Eating the Italian Way with the MyPyramid Food Guidance System

The great thing about eating the Italian way is that you can do it within the parameters of the new Dietary Guidelines for Americans and MyPyramid Food Guidance System. The new Dietary Guidelines describe a healthy diet as one that:

- Emphasizes fruits, vegetables, whole grains, and fat-free or low-fat milk and milk products;
- Includes lean meats, poultry, fish, beans, eggs, and nuts; and
- Is low in saturated fats, trans fats, cholesterol, salt (sodium), and added sugars.

The new Guidelines can be easily translated to accommodate Italian cuisine, whether it’s a well-designed pasta meal or a traditional three-course Italian dinner. Following are some key recommendations in the new Dietary Guidelines that can easily be applied to the Italian diet:

- **Grains:** Grains still make up the largest portion of the new food pyramid with a recommended 6-8 ounces a day for most adult men and women. Of these, the new guidelines recommend that at least 3 ounces be whole grains. So pasta still makes the list of healthy grains, with up to 2 ounces dry pasta (1-2 cups of cooked) being appropriate in a day — that still leaves 3 ounces to be filled by whole grains.

- **Vegetables:** The new guidelines call for eating more vegetables to the tune of 2½ cups per day — something that can easily be accomplished when pasta is used with a vehicle. Toss a generous portion of fresh vegetables (of any variety) with a cup of cooked pasta and a drizzle of good extra virgin olive oil to create a virtually limitless variety of nutritious pasta meals. The new guidelines emphasize dark green and orange vegetables, so experiment with spinach, pumpkin and squash; all vegetables used in various regional Italian dishes.

- **Fruits:** Americans should eat the equivalent of 2 cups of fruit per day. Italians often have fresh fruit for dessert, so try satisfying your sweet tooth after meals (or as snacks) with a variety of fresh fruit after dinner (maybe with a piece of good cheese or some nuts) instead of dessert options heavy on calories and fat.

- **Fiber:** Many American diets lack a sufficient amount of fiber. However, many typical Italian foods like legumes (beans), vegetables, fruits, and grains are all good sources. So whether you’re enjoying pasta with high-fiber vegetables like broccoli and spinach, or filling up on a hearty Tuscan bean stew, eating the Italian way can easily fulfill daily fiber recommendations.
• **Healthy Fats:** Fat is essential for good nutrition, however Americans should select foods with healthy fats such as those found in olive oil and nuts. Trans fats should be avoided and saturated fats kept to a minimum.

• **Fish and Lean Protein:** The new Guidelines recommend 2 servings of fish per week, which is rich in protein and Omega-3 fatty acids. Fish is eaten in many varieties throughout Italy and prepared in a variety of ways. When selecting meats and poultry, choose the leanest cuts possible. Typical Italian secondo courses (which mainly consist of poultry, fish or meat) are simply prepared without lots of butter or oils. Portion size should also be taken into consideration: the new Dietary Guidelines recommend keeping meats, fish and poultry to 5-6 ounces a day for most adult men and women.

• **Milk & Dairy:** The new guidelines call for 3 cups a day of fat-free or low-fat milk products. Italians are known for having a cappuccino for breakfast, so try a morning cappuccino with skim milk — but only for breakfast, Italians never have cappuccinos in the evening! Cheese is also a staple of the Italian diet and a good source of calcium — it's often sprinkled in small amounts to add flavor and richness to Italian dishes, or one or two pieces can be served for dessert.

• **Limit salt and added sugars:** When you prepare an Italian meal at home using fresh, healthy ingredients like pasta, vegetables, fish, tomato sauce and olive oil, you can spare yourself and your family high levels of salt (sodium) and added sugars found in many pre-packaged frozen and canned dinners. In addition to the health benefits of cooking from scratch, homemade Italian meals taste better and don’t take much longer to prepare.

• **Balance physical activity with food:** The new food pyramid recommends adding more physical activity into daily routines. For the Italians, this is a regular part of living and culture. Even if you can’t get to the gym every day, make it a point to take a walk, use the stairs, or find a new hobby you can enjoy frequently like biking or dancing!

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