

Greek snails in olive oil the long-life recipe



MEDICAL BRIEFING
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Dr Thomas Stuttaford p. 5.

THE large southern Greek snail contains the most health-giving fats in just the correct proportions, and its regular consumption, after being cooked in olive oil, may be one of many factors that makes Cretans the longest-living people in Europe.

Doctors discussing 50 years of research into the Mediterranean diet have been told that the average family in Crete, where they are meeting, still eat snails cooked in olive oil three times a week.

In southern Greece olive oil is used plentifully in cooking, and olives are eaten with plenty of rough bread, a wide variety of green vegetables and fruits as well as fish, cheese, mutton and red wine.

During the Second World War, when rationing restricted people's choice of food, a marked reduction in heart disease in Europe was noted. In consequence, in 1947 scientists recruited 10,000 middle-aged men from 16 centres in seven countries to study the relationship between their food, lifestyle and health.

Medical theories are often rediscovered and one of Napoleon's doctors, Professor Corvisart, recommended a diet that is remarkably similar to the one being analysed in Crete this week. Corvisart not only praised the use of olive oil, suggested a reduction in animal fat and the avoidance of "too plentiful a table", but understood the importance of having the opportunity "to satisfy the natural affections" and the virtues of regular exercise.

Samuel Black, an early 19th-century Irish physician in Newry, Co Down, was much influenced by Corvisart's book after his friend, a Mr Carson, collapsed and died while drinking chocolate. At his post-mortem examination

Dr Black was surprised to find that Mr Carson's coronary arteries were so calcified that they resembled the stem of a clay pipe. Thereafter, the arteries were prominently displayed in Dr Black's house and acted as a warning to his other friends and patients to follow his advice.

Alun Evans, of Queen's University, Belfast, continues to teach the importance of Dr Black's theories, now suitably modified, and lectured in Crete on the effect on health of the differences in lifestyle in northern and southern Europe.

Variations in diet and exercise interact with genetic factors and result in a death rate from heart disease four times greater in Northern Ireland than southern France. There is a fivefold greater likelihood of dying from coronary heart disease in North America or northern Europe than in the southern parts of Europe where the traditional Mediterranean diet is still taken.

The advantages of the liberal use of olive oil to prevent coronary heart disease and cardiac arrhythmias is increasingly well understood. Olive oil is a mono-unsaturated fat, avoiding the problems related to consumption of saturated fats, and it has the advantage that its use for thousands of years has failed to reveal any side-effects.

Professor Evans is keenly interested in the value to health of the natural antioxidants in the Mediterranean such as those found in olives and tomatoes.

The variety of vegetables and fruit eaten in southern Europe also helps to ensure good health: whereas a traditional northern European chooses from about 15 green vegetables, in Crete more than 100 different wild or cultivated plants are still eaten regularly.