

Nutrition expert  
Claudia Probart  
explores how the  
Mediterranean  
lifestyle translates  
into good health  
and sensual pleasures.

By Sharon Sanders

## When in Rome



When Claudia K. Probart welcomes a visitor to the apartment she borrows on the broad Viale Aventino in Rome, she lays out a hospitable spread. She pours a glass of Tuscan Rosso di Montalcino wine and proffers a tempting antipasto of fresh *salame* and young Pecorino cheese—the kind of foods she shops for at local markets like the idyllic Campo de' Fiori and the nearby Testaccio. A blue-eyed blond with an engaging laugh, Probart's conversation ranges in several directions, from the character of the light in Italy to the troubled life of the artist Caravaggio to her enthusiasm for digital photography. It's all so relaxing and sociable that it's easy to forget that the nibbles and lively conversation

are a reflection of her life's work: learning about nutrition and sharing that knowledge with others.

To her way of thinking, these simple pleasures—a glass of wine, a bit of cheese, and a pleasant chat—are the stuff of a healthy lifestyle. No one knows that better than residents of the Mediterranean region, which stretches from the shores of Spain and France to Italy and Greece to Turkey and North Africa. Probart, an associate professor of nutrition at Pennsylvania State University, spends part of each year in Italy investigating the science of the

Cycling first brought Probart to Italy. Today, she continues to explore the country on bike.

Mediterranean diet in its cultural setting. She believes that Italy is the ideal classroom for students to study—and experience—the intersection of cuisine, health, and culture.

"Rome is such an enchanting city. It's difficult not to feel that this is a very special place," she says. "I've become so immersed in the importance of the environment, the milieu, and the mystique of being in Italy—eating a Mediterranean diet, listening to all the





sounds in a piazza, watching Italians eat together, how vivacious and lively they are. You can't give a lecture and teach that; you need to bring students over here and say, "See?"

To that end, she introduces small groups of students to the culture through Penn State's Rome-based International Program in Nutrition. She also works as a consultant for the United Nations' Food and Agricultural Organization in Rome, developing nutrition education programs for third-world countries.

### Firsthand Observation

Although Probart's work as a nutritionist brings her to Rome every year, it was her lifelong passion for cycling that drew her to Italy more than a decade ago.

"My first bike ride in Italy was in Bassano del Grappa in the Veneto region," recalls Probart, who divides her time between the Eternal City and a 150-year-old converted one-room schoolhouse in central Pennsylvania. "We cycled hard every morning in spectacular scenery.

We toured churches, monasteries, and Palladian villas. And our hotel provided the best foods—magical risottos, magnificent pastas, copious antipasti, sweet fresh fruits, and the wonderful, light regional wines."

The food attracted her attention, and planted the seed of a question: While the diet of the people in the region is certainly healthful, is there also a connection between their way of life and their health and longevity?

What has since come to be called the Mediterranean diet is a way of eating that focuses on fish, olive oil, whole grains, and fresh produce—all elements of traditional Italian cuisine. It relies on herbs and tangy vinegars for flavor, and incor-

Probart's students search for culinary treasures in markets like the Volpetti.

porates red wine into many meals. Studies have linked this heart-healthy diet to long life spans and a low incidence of chronic disease. While much of the existing scientific research into the Mediterranean diet focuses on the omega-3 fatty acids in fish oils or the lycopene and other antioxidants in tomatoes, Probart suggests the diet's benefits come from more than chemical compounds.

She believes *how* you eat might be just as important as *what* you eat, and points to the Italian habit of lingering over *pranzo* (lunch), engaged in animated conversation, and the *passeggiata*, a leisurely evening stroll just before or after dinner. She suggests these factors might cause nutrients to metabolize more effectively than they do in people with faster-paced lifestyles. "The health and longevity associated with the Mediterranean diet cannot be explained by biochemistry alone," Probart explains. "Cultural, environmental, and genetic factors share some role in the benefits."

She concedes that quantifying the connection is difficult. But stress and negative emotions can play havoc with digestion, she notes, while a pleasant eating environment and the positive emotions associated with it may aid in digestion. "Whether metabolism is also impacted is less certain and remains to



be investigated," Probart says. "But that hypothesis could account for some of the unexplained health benefits of the Mediterranean diet."

Her students can't begin to consider the lifestyle effect until they have experienced it firsthand, she says. She wants them to really understand the connection. "It's important for them to taste a local tomato, drizzled with pungent olive oil, on a thick slice of farro wheat bread purchased from an open market," Probart explains. "I hope they get a new and different relationship with food, and maybe in some small way share that as they become professionals. When they go back to their hospitals, when they're trying to promote olive oil over butter or margarine, they'll have a little bag of tricks." (For some of Probart's tricks to help you incorporate Mediterranean habits into your own diet, see "5 Ways to Bring the Mediterranean Diet Home" on page 108.)

Probart's curriculum includes trips to local farms, olive groves, trattorias, *ali-*

*mentari* (small grocery stores), and open-air food markets where *la cucina Italiana* truly comes to life. Students might visit the ruins of a bakery in Pompeii or sample chickpea soup prepared from a classic recipe and enjoyed with the Greek temples of Paestum as a backdrop. Or they might just spend an afternoon in a trattoria, observing how Italians interact during their meals. Probart's groups have become such a regular fixture around Rome that a sign at the well-known specialty food store proclaims, "Penn State Students Love Volpetti's."

And she continues to explore Italy on her own educational bicycle trips, many tied to regional culinary specialties. "I just pick a place and a topic and go there to try to find out about it," she says. Two upcoming trips include tasting a local fish stew on a route from Venice south to Pescara and sampling balsamic vinegars around Modena.

## Finding Her Own Path

Cycling is one of the few direct links between Probart's present life

and her challenging childhood spent in central California, during which she attended more than 30 schools as her father traveled from job to job at canneries and construction sites. "We moved around so much that I wasn't able to make any close friends. But my bike became my constant companion and provided me access to the world. Whenever my family moved to a new area, the first thing I did was jump on my bike and explore the neighborhood. I do the same thing now," Probart says.

"Claudia will go on a 50-mile bike ride like I would drive to the mall," quips Cheryl Schissler about her older sister's zest for two-wheeled travel. Two bikes are tucked into a small room just off the foyer of Probart's Rome apartment; another five (along with her cat Amelia) await her in Pennsylvania.

Besides the frequent moves, Probart faced other challenges growing up. Her parents struggled to feed their family of five. Often, school lunch was the only hot meal of the day. "For poor families, healthful eating means getting enough

"In doing research, I got a sense of the power foods have in our lives and in our health. It seemed a little bit magical."



Italians enjoy their food and linger over pleasant trattoria lunches—a habit that may improve their health.



## 5 Ways to Bring the Mediterranean Diet Home

If a Mediterranean city is not your home, how can you emulate this healthful style of eating? We asked Claudia Probart for tips.

1. Cook with heart-healthy and vitamin E-rich olive oil. "We've known for years the importance of using olive oil," Probart says, "and the more we learn, the more we appreciate it." Olive oil is low in saturated fat and high in monounsaturated fat, and its polyphenols can reduce the risk of chronic disease.

2. Shop for simple, high-quality ingredients, including locally grown fresh produce. Probart shops daily and purchases small quantities.

3. Cook and enjoy dried semolina pasta often, and serve it al dente (cooked so it's neither too firm nor too soft and mushy) with sauces made from such fresh ingredients as greens, beans, and herbs.

4. Treat yourself to a leisurely midday meal with friends or family whenever you can. If possible, fit in a short stroll after lunch.

5. Bring joy to every meal—whether through dining with friends, eating outdoors in a pleasant environment, or approaching your repast, even the simplest one, with a sense of anticipation and celebration.

food, and exercise means walking where you need to go," she says.

As a young wife and mother, Probart studied accounting at East Los Angeles College because she thought it would help her earn a good living. But a required health class decided her future when she was assigned a term paper on nutrition.

"I thought it was all memorizing and categorizing," she recalls. "But in doing the research, I got a sense of the power foods have in our lives and in our health. It seemed a little bit magical. At the time I was married and my son was small, and I became excited about this powerful element I could add to our lives to make us healthier. As I learned more about nutrition, it dawned on me that maybe I could make a contribution not just to my family but to other people."

Bachelor's and master's degrees in nutrition from Utah State University followed, and Probart earned her doctorate from the University of Oregon. "I hate for this to sound trite," she says, "but it's because I did come from a poor family that I know that poor people don't have

access to the literature and resources that most wealthy people do. The people who need nutrition information are often the people least apt to receive it. Just in recognizing that, there's an obligation to fill in that gap."

**"The health and longevity associated with the Mediterranean diet cannot be explained only by biochemistry. Cultural, environmental, and genetic factors share some role in the benefits."**

After nearly a decade of work in the public health sector—as a director of dietetics for hospitals; as a nutritionist program manager for the Women, Infants, and Children's Program; and as a nutrition consultant for the Head Start Program—Probart entered academia, where much of her work emphasizes public health. She spearheaded Project PA, a collaboration between Penn State and Pennsylvania's Department of Education aimed at improving the nutritional value of school lunches. To help food-service directors adhere to federal guidelines and reduce fat in their lunch offerings, she oversaw satellite teleconferences, videotapes, computer-training classes, and hands-on instruction, which

included developing teams of master instructors available to schools across the state. She's still involved in providing education and materials to parents, teachers, and administrators to help combat childhood obesity.

Even though Probart directs projects around the world, her heart belongs to Rome. There, students are nurtured by her model of an active life. And she hopes they value the experience as much as she does. "Rome is special because its view goes back thousands of years and encompasses the two greatest lightning bolts of Western civilization—the rise of the Roman Empire and the Renaissance," she says. "To be able to explore their effects on a daily basis is a privilege I treasure."

And naturally, she's glad that her accounting studies didn't pan out. "I've had a fulfilling career and an opportunity to make a difference," she says, "but at the end of the day, I feel really good about what I do. I feel fortunate to have had this experience in Rome, but even more fortunate to have had this experience in nutrition."



### Pasta with Pomodoro Sauce

*Pomodoro* is Italian for tomato. Probart prepares this light, simple pasta dish at least once a week. She adds any flavorful ingredients she has on hand, such as chopped black or green olives.

- 2 tablespoons olive oil
  - 4 garlic cloves, minced
  - ½ teaspoon freshly ground black pepper
  - ¼ teaspoon salt
  - 1 (28-ounce) can whole tomatoes, undrained and coarsely chopped
  - ¼ cup finely sliced fresh basil
  - 8 cups hot cooked penne (about 1 pound uncooked tube-shaped pasta)
1. Heat oil in a large nonstick skillet over medium heat. Add garlic; cook 2 minutes, stirring constantly (do not

brown). Stir in pepper, salt, and tomatoes; bring to a boil. Reduce heat; simmer 7 minutes or until slightly thick, stirring occasionally. Remove from heat; stir in basil. Serve over pasta. Yield: 6 servings (serving size: ⅔ cup sauce and 1 ⅓ cups pasta).

CALORIES 346 (15% from fat); FAT 5.6g (sat 0.9g, mono 3.3g, poly 0.4g); PROTEIN 11.6g; CARB 61.5g; FIBER 3.6g; CHOL 0mg; IRON 3.3mg; SODIUM 342mg; CALC 43mg



*Certified Culinary Professional Sharon Sanders is the author of *Cooking Up an Italian Life* (Pergola West, 2001). She also publishes a newsletter about Italian food and life on her Web site, [www.simpleitaly.com](http://www.simpleitaly.com).*