

Quinn on Nutrition: Secrets of the Mediterranean diet

September 27 2019, by Barbara Quinn



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What is the secret of the Mediterranean diet, considered by nutrition experts to be one of the healthiest in the world? I'm still wondering about that after our recent trip to Italy.

On our arrival, our Italian-born guide Valeria, clued us in on some secrets of the area. If you want coffee, for example, she advised us to order "Americano coffee. Otherwise you will get espresso; and do not-a order cappuccino after 11 a.m. If you do, the Italians will look at you funny. Wine, yes. But not cappuccino."

Ah, wine ... yes. As we drove through the rolling green hills of vineyards in northern Italy, Valeria pointed out that every hill has a different name. "This is very important-a," she said, since the three ingredients needed to produce good wine are soil, climate, and location. (The best grapes are at the top of the hills, for example.) However, when it comes to making wine, "the heart-a and the passion are the same-a."

Italians have a passion for all their food and how it is produced, I learned. From the 4th generation Orlando Abrigo winery in the "Pied-eh-mont" (Piedmont) region of Italy to the producers of [prosciutto](#)-type ham in Parma, who tell us the only preservative they use is sea salt, the pride in their work was evident.

Still, I wonder, what is the secret of these vibrant Mediterranean people? Here's one clue: A recent analysis of 16 individual studies that involved more than a million people worldwide confirmed, once again, that our [lifestyle](#)—the choices we make every day—largely determines our risk for life threatening diseases like Type 2 diabetes, cancer and heart disease.

These researchers evaluated the effect of lifestyle choices such as exercise and sleep habits, alcohol intake and smoking on long term health. What they found: People who practiced the healthiest lifestyles reduced their risk for type 2 diabetes by 75%. And those with diabetes who had the healthiest lifestyles had a lower risk for heart disease and cancer than those with less healthful lifestyles.

On our trip, we saw very few Italians who were overweight although their diet is rich in pasta and cheese. They drink a fair share of wine with their meals. And we saw many people who smoke.

Walking, however, seems more popular than driving. And meals revolve around fresh ingredients in a more relaxed atmosphere than we sometimes see here at home. What gives?

Our last night in Italy was spent enjoying several courses of food and [wine](#) in the company of new friends, both American and Italian. I realized then that, in many respects, our hearts and our passions were the same, just as Valeria had said. Perhaps that is part of the secret? Stay tuned...

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Citation: Quinn on Nutrition: Secrets of the Mediterranean diet (2019, September 27) retrieved 14 May 2024 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2019-09-quinn-nutrition-secrets-mediterranean-diet.html>

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