

# Exhibition:

## GALERIE DE LA MÉDITERRANÉE, “Le grand Mezzé”<sup>1</sup>

**F. Xavier Medina.** Universitat Oberta de Catalunya, Barcelona

After several months of delay due to the pandemic – the opening was initially scheduled for 16 December 2020 –, the Galerie de la Méditerranée, the semi-permanent exhibition space in the Museum of European and Mediterranean Civilisations (Mucem) in Marseille, finally opened its major new exhibition on 19 May 2021, dedicated on this occasion to food in the Mediterranean area and its famous diet.

Mucem is the first – and only – major French national museum focused on the Mediterranean region. Furthermore, this is possibly one of the very few times when the theme of food, in this geographical area, has had an exhibition of such calibre.

Curated by Édouard de Laubrie, head conservator at Mucem, this exhibition is the result of a collective effort of several years, directed by the museum and with the participation of more than forty international specialists from different parts of the Mediterranean, from the Saint Joseph University of Beirut or the National Treasures Department of Jerusalem to the headquarters of the International Centre for Advanced Mediterranean Agronomic Studies in Bari and Montpellier, the UNESCO Chair on Food, Culture and Development of the Universitat Oberta de Catalunya in Barcelona, the Institut National du Patrimoine in Tunis,

universities including Ibn Tofail in Kenitra, Coimbra, Lyon 2, the Académie d’Athènes, the Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique and the École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales. The exhibition attempts to combine the Mediterranean production and food context with an explanation of what the Mediterranean diet is – or is considered to be – and its story up to the present time. It does so by taking a holistic and critical perspective on the strengths and weaknesses of the different arguments, and the long-range and short-term stories, between the local and the global... An undoubtedly ambitious enterprise.

The Mediterranean diet as a construct is the outcome of processes that have evolved and been enriched by external contributions throughout history. From this starting point, the exhibition poses some of the following questions: How can geographical and cultural culinary authenticity be defined and preserved as something shared by an enormous number (millions) of people? How can a diet be catalogued and protected without preventing it from evolving? How can it remain permeable while continuing to be *authentic*? These are some of the questions raised by the exhibition, which covers in a didactic and graphic way most of the aspects that affect our daily diet in the

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1. Museum of European and Mediterranean Civilisations, Marseille, 19 May 2021 - 31 December 2023.

Mediterranean area, and that take it from the field to the plate, embracing tangible culture, heritage, health and gastronomy or culinary knowledge.

It is clear that the Mediterranean diet is a social and cultural construct. It is also synonymous with different simultaneous and, at the same time, almost antagonistic trends: on the one hand, the necessary reference to and re-appropriation by the Mediterranean of its productions and cuisines, giving them a grouping based on a culinary system considered common, which tries to bring together under its mantle different aspects of its different cuisines. On the other hand, we must note the role of globalisation, which, aided by technologies – with the Internet as a basic element – means that, today, information, trends, values, policies, dishes or cuisines circulate and permeate the distinct societies in a different way and to a different degree. In this respect, the exhibition aims to highlight local specificities, but also, and at the same time, medium and long-term evolutions. Evolutions that make it very difficult to “fix” any heritage element, whether tangible or, and very especially, intangible, in a useful way that can go beyond taking a simple situational snapshot at a given moment.

Bearing these premises in mind, the exhibition unfolds before our eyes in the manner of a great feast full of dishes – tapas or *mezzé* – that are varied and tasty. The itinerary of “Le grand Mezzé” feast is organised in two sequences: the first, “From field to plate”, explains some basic concepts for understanding food in the Mediterranean area; the second, “Between here and elsewhere”, tells us about the globalised construction our food is undergoing, its continuous state of evolution and the construction and re-appropriation of territories throughout history, especially in the last couple of centuries. In this way, a selection of around 550 objects and documents from thirty-five museums and institutions

from different Mediterranean and European countries is presented, as well as twelve simultaneous audiovisual projects and six unseen works of art, created specifically for this exhibition, commissioned from artists such as Michel Blazy, Christine Coulange-Sisygambis, Laurent Fiévet, Laurent Derobert, Nicolas Boulard and Gerald de Viviès.

The exhibition has diverse objectives. On the one hand, historically and geographically, it shows how, due to its strategic position at a spatial level and to the successive civilisations that have traversed and built it, the Mediterranean area is not only an exceptional agricultural and culinary melting pot, but also an important centre of adaptation, acclimatisation and redistribution at a global level. Since the Neolithic age, the lands surrounding the Mediterranean have been a crossroads where people, plants, animals and knowledge converge in connection with the rest of the surrounding areas and with others further afield. It has never ceased to be a zone of acclimatisation and transit, due to its geography and climate, but also to its trade routes by land and sea – and more recently air –, and all this despite ongoing geopolitical tensions of every type, moment and magnitude.

On the other hand, there is a desire to offer a dynamic and evolving vision of food in the Mediterranean area. The inclusion of the Mediterranean diet in the Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity by UNESCO could seem to intend to freeze, fix – just as any form of heritage tries to do – and delimit this dynamic and changing diet in continuous evolution and interaction with other food models. Globalisation, for its part, also runs the risk of irremediably reducing this Mediterranean diet to a few emblematic products, and to a few specific and, possibly, oversized focuses of attention, with particular reference to health.

Thus, it would be easy to fall into the trap of thinking that the Mediterranean diet is already

closed in itself, inevitably or without any possibility of evolving. It would be easy to fall into the trap of thinking that the Mediterranean area is no longer enriching its cuisines – as it has done since the beginning of time, and especially from 15th to 17th centuries, with the products that came from the Americas, but also with those sent there from the Old World, and just as still happens today, for example, with the foods and cuisines of the East or of various American regions. Similarly, we cannot forget that Mediterranean cuisines also travel, and that they have reached all parts of the world, have been integrated into other culinary systems and even have different local adaptations as a result of intermixing, which are neither new nor strange.

We cannot conclude this discussion about the objectives of the exhibition without once again highlighting the desire to demystify and the critical spirit that guides it, trying to escape hackneyed stereotypes and preconceived ideas, and endeavouring to offer an overall, fluid, interdisciplinary and holistic vision of a phenomenon that affects us all at all stages of our lives and is too important to be overlooked.

Finally, it is worth taking a look at the interesting catalogue,<sup>2</sup> published by the museum in collaboration with the French publisher Actes Sud and under the direction of Édouard de Laubrie. It features different texts that have inspired the exhibition, or that use it to reflect on the indisputable major role of our diet in the Mediterranean area.

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2. Laubrie, Édouard (dir.), *Le grand Mezzé*, Marseille, Musée des Civilisations d'Europe et de la Méditerranée (Mucem) / Actes Sud, 2021.