

GREEK CUISINE

The Greek food throughout its history and continuing today is for the Greeks a philosophy, they know that what makes a perfect feast is not just the food but also the good company. Food is nearly always prepared with the tastes of the guests in mind, should the dishes be roasted or fried, light or heavy? and the wine carefully chosen. Much of the conversation at the dinner table centres amicably around the food. The freshness of the fish, having just leapt from the sea; the vegetables newly dug from the ground or picked from the vines of the local farmers. The host will want to proudly point out how they have attempted to provide the best and freshest produce for you to enjoy. The traditional day is still *de rigueur* on the islands. It begins early with a quick breakfast of coffee and cigarettes or dried Rusk soaked in warm milk, followed by a substantial lunch and a siesta. After a few hours more work, evening is the time to relax with family and/or friends whilst nibbling *meze* (Greek appetizer). This is followed at 9 or 10pm by dinner with, perhaps, sweet pastries, cakes or ice-cream enjoyed later in the cafes. Strong distinctive tastes are the hallmark of this culinary rhythm. Herbs like *rigani* (oregano), thyme, rosemary, parsley, coriander, dill, fennel and sage; spices such as cinnamon, nutmeg, pepper, vanilla and mastic are all crucial.

Greek olive oil enriches and flavours and the traditional cooking methods of grilling, long slow baking all enhance and mellow the food. Eating and drinking out in Greece is still wonderfully enjoyable and very democratic, young and old, wealthy and not so wealthy, the ordinary citizen and the celebrity, all enjoy the same favourite neighbourhood tavern, restaurant or cafe. Today, in many areas of Greece, celebratory meals, special occasions and family get-togethers are all more likely to occur in local taverns or restaurants than in peoples homes which means that you, the visitor, can vicariously enjoy the event which may also include live, traditional music and spontaneous dancing and perhaps fireworks! It seems academic to point out that thousands of years ago, the Greeks created one of the most important civilizations ever to be seen but part of this civilization was the idea of good living. Epicurus, for example, was one of the major philosophers in the Hellenistic period. One aspect of his teaching is that the point of all ones actions was to attain pleasure (conceived of as tranquillity) for oneself, and that this could be done by limiting ones desires and by banishing the fear of the gods and of death. Pleasure, simplicity and good friends you can trust were central to his theory of life. The Romans during the period of the Roman Empire continued this tradition, but to enormous excess. Evidence of this are seen in the many famous feasts held during this time. This element of excess was and still is at odds with the Greek temperament, and was eliminated by the later Byzantines, thus preserving the authenticity of Greek cuisine for over a thousand years. Basically the traditional diet and method of cooking food in Greece has not changed since the ancient times, the original flavours and ingredients are still used along with the crucial basic ingredient of all - Greek olive oil.

This is particularly so in somewhere like Crete, where the traditional diet is the same - simple and basic without the over spicing of much modern food. It is argued that the Cretan diet hasn't really changed since Minoan times - using olive oil, cereals, wine and fish. Such a diet has created the worlds most healthy and long-lived people and is the basis of the famous Mediterranean Diet. Indeed, research carried out in 1950 by the International Scientific Community discovered that the inhabitants of Crete were so healthy due to their diet. Still today, it is generally agreed that following the traditional Cretan way of eating leads to less chance of suffering from heart disease compared to other Mediterranean countries. The main reason seems to be due to the fact that Cretans eat twice as much fruit, a quarter less meat and more pulses than other Europeans. But one could also argue that this is the traditional diet of much of Greece. In the summer of 2005, the margarine producer Flora ran a campaign to raise awareness about heart disease and cholesterol in women.

Cholesterol is largely found in animal fats and people with high levels are more prone to suffer from heart disease than those with lower levels. Greek cuisine is largely free from animal fats which is why it is so good for us. This, together with fresh, organic foodstuff, large helpings of fish, fruit and vegetables with very little opportunity for fast food binges and no real tradition of making do with pre-cooked TV dinners leads us to conclude that it is not really surprising that as well as being the cradle of civilization it was also the birthplace of the Mediterranean Diet. Today, with the introduction of *nouveau cuisine* in much of Western Europe - with its strange mix of ingredients and flavours, or the cuisine of some European cities with its pretentiousness, complicated etiquette procedures and formalities it seems that all gastronomical pleasure has been lost. In Greek cuisine you can rediscover the original feeling of taste. The Greek food is beautiful! And when I say Greek food I don't mean souvlaki and moussaka, but the hundreds and hundreds of wonderful dishes that Greek women have invented through time.

OVERVIEW

Contemporary Greek cookery is typical of Mediterranean cuisine, making wide use of olive oil, grains and bread, wine, fish, and various meats, including poultry and rabbit. Typical ingredients in the Greek cuisine are the meat of the lamb or pork, kalamata olives, feta cheese, grape leaves, zucchini and yoghurt. The desserts are dominated by nuts and honey. Some dishes use phyllo pastry.

The most characteristic and ancient element of Greek cuisine is olive oil, which is frequently used in the dishes of the Greek cuisine. It is produced from the olive trees prominent throughout the region, and adds to the distinctive taste of Greek food. The basic grain in Greece is wheat, though barley is also grown. Important vegetables include tomato, aubergine (eggplant), potato, green beans, okra, green peppers, and onions. Honey in Greece is mainly honey from the nectar of fruit trees and citrus trees: lemon, orange, bigarade (bitter orange) trees, thyme honey, and pine honey from conifer trees. *Mastic* (aromatic, ivory coloured resin) is grown on the Aegean island of Chios.

Greek cuisine uses some spices more often than other Mediterranean cuisines do: oregano, mint, garlic, onion, dill and bay laurel leaves. Other common herbs and spices include basil, thyme and fennel seed. Many Greek recipes, especially in the northern parts of the country, use "sweet" spices in combination with meat, for example cinnamon and cloves in stews. Greek flavouring is often characterised by the use of mint and nutmeg.

The terrain has tended to favour the breeding of goats and sheep over cattle, and thus beef dishes are more rare. Fish dishes are also common, especially in coastal regions and on the islands. A great variety of cheese types are used in Greek cuisine, including *Feta*, *Kasseri*, *Kefalotyri*, *Graviera*, *Anthotyros*, *Manouri*, *Metsovone* and *Mizithra*.

Too much refinement is generally considered to be against the hearty spirit of the Greek cuisine, though recent trends among Greek culinary circles tend to favour a somewhat more refined approach.

Dining out is common in Greece, and has been for quite some time. The Taverna and Estiatorio are widespread, serving traditional Greek home cooking at affordable prices to both locals and tourists.

Recently, fast-food has also become more popular in Greece and Europe, with local chains such as Goody's springing up. Although fast food is gaining popularity and many major fast-food chains have opened all over Greece, the Greek people still rely primarily on the rich and extensive dishes of the Greek cuisine. In addition, some traditional Greek foods, especially souvlaki, gyros, pita/pites, for example tiropita and spanakopita (savory or sweet stuffed phyllo dough) are often served in fast food style.

ORIGINS

Greece has an ancient culinary tradition dating back several millennia, and over the centuries Greek cuisine has evolved and absorbed numerous influences and influenced many cuisines itself.

Some dishes can be traced back to ancient Greece: skordalia (a thick purée of potatoes, walnuts, almonds, crushed garlic and olive oil), lentil soup, retsina (white or rosé wine sealed with pine resin) and pasteli (candy bar with sesame seeds baked with honey); some to the Hellenistic and Roman periods: loukaniko (dried pork sausage); and Byzantium: feta cheese, avgotaraho (cured fish roe) and paximadi (traditional hard bread baked from corn, barley and rye). There are also many ancient and Byzantine dishes which are no longer consumed: porridge as the main staple, fish sauce, salt water mixed into wine, *etc.*

Many dishes' names come from the Ottoman cuisine tradition and their names reveal Arabic, Persian or Turkish roots such as moussaka (layers of ground minced lamb meat, eggplant and tomato baked in oven), tzatziki (yoghurt with garlic and cucumber), yuvarlakia (meatball in sauce), keftethes (meatball). Many dishes' names probably entered the Greek vocabulary during Ottoman times, but there was earlier contact with the Persians and the Arabs. Some dishes may be pre-Ottoman, only taking Turkish names later; Ash and Dalby, for example, speculate that grape-leaf dolmathes were made by the early Byzantine period.

A few dishes are influenced by Venetian (Italian) cuisine, such as pastitsio, makaronia me kima, (pasta with meat) found mostly in Greece and Anatolia and Asia Minor and regions of that influence.

Legend has it that Klephtico (or Kleftiko), which is slowly cooked lamb (or other meat), can be translated as 'stolen meat'. The Klephts, not having flocks of their own, would steal lambs or goats and cook the meat in a sealed pit to avoid the smoke being seen.

TYPICAL DISHES

Greek cuisine is very diverse and although there are many common characteristics amongst the culinary traditions of different regions within the country, there are also many differences, making it difficult to present a full list of representative dishes. For example, the vegetarian dish "Haniotiko Mpoureki" (oven baked slices of potatoes with zucchini, myzithra cheese and mint) is a typical dish in western Crete, in the region of Chania. A family in Chania may consume this dish 1-2 times per week in the summer season. However, it is not cooked in any other region of Greece.

The list will present some of the most representative Greek dishes that can be found throughout the country and the most famous of the local ones:

APPETIZER

Meze is a collective name for a variety of small dishes, typically served with wines or anise-flavored liqueurs as *ouzo* or homemade *tsipouro*. *Orektika* is the formal name for appetizers and is often used as a reference to eating a first course of a cuisine other than Greek cuisine. Dips are served with bread loaf or *pita* bread. In some regions, dried bread (*paximadhi*) is softened in water.

- **Boureki:** individually vegetable and meat fillings wrapped in phyllo pastry or dough.
- Deep Fried vegetables "**tiganita**" (courgettes, aubergines, peppers or mushrooms).
- **Dolmades:** grapevine leaves stuffed with rice and vegetables, meat is also often included.
- **Fava:** Yellow split pea puree or other bean purees; sometimes made of fava beans (called *fasolada* in Greek)
- Greek Salad: The so-called Greek Salad is known in Greece as Village/Country Salad (**Horiatiki**), essentially a tomato salad with cucumber, red onion, feta cheese, and kalamata olives, dressed with olive oil.
- **Horta:** wild or cultivated greens, steamed or blanched and made into salad, simply dressed with lemon juice and olive oil. They can be eaten as a light meal with potatoes (especially during Lent, in lieu of fish or meat).
- **Kolokythoanthoi:** zucchini flowers stuffed with rice or cheese and herbs.
- **Koukkia:** fava beans.
- **Lachanosalata:** Cabbage Salad. Very finely shredded cabbage with salt, olive oil, lemon juice/vinegar dressing.
- **Marides tiganites:** Deep-fried whitebait, usually served with lemon wedges.
- **Melitzanosalata:** aubergine (eggplant) salad.
- **Pantzarosalata:** beetroot salad with olive oil and vinegar.
- **Patata salata:** Potato salad with olive oil, finely sliced onions, lemon juice or vinegar.
- **Saganaki:** fried cheese; the word "saganaki" means a small cooking pan, and can be applied to many other foods.
- **Skordalia:** thick garlic and potato puree, usually accompanies deep fried fish/cod.
- **Spanakopita:** spinach feta cheese dill spicing onion wrapped in phyllo pastry.
- **Taramosalata:** fish roe mixed with boiled potatoes or moistened breadcrumbs, olive oil and lemon juice.
- **Tzatziki:** yoghurt with cucumber and garlic puree, used as a dip.
- **Tyropita:** cheese (usually feta) wrapped in phyllo pastry.

Many other food items also are wrapped in phyllo pastry, either in bite-size triangles or in large sheets: kotopita (chicken), spanakotyropita (spinach and cheese), hortopita (greens), kreatopita (meat pie, using ground meat), etc.

SOUPS

1. Avgolemono 'egg-lemon' soup: chicken, meat, vegetable, or fish broth thickened with eggs, lemon juice, and rice.
2. Bourou-Bourou, a vegetable & pasta soup from the island of Corfu.
3. Colomo soup.
4. Fakes, is a lentil soup and one of the famous everyday Greek soups, usually served with vinegar and feta cheese.
5. Fasolada, a bean soup defined in many cookery books as the traditional Greek dish. It is made of beans, tomatoes, carrot, celery and a lot of olive oil.
6. Magiritsa, is the traditional Easter soup made with lamb offal and thickened with avgolemono.
7. Patsas, a tripe soup.
8. Psarosoupa 'fish soup' can be cooked with a variety of fish types, and several kinds of vegetables (carrots, parsley, celery, potatoes, onion), several varieties include the classic kakavia which is drizzled with olive oil.
8. Revithia, a chickpea soup.
9. Trahana soup, a mixture of fermented grain and yoghurt .

VEGETARIAN MAIN DISHES

Very popular during fasting periods, such as the Great Lent:

- A) Aginares A La Polita: artichokes with olive oil.
- B) Arakas Me Aginares: fresh peas with artichokes in the oven.
- C) Bamies: okra with tomato sauce (sometimes with potatoes and/or chicken/lamb).

- D) Briám: an oven-baked ratatouille of summer vegetables based on sliced potatoes and zucchini in olive oil. Usually includes eggplant, tomatoes, onions, and ample aromatic herbs and seasonings.
- E) Domatokeftedes: tomato fritters with mint, fried in olive oil and typically served with fava (split pea paste). Mainly a Cycladic Island dish.
- F) Fasolakia freska: fresh green beans stewed with potatoes, zucchini and tomato sauce.
- G) Gigantes beans: baked butter beans with tomato sauce and various herbs. Often made spicy with various peppers.
- H) Horta (greens) already mentioned in the Appetizers section, are quite often consumed as a light main meal, with boiled potatoes and bread.
- I) Lachanorizo () (Cabbage with rice)
- J) Prassorizo () (Leeks with rice)
- K) Lachanodolmades: Cabbage rolls, stuffed with rice and sometimes meat, spiced with various herbs and served with avgolemono sauce or simmered in a light tomato broth.
- L) Spanakorizo: Spinach and rice stew cooked in lemon and olive oil sauce.
- M) Yemista: Baked stuffed vegetables. Usually tomatoes, peppers, or other vegetables hollowed out and baked with a rice and herb filling.

MEAT DISHES

1. Baked lamb with potatoes (μ). One of the most common Greek dishes. There are many variations with additional ingredients.
2. *Bekri Meze*: 'drunkard's snack', diced beef marinated in wine, cloves, cinnamon, bay leaves, olive oil and cooked slowly.
3. *Giouvetsi*: baked lamb in clay pot with *Kritharaki* - orzo.
4. *Païdakia*: Grilled lamb chops with lemon, oregano, salt and pepper.
5. *Htapohti sti Skhara*: Grilled octopus in vinegar, oil and oregano. Accompanied by Ouzo.
6. *Gyros*: meat roasted on a vertically turning spit and served with sauce (often *tzatziki*) and garnishes (tomato, onions) on pita bread; a popular fast food.
7. *Kleftiko*: literally meaning "of the *Klephths*", this is lamb slow-baked on the bone, first marinated in garlic and lemon juice, originally cooked in a pit oven.
8. *Keftedes*: fried meatballs with oregano and mint.
9. *Kotopoulo pilafi* ('Chicken Pilaf'), mostly popular on the island of Crete.
10. *Moussaka*: eggplant casserole. There are other variations besides eggplant, such as zucchini or rice, but the eggplant version *melitzanes moussaka* is most popular.
11. *Pastitsio*: a baked pasta dish with a filling of ground meat and a Bechamel sauce top.
12. Pork with celery (*hirino me selino/hirino selinato*).
13. *Soutzoukakia Smyrneika*: large meatballs with cumin, cinnamon and garlic and served in a tomato sauce.
14. *Souvlaki*: (lit: 'skewer') Anything grilled on a skewer (lamb, chicken, pork, swordfish, shrimp). Most common is lamb, pork or chicken, often marinated in oil, salt, pepper, oregano and lemon.
15. *Spetsofai*: a dish with country sausages, peppers, onions and wine. Originates from *Mt. Pelion*.
16. *Stifado*: game (rabbit, venison etc.) stew with pearl onions, red wine and cinnamon.

DESSERTS & SWEETS

- A. *Baklava*, phyllo pastry layers filled with nuts and drenched in syrup.
- B. *Diples*, a Christmas and wedding delicacy, made of thin, sheet-like dough which is cut in large squares and dipped in a swirling fashion in a pot of hot olive oil for a few seconds. As the dough fries, it stiffens into a helical tube; it is then removed immediately and sprinkled with honey and crushed walnuts.
- C. *Galaktoboureko*, custard between layers of phyllo. The name derives from the Greek "ghala", meaning milk, and from the Turkish börek, meaning filled, thus meaning "filled with milk."
- D. *Halvadopites* A nougat of sesame with almonds in a thin crust.
- E. *Karidopita*, a walnut cake.
- F. *Koulourakia*, butter or olive-oil cookies.
- G. *Kourabiedes*, Christmas cookies made by kneading flour, butter and crushed roasted almonds, then generously dusted with powdered sugar.
- H. *Loukoumades*, similar to donuts, loukoumades are essentially fried balls of dough drenched in honey and sprinkled with cinnamon.
- I. *Melomakarona*, "honey macaroons", Christmas cookies soaked in a syrup of diluted honey (*meli* in Greek, thus *melomakarona*), then sprinkled with crushed walnuts.

- J. *Moustalevria*, a flour and grape must pudding.
- K. *Moustokouloura*, cookies of flour kneaded with fresh grape must instead of water.
- L. *Rizogalo* 'rice-milk' is rice pudding.
- M. *Loukoumi* is a confection made from starch and sugar, essentially similar to the Turkish delight. A variation from *Serres* is called *Akanes*.
- N. *Milopita me Pandespani*, apple pie with cinnamon and powdered sugar.
- O. Spoon sweets of various fruits, ripe or unripe, or green unripe nuts. Spoon sweets are essentially made the same way as marmalade, except that the fruit are boiled whole or in large chunks.
- P. *Tsoureki*, a traditional Christmas and Easter sweet bread also known as 'Lambropsomo' (Easter bread), flavored with "mahlepi", the intensely aromatic extract of the stone of the St. Lucie Cherry.
- Q. *Vasilopita*, Saint Basil's cake or King's cake, traditional for New Year's Day. *Vasilopites* are baked with a coin inside, and whoever gets the coin in their slice are considered blessed with good luck for the whole year.
- R. Yogurt with honey or spoon sweet syrup.

CHEESE

There is a wide variety of cheeses made in various regions across Greece. The vast majority of them remain unknown outside the Greek borders due to the lack of knowledge and the highly localized distinctive features. Many artisanal hand made cheeses, both common varieties and local specialties, are produced by small family farms throughout Greece and offer distinct flavors atypical of the mass produced varieties found commercially in Greece and abroad. A good list of some of the varieties of cheese produced and consumed in Greece can be found in the List of cheeses article, under the name of the country. Here are some of the more popular throughout Greece:

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| 1. Feta | 2. Kasseri | 3. Kefalotyri |
| 4. Graviera | 5. Kefalograviera | 6. Formaela |
| 7. Myzithra | 8. Anthotyros | 9. Manouri |
| 10. Metsovone | | |

DRINKS

1. Greek frappé coffee a foam-covered drink derived from spray-dried instant coffee that is consumed cold.
2. Greek coffee, made by boiling finely ground coffee beans, and is served thick and strong, and often sweetened. It is always unfiltered, with the coffee sediment at the bottom of the cup.
3. Wine is the most common drink in Greece. Legend claims that wine was invented on the island of Icaria.
4. Beer is widely drunk; common brands include Vergina, Heineken, Amstel, Zeos, Mythos, Alfa Hellenic Lager, Fix, Henninger, and Kaiser, all of which are produced locally, some under license.
5. Ouzo (an 80-proof clear alcoholic beverage that is flavored with anise; it turns milky white with water or ice; the best said to be produced on the island of Lesbos).
6. Tsipouro or (esp. in Crete) tsikoudia/raki (Mostly home-brewed, a clear drink similar to ouzo, often with higher alcohol content, and usually not flavored with herbs. The city of Volos at the centre of Greece is well-known for its Tsipouradika (literally: tsipouro places). In Thessaly tsipouro is always flavored with anise.
7. Retsina (a white wine that has some pine resin added, originally as a preservative, but nowadays for the flavor; this is an Athens region specialty. It should not be aged.).
8. Mavrodafni Sweet, liquor-style, red wine with higher alcohol percentage than normal.
9. Metaxa, a brand of sweet brandy, 40% alcohol content.
10. Tentura, a cinnamon flavored liquor from Patras.