



The Mediterranean diet is currently considered by Nutritionists as a *modus vivende* that endows people with longevity and sound health, with Crete at its epicentre, as supported by research conducted on an international scale¹. It was established that the inhabitants of Crete manifest the lowest mortality indices with respect to cardiovascular diseases and cancer. Researchers then focused their attention on the particular aspects of nutrition responsible for such robust health.

The history of Cretan diet is very old; its roots lie deep in the Neolithic Age. Today science has no proof, only circumstantial evidence of the dietary habits of Cretans 5,000 years ago. However, a clear picture of those habits emerges from as far back as 4,000 years ago, when the Minoan civilization was at its peak. On the basis of archaeological findings, it seems that ancient Cretans, the Minoans, consumed pretty much the same products that are being consumed by modern Cretans today. Large clay jars (*pithoi*) were found in Minoan palaces that were used for the storage of olive oil, grain, legumes, and honey. In various pictorial representations² we can also see the magnificent world of Cretan plants and herbs.

During the Byzantine period, the Cretans remained faithful to their dietary legacy and cooking habits. On the one hand, urban families were keen on preparing elaborate meals distinguished for their exceptional taste. On the other hand, the rural population subsisted strictly on products grown: greens, fruit, legumes, olives and olive oil. The Cretans, however, applied their accumulated knowledge and imagination to these lowly products producing delicious results. This practice sustained Cretans through adverse times, in periods of successive occupation by the Arabs (824-961), the Venetians (1204-1669) and the Turks (1669-1898). A turning point in the Cretan diet occurred with the introduction of new crops, particularly of the tomato, from the New World

The conquerors came and went from Crete, but the Cretan spirit, religion, language and cuisine remained unchanged over the centuries!