



THE MEDITERRANEAN MEZE TABLE

Meze. Mezze. Mazza.

No matter the spelling, there is a magical little plate of food found all over the Mediterranean that feeds hunger and the need for socialization!

#mediterraneandiet
#mediterraneanfood
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In Mediterranean countries where raising a glass of wine is enjoyed, the drink is always accompanied by something to eat, thus in Spain, we have the small plates which are typically presented at a bar as a cover for your glass. *Tapas* (lids/covers) keep everyone fed with small savory bites between lunch and the traditional late dinner. It is said that pre-nineteenth century innkeepers started the *tapas* trend as a way of giving guests a taste of their dinner menu. *Albondigas* (meatballs), *papas bravas* (potatoes with a spicy sauce), *Banderillas* (tiny skewers), and croquettes with various fillings called *Croquetas* are typical offerings.

The *hors d'oeuvres* of France, meaning “outside of the work/ordinary,” as in ordinary courses, are said to have evolved as a teaser for the appetite, and the practice continues as a way of preparing the palate for the upcoming dinner. You’ll encounter *canapés* on a cracker, bread, or puff pastry. Or you may be served tasty bites of *cheesy gougeres*, *tapenade*, *pate*, or *fromage fort*. The *antipasti* of Italy are traditionally served as a first course at the dinner table. While varying from region to region, some antipasto examples are assorted cheeses and cured meats, anchovies, and pickled vegetables.

Other cultures which share the influence of their history as part of the once-vast Ottoman Empire have more similar meze. Local ingredients, fillings, and seasonings give each of these countries their distinctive flavor profiles, so while the names of dishes sound somewhat similar, they are quite different. Egypt has *torshi* (pickled vegetables), *warak enab* (stuffed grape leaves), and a whipped feta, tomato, and olive oil dip served with hot *pita* bread.

Greece and Cyprus enjoy regional variations of meat or vegetables *kefte/keftethes*, the savory meatballs found at all outdoor restaurants and tavernas. Also popular are the *saganaki* (flambéed cheese), grilled octopus, and assorted dips such as *tzatziki*, *fava*, and the creamy-salty *taramosalata* made with fish roe, which gives it the easily recognized pale pink hue. Often, there will be *spanakopita* or *tiro-pita* triangles, smaller versions of the dinner and party-sized versions. Always served with *mezethes*, you will find *feta* and *kasseri* cheeses, pickled olives, and the iconic *horiatiki salata* (village salad).

People in this part of the Mediterranean live for meze time and the long conversations and musical enjoyment, which are as much a part of the table as the assortment of tasty little bites of food to be shared with friends. Turkey’s table of meze includes *dolma* or *sarma* (stuffed grape leaves), octopus salad, and eggplant salad dip, along with *kalamar tava* (fried squid). Palestinians enjoy *falafel*, *hummus*, eggplant salad, and *tabbouleh* at their meze table, while the people of Lebanon offer *baba ghanoush*, *kebbeh*, *kofta*, and *muhammara* dip made from walnuts and red peppers.

It doesn’t matter what name you have for it, which Mediterranean country you are in, how you spell or pronounce it. The idea of the meze table is as popular today as it was centuries ago. Meze is a great culinary idea that feeds friendships, deep conversation and hunger, and is deeply satisfying.

Sources: *The Oxford Companion to Food*, Alan Davidson (author). *Little Foods of the Mediterranean: 500 Fabulous Recipes for Antipasti, Tapas, Hors D'Oeuvre, Meze, and More*, Clifford A. Wright (author).

Read more from Despina Yeargin at:
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A Turkish word with origins that go back even further to Persia, the Meze is a snack or bite of food that is typically served in a casual way along with a drink of anise-infused ouzo, arak, raki, or wine. While some Mediterranean cultures do not consume alcohol, they enthusiastically promote the consumption of delicious assorted meze to enjoy time visiting with friends.