value, however, has persisted throughout history¹² and meat has been consumed whenever possible.

Thirdly, and in spite of shortages, meat consumption has been an essential element of the lifestyles, traditions and festivities of diverse Mediterranean societies, in the North as well as in the South, even among the most impoverished classes, which, as González Turmo argues (1995: 222), have always tried to guarantee its consumption at all costs. So much so, that whenever the supply of pork, mutton or goat dwindled, people did not hesitate to resort to more unusual kinds of meat such as that of iguanas, snakes, lizards, donkeys and even cats.

There have always been attempts to ensure meat consumption all year long, through preserving techniques (salting, drying etc.) and a regulation of fresh meat consumption. People took advantage of periods of more relative abundance, such as those coinciding with pig slaughter, and preserved the meat so that it could be consumed all the year long. Sausage making is an outstanding *traditional* practice in the Mediterranean area. On the Northern shores the main ingredient is pork, but on the Southern and Eastern shores mutton and beef are also used.¹³

All that being said, while meat scarcity in the Mediterranean (but also in other areas) has been an objective fact, nevertheless it cannot be denied that this important food has always been present in Mediterranean societies, on a symbolic as well as on a practical level, its consumption being very high and frequent during given historical periods. This is a fact that specialists in nutrition are not willing to acknowledge. It is puzzling that, within these specialists' more or less homogeneous discourse, meat should disappear so arbitrarily, and not only from dietetic recommendations that are, within the scope of their discipline, reasonable, but also from their assumptions about these populations' food history.

TRADITIONAL MEDITERRANEAN DIET

In a recent publication, the sociologist Claude Fischler complained about the fact that when it comes to talking about Mediterranean regime, nutritionists refer, time and again, to anything but strictly nutritional facts. In his view, they keep justifying their recommendations by using discourse that goes beyond nutrition and science (Fischler, 1996: 364).

As Fischler goes on to say, the most recurring argumentation nutritionists resort to is that the Mediterranean food model is *traditional* and *enduring* and has remained unaltered over the last two thousand years (1996: 365). Evidently enough, meat shares no role with other elements in this *unaltered tradition*, despite the fact that it is, as explained above, a food whose presence in the history of Mediterranean societies has been largely documented. Witness this lack of acknowledgment in Ros' words (1996: 341) cited above that define a *traditional Mediterranean diet* as one that includes greens, vegetables, fruit, fish, olive oil, wine and little dairy products or processed foods. Evidently, meat has no part in this supposedly *traditional* diet; and not only meat in the strict sense, but also animal fat. As Stouff argues (1970), it seems that in Provence, during the 14th and 15th centuries, for example, Christians hardly used olive oil as an ingredient in food: they used lard. Fernandez-Martorell (1996) observes that the pig, for the Jew, was an animal they associated with Christians; its meat and lard differentiated old Christians from those who, like the Jews, cooked with olive oil.

Our purpose here is not to question the nutritional advantages of a Mediterranean *diet* as defined by nutritionists. The principles they put forth are more than reasonable and worth taking into account for their beneficial effects on health. What this article criticises is the discourse that has been created around such a diet, a discourse based on a biased perspective which has contributed to the distortion of a food context that in itself is already difficult to apprehend. When one speaks of the Mediterranean *diet*, as mentioned above, one refers to the representation of a traditional diet, unaltered throughout the centuries; and its definition according to this perspective has been given in extremely partial and restrictive terms. In the case of meat it could be said that we are witnessing a sort of witch hunt, which in many respects is not justified.

As previously observed, to use Annie Hubert's words (1998: 157), the most interesting point here is that we are witnessing the portrayal of a scientific model of the Mediterranean. The origins of its creation are in the Anglo-Saxon world, but it is now in the process of being assimilated by the Mediterranean area's representatives themselves. Within this model, and outside the reach of any other medical or nutritional discourse, we must not forget that meat as a basic food is of primary importance.

Translated from the Spanish version by Monica Stacconi.

NOTES

1. The use of italics for this word is intentional. I will refer to it later on in the article.
2. The Mediterranean, like any other space and reality, is a socio-cultural construction, shaped within a specific geographical area. Likewise, to speak about food in the Mediterranean implies a specific socio-cultural construction (Medina, 1996b: 22), related to a whole framework of diverse factors: political, economic and social.
3. "La dieta mediterránea a estudio", in *El Periódico de Aragón*. Zaragoza, Saturday, 4, March, 2000, p.27.
4. In Latin languages *dieta* is a medical term denoting a very specific food regime. See for example the French "diète" in Le Nouveau Petit Robert: "specific food regime, prescribed by a doctor, favouring, limiting or excluding certain foods with a hygienic or therapeutic aim. Regime", Paris, Le Robert, 1994, p.641. According to this concept, currently most French experts use the term "régime méditerranéen", and not "diète méditerranéenne". The same is true in other languages such as Spanish or Catalan. However, it must be taken into account that "diet" comes from the Greek "diaita": "lifestyle".
5. My emphasis.
6. "La dieta mediterránea a estudio" (*ibid.*)
7. My emphasis.
8. As de Garine points out (1993: 13), when summer heat makes its appearance, one can observe that at the butcher's winter pork meat is replaced by fresh lamb; and the presence, on the table, of spitted or fried birds, thrushes and starlings, is the harbinger of autumn and cold weather.
9. The great religions that fought for spiritual hegemony in the Mediterranean put not only the consumption, but also the equitable distribution of meat under the protection of the religious institution of sacrifice (Romero de Solís, 1993: 87).
10. See for example González Turmo (1995), Romero de Solís (1993) or Gast (1996).
11. Silvia Carrasco (1996: 382-383) wonders, in this respect, what would happen if it was found out that the only period in history in which some social group – in a

- Mediterranean region like Catalonia, for example – has actually practiced something similar to what we call today Mediterranean diet, were the 1970s. She mentions, to give an example which is close to her experience, what was the habitual food of Catalan lower-middle classes: greens and vegetables, cereals, legumes, roast meat, plenty of sardines and codfish, olive oil, bread, dark chocolate and... “as many eggs as the days of the week”.
12. Riera points out (1996) that during the low Middle Age, even the lowest classes held meat to be the best nourishment, a food which helped people to keep healthy and overcome illnesses.
 13. See, in this respect, Kanafani-Zahar (1993).

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