

Mediterranean cuisine embraces a remarkable diversity of food cultures, stretching from Cyprus and Greece across southern Europe to Spain and the shores of North Africa.

Although these regions share many ingredients, their culinary traditions, flavour combinations and cooking techniques are strikingly distinctive, shaped by geography, history and centuries of cultural exchange.

At the heart of these cuisines are two unifying elements: olives and aromatic herbs. Olive oil provides richness, texture and a foundation for cooking, while rosemary, thyme, oregano, basil and parsley bring fragrance, freshness and regional character.

Seafood naturally plays a prominent role, and our featured recipe celebrates one of my favourite pleasures: enjoying a fragrant bowl of fish soup in a Mediterranean port café.

Originating as a humble fisherman's dish, prepared from the day's unsold catch, this wonderfully aromatic preparation has evolved into a celebrated regional speciality. Our version combines fresh seafood with a smooth saffron, tomato and fennel broth, finished with vibrant herb oil and traditional garlicky rouille.

This week, we explore Mediterranean — The Olive & Herb System, where simple ingredients, aromatic herbs and skilful preparation create extraordinary flavour.



Kitchen Haiku

Olive groves unfold
Wild herbs scent the coastal breeze
The sea fills our bowls

This Week's Focus - The Olive & Herb System

Mediterranean cooking demonstrates how a small group of complementary ingredients creates remarkable regional diversity.

OLIVE OIL - Provides richness, body and flavour.

HERBS - Introduce fragrance, freshness and identity.

ACIDITY - Lemon, wine and vinegar bring brightness.

AROMATICS - Garlic, onion and fennel establish depth.

LOCAL PRODUCE - Seafood, vegetables and grains define regional character.

These elements work together through roasting, grilling, simmering, braising and gentle infusions.

The principle: Build flavour through quality ingredients, aromatic foundations and carefully controlled richness.



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Flavour Lens

Profile

Herbaceous • Fruity • Savoury • Aromatic • Bright • Earthy • Coastal

Behaviour

Infuses • Sautés • Roasts • Grills • Braises • Simmer • Emulsifies

Balance Role

Olive oil carries flavour and provides richness. Herbs contribute aromatic complexity. Acidity refreshes the palate, while garlic, vegetables and seafood establish savoury depth.

Key Pairings

Extra Virgin Olive Oil • Rosemary • Thyme • Oregano • Basil • Parsley • Garlic • Fennel • Tomato • Lemon • Saffron • Seafood



Chef's Insight – Simplicity Requires Precision

Mediterranean cooking is frequently described as simple.
Yet simplicity places greater importance on ingredient quality and technique.
A good olive oil can transform a finished dish.
Fresh herbs must be introduced at the appropriate stage.
Acidity should brighten without overwhelming.
And seafood requires careful cooking to preserve its natural flavour and texture.
The fewer the ingredients, the more important each becomes.

Ingredient Spotlight – Extra Virgin Olive Oil

Olive oil is more than a cooking medium. It is a defining ingredient of Mediterranean cuisine.
Its flavour varies with olive variety, maturity, origin and processing, ranging from delicate and buttery to grassy, peppery and pleasantly bitter.
Used in cooking, it helps release and carry the flavours of garlic, vegetables and aromatic herbs.
Added as a finishing oil, it contributes fragrance, richness and texture.
Its character should complement the preparation rather than overwhelm delicate ingredients.

Chef's Rule
Choose olive oil for its flavour as well as its function.



Five Foundations of Mediterranean Flavour

Element	Typical Ingredients	Culinary Function
Olive Oil	Extra virgin olive oil	Richness and flavour carrier
Herbs	Rosemary, thyme, oregano, basil	Aroma and identity
Acidity	Lemon, wine, vinegar	Brightness and balance
Aromatics	Garlic, onion, fennel	Savoury foundations
Local Produce	Seafood, tomato, vegetables	Freshness and character

Beyond the Five Elements

SEASONALITY – Local harvests influence flavour and preparation.
TECHNIQUE – Gentle simmering, grilling and roasting develop different expressions of the same ingredients.
TEXTURE – Crisp bread, tender seafood and smooth sauces provide contrast.
The principle: Respect the ingredients and allow their natural character to remain recognisable.

Professional Application

OLIVE OIL CARRIES THE FLAVOUR

- Herbs provide aromatic character.
- Garlic and vegetables build the foundation.
- Wine and citrus bring brightness.
- Seafood and local produce establish identity.
- Technique brings these elements together.

A Practical Mediterranean Flavour Sequence

1. **BUILD THE BASE** - Gently soften garlic, onion, fennel or other aromatics in olive oil.
2. **DEVELOP THE CHARACTER** - Introduce tomatoes, wine, herbs and other regional ingredients.
3. **CONTROL THE COOKING** - Simmer, roast or grill according to the ingredients and desired texture.
4. **REFRESH THE FINISH** - Use lemon, fresh herbs or a distinctive finishing olive oil.

THE CHEF'S RULE

- BUILD THE FOUNDATION.
- RELEASE THE AROMATICS.
- PRESERVE THE INGREDIENT.

Mediterranean cooking demonstrates how quality produce and carefully selected herbs can create complexity without unnecessary complication.



Mediterranean Olive & Herb System Podcast

Mediterranean Regional Cuisine

Flavours, Customs & Culinary Traditions

Mediterranean cuisine reflects diverse cultures shaped by geography, trade and tradition. Olive oil, herbs, vegetables and seafood provide common foundations, yet regional flavours remain distinctive.

Greece & Cyprus favour olive oil, oregano, lemon and mint. Grilled seafood, meze, salads and shared dishes characterise their cuisine.

Southern Italy celebrates tomatoes, basil, garlic and olive oil. Pasta, seafood and seasonal vegetables emphasise freshness and simplicity.

Southern France & Provence feature rosemary, thyme, fennel and olive oil. Seafood soups, grilled fish and herb-infused sauces reflect coastal traditions.

Mediterranean Spain combines olive oil, saffron, paprika and garlic. Seafood rice dishes, tapas and slow-cooked specialities are prominent.

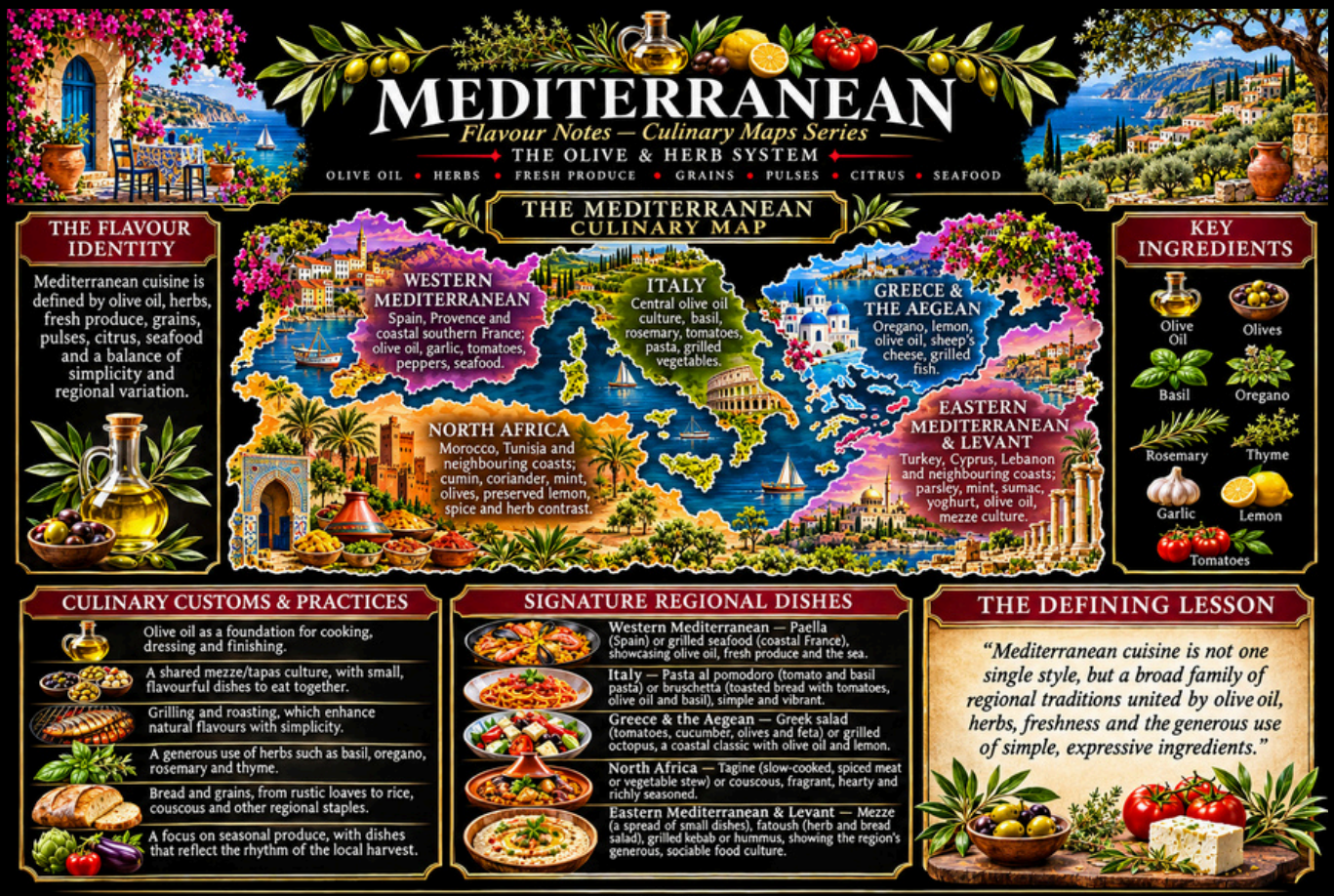
North Africa introduces cumin, coriander, preserved lemon and chilli. Couscous, seafood and aromatic slow-cooked dishes reflect diverse cultural influences.

Eastern Mediterranean favours parsley, mint, lemon, sesame and olive oil. Mezze, grilled dishes, flatbreads and pulses encourage communal dining.

Culinary Customs & Practices

Shared dishes, seasonal markets and outdoor dining are widespread. Grilling, roasting, braising and gentle simmering are traditional techniques, with bread accompanying many meals.

Chef's Insight: Shared ingredients unite Mediterranean cuisines; regional traditions give each its distinctive character.



This Week's Infographic

Flavour Notes — Series II

Issue 34 — Global Flavour Systems

MEDITERRANEAN

The Olive & Herb System

Flavour System Focus: Oils and Herbs

A cuisine built on exceptional ingredients, olive oil, fresh herbs and seasonal produce — creating food that is vibrant, balanced and full of character.

1. Core Ingredients & Flavour Contributors

Olive Oil	Garlic	Lemon	Tomato	Olives	Capers	Herbs	Sea Salt
The foundation — fruity, peppery and aromatic.	A key aromatic that adds depth and character.	Brings freshness, brightness and balance.	Adds natural sweetness, acidity and depth.	A savoury, briny note that defines regional character.	A small ingredient with a big impact — sharp and aromatic.	Rosemary, thyme, oregano, basil, parsley and mint bring regional identity.	Enhances and harmonises all the flavours.

2. The System in Practice

- **Olive Oil** — Carries flavour, softens and binds ingredients.
- **Herbs** — Add aroma, freshness and regional character.
- **Acidity** (Lemon, wine, vinegar) — Lifts and balances richness.
- **Produce** — Seasonal vegetables add sweetness, texture and colour.
- **Protein** — Often simple, allowing the oil, herbs and produce to shine.

3. Key Herbs & Their Uses

- **Basil** — Sweet, fresh, ideal for tomatoes, fish and salads.
- **Oregano** — Robust and earthy, perfect for grilled meats, vegetables and sauces.
- **Thyme** — Warm and versatile, enhances meats, fish, beans and stews.
- **Rosemary** — Piney and aromatic, excellent with lamb, chicken, potatoes and roasted veg.
- **Parsley** — Fresh and clean, adds brightness to almost any dish.
- **Mint** — Cool and refreshing, superb with lamb, yoghurt and grains.
- **Sage** — Earthy and distinctive, ideal for poultry, pork and beans.
- **Marjoram** — Milder and sweeter than oregano, great in sauces, braises and dressings.

4. Oil, Herb & Flavour Pairings

- **Olive Oil + Tomato + Basil** — Classic Mediterranean harmony — simple, fresh and vibrant.
- **Lemon + Fish + Parsley** — Bright, clean and elegant.
- **Garlic + Lamb + Rosemary** — Bold, aromatic and deeply savoury.
- **Olives + Vegetables + Oregano** — Rich, earthy and distinctly Mediterranean.

5. Regional Examples

- **Provence (France)** — Herbs, olive oil and garlic with seasonal produce.
- **Italy** — Olive oil, basil, tomatoes and fresh herbs.
- **Spain** — Olive oil, peppers, tomatoes and smoked notes.
- **Greece** — Olive oil, lemon, oregano and fresh seafood.
- **North Africa** — Olive oil, preserved lemon, herbs and warm spices.

6. Cooking Applications

- **Grilling** — Adds smokiness and depth.
- **Stewing** — Builds rich, layered flavours.
- **Roasting** — Concentrates natural sweetness.
- **Dressings** — Simple, fresh and aromatic.
- **Herb Oils** — Infuses the essence of fresh herbs into oil.
- **Rouille & Aioli** — Rich, garlicky sauces that complete the dish.

7. Chef's Tips

- Use a good-quality extra virgin olive oil — it makes a real difference.
- Add fresh herbs towards the end of cooking to retain their character.
- Balance richness with acidity (lemon, vinegar or tomatoes).
- Keep the ingredients simple and seasonal.
- Make herb oils and flavoured oils for extra versatility.
- Use rouille, aioli or tapenade to add depth and contrast.

8. The Flavour Build

1. Start with olive oil.
2. Add aromatics (garlic, onions).
3. Build with seasonal produce (tomatoes, peppers, fennel, etc.).
4. Layer in herbs (fresh or dried).
5. Add protein (fish, meat or legumes).
6. Finish with acidity, fresh herbs and, if needed, a sauce such as rouille or aioli.

9. Featured Dish

Mediterranean Fish Soup with Herb Oil and Rouille



The Flavour in Action

- Olive oil carries aromatics and herbs, creating a fragrant base.
- Tomatoes and broth provide depth and natural sweetness.
- Seafood brings savouriness and the essence of the sea.
- Herb oil adds a fresh, aromatic lift and vibrant finish.
- Rouille brings richness, garlic and a gentle spice, the classic Mediterranean counterpoint.

Liquid Counterpoint:
A crisp dry white wine or sparkling water with lemon and herbs.

The Chef's Five-Point Check

BEFORE IT LEAVES THE KITCHEN

01 Does the olive oil complement the dish without overwhelming it?

02 Are the herbs fragrant and appropriately balanced?

03 Is the acidity sufficient to lift the richness?

04 Have the aromatics developed without burning?

05 Are the ingredients correctly cooked, with their natural textures preserved?

The best Mediterranean dishes allow their ingredients to speak clearly.



Chef's Insight

"Great Mediterranean cooking depends on knowing when to develop flavour - and when to leave the ingredient alone."

Kitchen Practice - Build the Olive & Herb System

1. Select the Right Olive Oil - Consider the oil's flavour, intensity and intended use. Reserve particularly distinctive oils for preparations where their character can be appreciated.

2. Establish an Aromatic Foundation - Gently soften garlic, onion, fennel or other vegetables to release their flavour without excessive colouring.

3. Understand Herb Behaviour - Hardy herbs such as rosemary and thyme tolerate longer cooking. Tender herbs such as basil and parsley generally benefit from later addition or careful infusion.

4. Balance Richness with Acidity - Use lemon, wine or vinegar to refresh olive-oil-rich preparations and sharpen savoury flavours.

5. Preserve Natural Texture - Cook seafood gently, avoid overworking vegetables and finish dishes with fresh herbs or olive oil where appropriate.





A practical application of this week's flavour system

Mediterranean Fish Soup With Herb Oil and Saffron-Garlic Rouille

A refined Mediterranean seafood soup of firm white fish, prawns, mussels and squid in a smooth puréed broth of tomato, fennel, garlic, saffron and white wine. Finished with fresh parsley-basil oil, grilled bread and a saffron-garlic rouille, it brings together the olive oil, herbs, seafood and bright aromatics characteristic of Mediterranean cooking.





What This Dish Teaches

OLIVE OIL - Establishes the cooking foundation and carries the aromatics.
HERBS - Thyme and bay develop the broth; parsley and basil provide a fresh finish.
ACIDITY - White wine, tomato and lemon bring brightness.
AROMATICS - Fennel, garlic, onion, leek and orange zest create depth.
SEAFOOD - White fish, prawns, mussels and squid provide savoury character.
TEXTURE -Smooth broth contrasts with tender seafood, crisp bread & rouille.

The result: A refined interpretation of a traditional Mediterranean fisherman's soup, celebrating the interaction of olive oil, herbs, seafood and aromatic ingredients.

🔗 **Recipe: Mediterranean Fish Soup with Rouille**

The Liquid Counterpoint – A Crisp Mediterranean White Wine

A dry, refreshing Mediterranean white wine, such as Vermentino or Assyrtiko, provides an appealing accompaniment to aromatic seafood soup.

From the Kitchen - The Fisherman's Soup

Across Mediterranean fishing communities, seafood soups developed as practical ways of using smaller fish and portions of the day's catch. Local vegetables, olive oil, herbs and available seafood formed the foundation, with preparations varying from port to port.

Our featured recipe takes inspiration from this tradition, refining the broth through puréeing and straining while retaining its essential Mediterranean character.

The parsley-basil oil introduces a vivid herbal finish, while the saffron-garlic rouille adds depth and richness.

For me, few dining experiences capture the Mediterranean quite like a bowl of fragrant fish soup enjoyed in a small port café, with good bread and the sea close by.



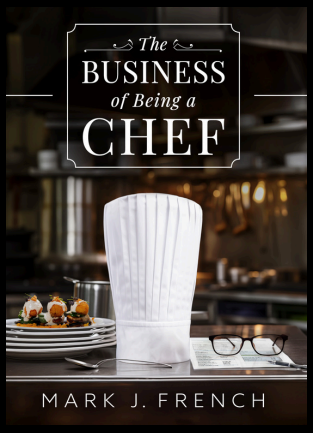
Further Reading & Resources

From the Library

See flavour balance charts and acidity mapping in the ChefsNotebooks archives.

The Business of Being a Chef

For a deeper understanding of flavour structure and kitchen systems, The Business of Being a Chef provides useful operational context alongside culinary insight.
🔗https://chefsnotebooks.com/books



The Business of Being a Chef is the result of more than 30 years of experience in hotels and restaurants throughout the world. It is a guide to managing the multiple business demands of today's executive chef, encompassing diverse areas including cooking, taste, food safety, human resources, finance, and sales & marketing, amongst others. It is also a great resource for operations managers.

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About the Author

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