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May is International Mediterranean Diet month, started 10 years ago by Oldways, to raise awareness of the health benefits of the diet. Ranked the Best Diet Overall by U.S. News and Report for the past two years in a row, consumers are catching the fever and discovering the delicious foods it offers.

Along with healthy, fresh ingredients the diet focuses on eating SLOWLY and SOCIALLY, two behaviors Americans have forgotten in our obsession with work and consumerism. For the Mediterranean people, family mealtimes are the main event with meals that last several hours.

The term "Mediterranean diet" refers to the eating pattern of at least 16 countries that border the Mediterranean Sea. Research on the health benefits date back to the 1950s with the "Seven Countries Study," which established the diet as a heart-healthy eating pattern. More recent research suggests it could counter diseases associated with chronic inflammation, such as metabolic syndrome, atherosclerosis, cancer, diabetes, obesity, pulmonary diseases and cognition disorders. The Dietary Guidelines for Americans 2015-2020 recommends the Mediterranean diet, to help promote health and prevent disease.

Oldways created the Mediterranean Diet Pyramid. Basic characteristics are:

- An abundance of food from plant sources, including fruits and vegetables, potatoes, breads and grains, beans, nuts and seeds.
- Olive oil as the principal fat, with total fat (25% to 35% of energy) and saturated fat no more than 8% of energy.
- Daily consumption of low-to-moderate amounts of cheese and yogurt.
- Twice-weekly intake of low-to-moderate amounts of fish and poultry.
- 7 eggs per week (including those used in cooking and baking).
- Fresh fruit as the typical daily dessert.
- Moderate consumption of wine with meals. For men, one to two glasses per day; one glass per day for women. A glass is 5 ounces which is a small amount. Wine is optional and avoided when consumption would put the individual or others at risk.
- Red meat only a few times per month.
- Regular physical activity at a level that promotes a healthy weight, fitness and well-being.

For this article I interviewed Sharon Streb, owner of **Olive & Basket**. Sharon opened the store in 2014 putting her dreams into action. In 2011, she moved to Italy to study interior design. While there she fell in love with the local cuisine, especially olive oil. An entrepreneur by heart, who had always longed to have her own business, and she came back to the States and opened the store. Originally it was called

Oil & Vinegar. To avoid consumer confusion with another store in Frederick, Sharon changed the name to **Olive & Basket**, in winter of 2018. The location has always been at the Westview Shopping Center.

Sharon describes the store as the “William & Sonoma of food, because they carry over 300 gourmet food items. A culinary gift store, where not a day goes by when a customer doesn’t come in to find the perfect food gift. Every occasion....bridal showers, weddings, house warming, graduations.” No surprise, who doesn’t love food and ingredients to make good food!

My interest in the store was olive oil, a main ingredient in the Mediterranean diet. For decades I have used olive oil for its health properties but I must admit I was not storing it properly. It does not sit by the stove in a pretty bottle as shown in those decorating magazines. Here are Sharon’s tips for buying and storing olive oil:

1. Buy olive oil in small quantities. Olive oil only last for 12 months. As it ages the health properties decline so be sure to check dates on the bottle.
2. Read the label to find out where the olive oil comes from, it should be from only one source. Many products are adulterated and other oils have been added. 60 minutes did a segment called Agro Mafia you can watch on Vimeo that explains the fraud which occurs.
3. Avoid storing your olive oil in sunlight. Next to the stove or near a window is not the place. Neither is the top shelf of the grocery store where it is exposed to overhead lights.
4. Store the oil in dark, not clear, glass bottles with a secure top to avoid exposure to air and heat. The popular pour spouts are not useful unless they can be securely locked. Olive & Basket sells bottles and you can bring them back, cleaned of course, for refills.

The store offers 18 varieties and 40 different vinegars to pair with it. I literally could have spent an entire day sampling all the choices. Typical fruit based vinegars (Myer lemon, blood orange, fig, strawberry) to the unusual like bourbon, chocolate, and tomato. The most popular is mango, which is often sold out.

While conducting the interview a frequent customer walked in, Helene Matesa from Walkersville, who credits the Cranberry Pear vinegar with helping her lose 25 pounds. Helene says, “It has just a hint of sweetness and I don’t feel deprived, and without any added sugar. I use it on a salad and don’t even need the oil, it’s so delicious.” I made sure I left the store with a sample.

By now I hope I have enticed you to give the Mediterranean diet a try! A diet you can actually follow with food already in your pantry or soon to be. The Dietary Guidelines 2015-2020 promotes the diet, for details on specific amounts of foods to eat see <https://health.gov/dietaryguidelines/2015/guidelines/appendix-4/>

There are plenty of cookbooks on the market, or try one via library loan, to entice you to get into the kitchen. A search on the Frederick County library website shows 19 different cookbooks. If you need help accessing electronic resources just make an appointment with your local librarian for assistance.

Oldways provides recipes at <https://oldwayspt.org/traditional-diets/mediterranean-diet>  
Sign up to get their email and you can be entered to win a Mediterranean gift basket at the end of the month. Meanwhile try these favorite recipes from Olive & Basket.

## **PICI PASTA WITH SPICY OLIVE AND TOMATO SAUCE**

1/2 pound Pici Pasta with Red Chili  
1/2 cup fresh chopped parsley  
1 cup canned whole peeled tomatoes, chopped  
7 Tablespoons extra virgin olive oil  
1 Tablespoon pitted, chopped olives  
Favorite grated cheese to taste  
4 garlic cloves, minced  
1 red pepperoncino, chopped  
Pinch of oregano

Saute garlic, parsley, oregano, olives, and red pepperoncino in oil. Add chopped tomatoes and cook 5-10 minutes.

Boil pasta for 4 minutes, drain then add to sauce and cook. Makes 4 servings.

## **EASY CHOCOLATE CAKE WITH OLIVE OIL IN ONE PAN**

1 1/2 cup flour  
1 cup sugar  
2 tablespoons Dutch processed cocoa  
1 teaspoon baking soda  
1/2 teaspoon salt  
1/4 cup blood orange Extra Virgin Olive Oil + 2 tablespoons  
1 tablespoon Vanilla  
1 tablespoon Vinegar (Cranberry, Cherry Almond, or Blackberry)  
1 cup water or red wine (Adult Version)

Preheat oven to 350°F. Spray an 8x8 pan lightly with cooking spray. Whisk all of the dry ingredients together in the pan. Make three holes and place oil, vanilla, and vinegar individually into each hole. Pour water over all, then mix until fully combined.

Bake for 30-35 minutes, or until a toothpick inserted in center comes out with a few moist crumbs. Set aside to cool.

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