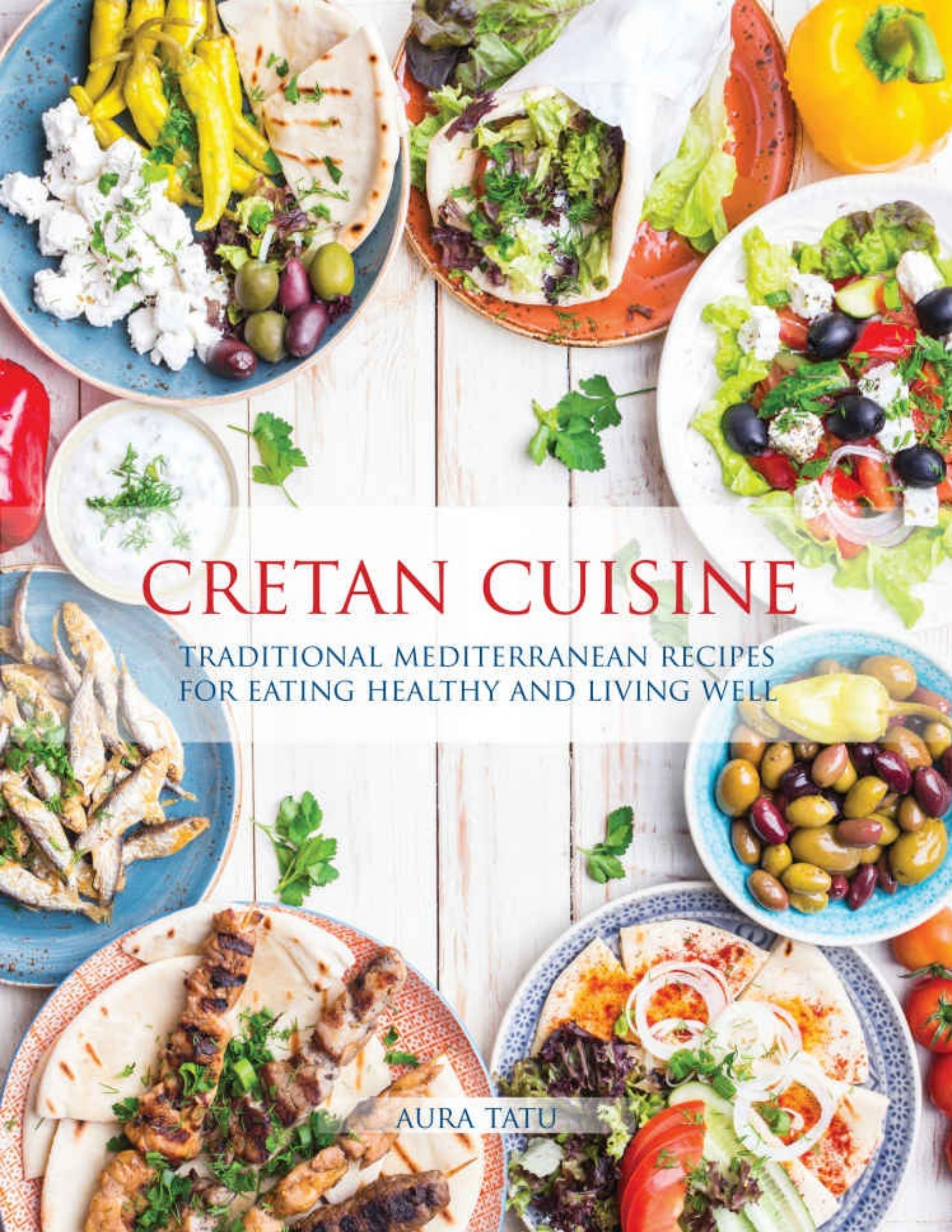




CRETAN CUISINE

TRADITIONAL MEDITERRANEAN RECIPES
FOR EATING HEALTHY AND LIVING WELL

AURA TATU

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“Tell me what you do with the food you eat, and I’ll tell you who you are. Some turn their food into fat and manure, some into work and good humor, and others, I’m told, into God. So there must be three sorts of men. I’m not one of the worst, boss, nor yet one of the best. I’m somewhere in between the two. What I eat I turn into work and good humor. That’s not too bad, after all!’

Nikos Kazantzakis - Zorba the Greek

Mama Katerina has been cooking her amazing food at the Mistral Singles Hotel in Maleme, Crete, since it opened in 1991. Nowadays she is enjoying a well deserved retirement but is often present in the kitchen supervising the staff, helping with the preparation of meals and every now and then cooking some of her signature dishes.

Based on the most popular dishes served at the Mistral during summer the recipes in this book have been compiled with her help and also on what Cretans eat all year round as well as on special occasions.

This book offers a panoramic view of the Cretan culture through their most prized asset - their food - enabling the reader to gain a better perspective of the local customs as well as the culinary history of this blessed land.

The Cretan Diet

With over 1400 islands, 230 of which harbour life, Greece is a country of rich history and breathtaking beauty, charming its visitors year after year with its authentic culture and irresistible flavours. Crete is the biggest Greek island and the fifth largest in the Mediterranean Sea after Sicily, Sardinia, Cyprus and Corsica. Situated in the southernmost point of Europe, it is separated by only 400 kilometres of sea from the North African coast of Libya and Egypt.

The birthplace of Zeus in ancient Greek mythology, Crete's heritage spans over millennia pre-dating the Minoan civilisation, considered the earliest known in Europe. Its archaeological finds include magnificent palaces, houses, roads, paintings and sculptures. As old as its civilisation is the cultivation of olive trees on the island. The Palace of Knossos, Europe's oldest city, still bares traces of an olive grove comprising of 400 olive trees, a mill and several earthenware jars used to store vast quantities of olive oil. The "gold-liquid" as Homer referred to olive oil in his Odyssey has been a permanent presence on the island since ancient times. Ancient olive presses made of stone have been found all over Crete with the one in Vathypetro considered to be the oldest in the world.¹ Also, one of the oldest producing olive trees in the world is located in the tiny village of Ano Vouves (west Crete), close to Chania.² It is believed to be at least 2000 years old.

In fact, nothing is more characteristic of Crete than the olive trees which cover one quarter of the island in groves accounting for approximately 65% of its agricultural land. With over 35 million olive trees on the island and land inherited from generation to generation, Cretan farmers literally grow up alongside their trees.

The quality of Cretan olive oil is determined by a unique combination of soil, climate and obstinate use of traditional means to harvest. The most popular olive tree is the Koroneiki, which bears very small drupes but extremely resistant to wind and heat. It produces one of the best qualities of olive oil, with acidity levels not exceeding 0.3% (which makes it extra virgin).

Unsurprisingly, the average consumption of olive oil is the highest in the world, averaging 20kg per Greek and shooting up to 25kg in Crete. To place the importance of olive oil into the Cretan diet perspective, consider

that average olive oil consumption in Spain is 14 litres per person, Italy 11 litres per person and the USA around 1.1 litres per person annually.³

The world had to take notice of some impressive facts about the Cretan diet. In 1947, representatives of the Rockefeller Foundation arrived in Crete to offer humanitarian assistance to the war-ravaged islanders and coordinated an epidemiological study in order to determine the state of health of the local population.⁴ It documented the islanders' meagre diet, mainly consisting of wild greens, fruits, legumes, bread and barley rusks, little protein and plenty of olive oil. While the scientists were appalled at what seemed like a diet of utter despair, they were equally surprised to find out that the islanders' were uncannily healthy. Even in those war-torn years, there was no malnutrition in Crete.

Around the same time in Naples, a young cardiologist named Ancel Keys was puzzled at how there wasn't a single heart patient in the entire hospital he had served in during the War. He conducted a comparative study⁵ on feeding habits prevalent in seven countries: USA, Finland, Holland, Japan, Italy, Yugoslavia and Greece. This study revealed that, while the Cretans consumed an inordinate amount of fat, on a par with meat-eating Fins, still, they had no heart disease whilst the populations of Northern Europe and the United States had more cardiovascular risks than those from the Mediterranean basin. These risks were related to excessive consumption of saturated fatty acids, whereas olive oil appeared to be beneficial to health. Unlike the Fins, who got most of their saturated fat from meat and animal products, the Cretan peasants got most of their fat from unsaturated olive oil. The Cretan diet (in fact a great part of Greek diet) in the 1950s consisted of carbohydrates (mainly bread and barley rusks), wild greens (more than 80 different varieties), other vegetables, fruits and olive oil. There was virtually no cheese in the diet as this was considered a commodity to be made and sold and, there was almost no meat. By the late 1950s, Keys had concluded that the Cretan diet was one of the healthiest in the world.

For thousands of years Cretans have eaten only what the land was producing, plenty of fruits, vegetables, olives, whole grains and pulses. As to why the diet was better in Crete and not on other Mediterranean islands (e.g. Sicily, Rhodes, Cyprus), it's perhaps because of the relative long distance from the mainland. Small boats were not capable of making the long and occasionally treacherous journey to Crete. This isolation has

compelled the Cretans to maintain their traditional diet for longer than other islanders.

Further, Keys' study revealed that Cretans ate more fruit than any of the other populations in the study. From November to April, grapefruits, lemons, oranges and tangerines are plentiful and they are present in Cretan cuisine not only in desserts but also as ingredients in salads and main dishes. Figs and pomegranates grow abundantly while melons are cultivated extensively during summer months. The favourable soil conditions support excellent grape varieties with viticulture being practiced on large areas since Minoan times.

However, what makes Crete a truly blessed land is the abundance of wild greens some of which do not grow anywhere else in the world. There are more than 80 types of edible weeds growing in Crete, bearing various names that differ depending on the area, with the majority eaten steamed and simply seasoned with salt, lemon juice and olive oil. They are also extensively used as fillings for the "kalitsounia"- the traditional Cretan mini pies, or cooked together with meat and fish. Some other aromatic plants are used as herbal teas or for their pharmaceutical properties.

Other stars of the Cretan diet are whole-grains barley and wheat in the form of bread and rusks, pulses such as beans, fava beans, chick peas, lentils, split peas and nuts, especially almonds, chestnuts and walnuts.

Throughout this book you will find many recipes that are based on the traditional Cretan diet, mostly vegetarian and simple dishes, but also more modern recipes that have become iconic of Greek cuisine in the past century.

The rule of the Ottoman Empire over South-eastern Europe has strongly influenced the Balkans cuisines and many recipes (together with vegetables and spices) have travelled and been adapted into local delicacies. However, Ottoman fare has its roots in the Byzantine era,⁶ in essence a merger of Greek and Roman gastronomy enhanced with oriental/Persian influence. The epicentre of the Byzantine/Ottoman cuisine was the city of Istanbul (Constantinople) which was founded by Greeks in 667 BC. In fact, the name "Istanbul" derives from the way Byzantines referred to the metropolis in Ancient Greek terms, "he Polis" meaning "the City", the colloquial Greek phrase "stin poli" meaning "in the city" reinterpreted as a single word.⁷

For mainland Greeks as well as for many foreign visitors, Crete is the

absolute bastion of good food with many local products specific to the island. Some recipes in this book include certain ingredients such as goat cheese or Graviera, which are not always easy to find outside Crete. The list below suggests the most suitable alternatives to help you prepare any of these dishes and be sure to obtain the same outstanding results.

Mizithra goat cheese

Soft, snow-white, creamy and moist, this cheese is the queen of Cretan cuisine as it is extensively used in a variety of hot or cold dishes. It has an almost sweet and milky taste and is extremely versatile. It can be used in savoury dishes such as appetizers or main course meals as well as for desserts in combination with honey and mint.

The closest substitute: Italian ricotta, Greek feta or a combination of both (depending on the dish).

Graviera cheese

Hard, yellow cheese made from sheep milk, shaped in large wheels and ripened for at least five months. Very popular all over Greece, it has a certification of protected destination of origin (PDO) in certain regions of Crete. Matured wheels have a slight burnt caramel and nutty taste. It is used grated or sliced in many dishes, but also as an amuse-bouche paired with honey at the beginning of a feast (mostly weddings).

The closest substitute: Swiss cheese gruyere or Italian Parmesan.

Apaki

Cured pork meat that has been marinated for few days in strong vinegar, then smoked with aromatic herbs and wrapped in a layer of spices or herbs. This was the traditional way of preserving meat in a climate of mild temperatures with pork being the most suitable. Due to its strong aromatic taste, apaki is used in small quantities in dishes such as omelettes, pulses or salads and can also be served as an appetizer (meze) if fried or cooked in orange juice.

The closest substitute: Italian or Spanish cured pork lean meats.

Raki

Also known as Tsikoudia, the most popular alcoholic drink in Crete. It is made from distilled grape pomace obtained during wine fermentation and is used for almost everything, from appetizer to digestive, painkiller to massage ointment! In cooking, it is mainly added to dough to give it a more tender consistency.

The closest substitute: vodka.

Kritharaki

Short-cut pasta shaped like an oversized grain of rice. It is usually served with casseroles and meats cooked in red sauce or as part of a salad.

The closest substitute: orzo.

Hilopites

Egg noodles made with semolina and milk, in the form of ribbons or small squares. Usually boiled and served as an accompaniment to rooster in wine, but can also be cooked with beef or lamb.

The closest substitute: fettuccine.

Barley rusks

Twice baked bread made with wholegrain barley flour, water and salt. They are very hard but extremely healthy and the basic need that led to their creation was to prolong the shelf life of bread. It is said that the first rusk was made by the Byzantine baker Paxamos, which gives it the Greek name of “paximadi”.

The closest substitute: any type of hard thick rusk, thick slices of toasted country bread or wholegrain croutons.

Thyme honey

The most revered Greek honey, mainly because thyme-fed bees produce less honey, making it rare and more expensive. The colour of thyme honey is light amber to amber and the taste is very strong with intense aromatic, herbal, savoury flavours. Thyme honey is used extensively in desserts and toppings.

The closest substitute: acacia, dandelion or blueberry honey.

Traditional Cretan recipes do require large amounts of olive oil. However, the recipes in this book have been tempered down to lighter versions, while still preserving the quality and taste as originally intended. Absolutely all recipes where ingredients state “olive oil” refer to the extra virgin variety as the Cretans never use a lower quality, even when frying. Some recipes use vegetable oil for frying and for those, feel free to experiment with any oil of your choice.

We invite you to try these recipes, most of which are easy to make and require common ingredients. In no time at all, you will produce an authentic Cretan/Greek dish to impress your friends and relatives.

1 www.archanes-asterousia.gr/

2 www.olivemuseumvouves.com/

3 www.centrafoods.com/

4 www.rockefellerfoundation.org/about-us/

5 www.sevencountriesstudy.com

6 https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Byzantine_cuisine

7 https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Names_of_Istanbul

Guides

Throughout this book you will encounter a number of recipes that have in common ingredients with the same method of preparation or handling. For easier reference, we have compiled the short guides below.

Avgolemono sauce

A staple in Greek cuisine, the avgolemono (egg-lemon) sauce is used as a thickening agent for soups and sauces of various dishes to give a delicate, creamy and tangy flavour. The sauce is always made from the liquid in which the meats, fish or vegetables have been cooked.

Although preparing the avgolemono sauce is relatively simple, not following the exact steps can make the egg curdle and ruin the dish. You will find this sauce in recipes like [lamb and artichokes avgolemono](#), [cabbage rolls](#), [pork with celery](#), [meatball soup](#) or [chicken soup](#).

Preparation time: 10-15 mins

Servings: 4

Eggs must be at room temperature and stock has to be warm, not hot.

When you are finished cooking, remove from the heat and take 1 cup stock or soup from the pot and let it cool for 5 minutes. You can also add 1/2 cup water to stop the boiling process.

The egg whites are more likely to curdle than the egg yolks (this is why some recipes use only the egg yolks).

Crack the eggs into a bowl and whisk until creamy. Add the lemon juice gradually, whisking continuously. Add a little warm stock or soup and continue to whisk quickly, repeat until the whole stock or soup is incorporated and you have a liquid consistency. The secret to avoid lumps is to whisk continuously and to add the broth slowly to equalise the temperatures. Pour the mixture gradually back into the pot, stirring constantly into the broth or soup to distribute evenly.

A fool proof technique to make the avgolemono sauce perfect from the very first time is to add 1 teaspoon corn starch into the mixture. Start by adding the lemon juice into the bowl then 1 spoon water and 1 corn starch. Whisk thoroughly until dissolved then add the eggs into the mixture continuing to whisk. Repeat the process, slowly incorporating the warm broth or soup into the avgolemono sauce and pour it back into the pot.

How to use syrups for desserts

Many Greek desserts use syrups to moisten and sweeten their bases and although this is a simple process, it is important to be made correctly to avoid soggy or crumbling.

The syrup is always made with equal parts of water and sugar (granulated/caster/golden). You can also use honey which is sweeter than sugar, so the ratio should be 75g to 100ml of water.

Add all the ingredients together in a saucepan and bring to the boil. To avoid the syrup becoming lumpy, never stir it during the boiling process. The sugar (or honey) will dissolve in the hot water and after 2 minutes will start to thicken. Depending on how dense you want the syrup, boiling will take between 2 to 5 minutes.

For dishes such as [baklava](#), [galaktoboureko](#), [kataifi](#), [portokalopita](#) or [melomakarona](#) the syrup must be cold when it is poured over the hot dish straight from the oven.

For desserts like [ravani](#) or [karydopita](#) the other way applies: hot syrup over cold dish. Never pour hot syrup over a hot base as it will ruin your dish.

It is very important to pour the syrup slowly to allow the base to properly absorb it and avoid soaking. You may prefer to use a pastry brush to gently apply the syrup evenly all over the surface, or use a tablespoon to add small quantities gradually to cover the entire base.

How to handle phyllo pastry

Phyllo (or fillo) dough is packaged in paper-thin sheets which are stacked and rolled together. It is usually available in three thicknesses: for pastry (very thin, used for baklava and delicate pastries, about 20 sheets in a box), country phyllo (medium thin, used for pies, about 6-8 sheets in a box) and puff pastry (equivalent to sfogliata, used for sweets and baked recipes, 2 sheets in a box). The phyllo sheets can usually be found in the frozen section of supermarkets in boxes of 450-500g. Because the pastry is very thin, it can easily dry out and break when handling. Follow these instructions and the phyllo will remain flexible and moist for your recipes.

Phyllo should always be defrosted in the refrigerator overnight. A common mistake is to defrost it at room temperature, which causes the phyllo to warm up and make the outer layers brittle. When working with the pastry, the phyllo should be cold and humid.

Keep the phyllo in the fridge until you are ready to use it, otherwise it will dry out very quickly. Alternatively, if you need to keep it longer at room temperature place it between two damp tea towels to maintain the moisture.

If the margins go dry and crack during handling, brush with melted butter or use those pieces in the middle of your pie. Always grease the layers sufficiently, especially the top which needs to gain a golden colour whilst baking.

When your dish is prepared, bake immediately so that the phyllo doesn't have time to dry out whilst waiting for the oven to heat.

Scoring the top layer into desired portions before baking will allow the steam to escape and when baked, will form a guide to cut your pieces.

If you have unused phyllo sheets, wrap them back into the original packaging and refrigerate as soon as possible.

General measurements

To guarantee the success of these recipes, use digital kitchen scales to measure the precise quantity of solid ingredients.

As most of the recipes in this book require olive oil in small quantities (40ml/70ml etc), consider the rule:

1 teaspoon (tsp.) olive oil = 5ml

1 tablespoon (tbsp.) olive oil = 15ml

Unless otherwise specified, salt and pepper are always added “to taste”.

basic conversions to US measurements:*

Grams to ounces:

30g = 1 ounce

115g = 4 ounces

225g = 8 ounces

350g = 12 ounces

450g = 1 pound

Celsius to Fahrenheit:

150C = 300F

160C = 325F

180C = 350F

190C = 375F

200C = 400F

220C = 425F

Length:

2,5 cm = 1 inch

*Equivalents have been rounded up or down for easier reference. A useful tool for a larger range of conversions can be found at: www.metric-conversions.org

APPETIZERS

Cretan dakos

The epitome of the Cretan diet, this basic dish combines important elements for a healthy and nutritious meal. The simple combination of barley rusk with tomato, goat cheese and olive oil results in a delicious and filling snack that can be served at any time of day, from breakfast to dinner. It is important to grate the tomato so that the juices are absorbed in the barley rusk. Try to use fresh organic tomatoes to really bring this dish to life. If traditional Cretan goat cheese is not available, you can replace it with feta cheese.

Preparation time: 10 mins

Servings: 4

Ingredients

4 round Cretan barley rusks

(or 4 slices thick wholegrain bread, toasted)

4 medium tomatoes, grated

100g mizithra cheese (or feta)

4 tsp. olive oil

pinch of dry oregano

salt

4 black olives for decoration

Method

Grate the tomatoes and drain most of the liquid.

Pass the rusks under running water (very quickly) and place on a serving plate (skip this step if using bread). Cretan rusks are very hard but the liquid gets absorbed quickly and with too much, they will become soggy. They should still be crunchy but easily breakable.

Add around ½ tsp olive oil on each and let it absorb.

Spoon the grated tomato on top, covering the whole rusk then add the crumbled cheese.

Drizzle with ½ tsp olive oil and sprinkle with oregano.

Add a black olive on top and serve immediately.

Tzatziki with avocado

Greek tzatziki is a very versatile appetizer, often used as a sauce for gyros, souvlaki and grilled meats. It can also be spread over pita bread or used as a dip for crackers or vegetables. What makes tzatziki exquisite in taste is the use of authentic Greek natural yoghurt which is strained, giving it a more dense and creamy texture. Adding the unique colour and flavour of a well ripened avocado elevates the tzatziki to a sophisticated gourmet dish. Remove the avocado from the ingredients below and you have the classic Greek tzatziki recipe.

Preparation time: 10 mins

Servings: 4

Ingredients

1 large ripe avocado, peeled and pitted

2 cloves garlic, crushed

1 lemon, juiced

50ml sour cream

150g cucumber, grated

½ tsp. red pepper flakes

1 tbsp. fresh cilantro, chopped

1 tbsp. fresh mint, chopped

salt and freshly ground pepper

Method

In a medium bowl, combine the avocado, garlic, lemon juice, sour cream and cucumber. Mash with a fork until smooth. If your avocado is not quite ripe, you may wish to use a food processor. Season with red pepper flakes, cilantro, mint, salt, pepper and mix well. Cover and refrigerate for 1 hour before serving.

Aubergine dip - melitzanosalata

This classic Greek summer dish is authentically vegan and incredibly full of flavour. You will be surprised by how few ingredients are needed and how easy it is to make. The origins of this recipe trace back to Levantine cuisine and variations of the dip are popular in Arabic, Turkish, Balkan countries.

The traditional preparation method is for the aubergine to be baked or broiled over an open flame before peeling, so that the pulp is soft and has a smoky taste. If a grill or broiler is not available, the aubergines can be baked in the oven on a tray lined with a parchment sheet. This delicious dip is best served with crusty bread or Greek pita but can also be used as part of a meze platter alongside [spicy cheese dip](#), [tzatziki](#) or [potato and garlic mash](#).

Preparation time: 10 mins

Cooking time: 60 mins

Servings: 4

Ingredients

2 large aubergines

4-5 cloves garlic

5 tbsp. olive oil

2 tbsp. lemon juice

1/2 tsp. salt and pepper

Method

Wash and prick holes in the aubergines and put them on the grill over a high flame (or under broiler). Turn the aubergines until the entire skin is blackened and juices begin to seep out. Alternatively, bake in a preheated oven to 180C, on a lined baking tray.

When the aubergines are cooked, allow them to cool. Then, very gently remove the skin and place the flesh in a colander to drain for another 30 minutes.

Wrap the cloves of garlic in foil and add to the grill (or oven) until they are roasted and soft. Mash with a fork to make a paste, add 1/2 tsp salt/pepper and set aside.

Put the drained aubergine pulp, garlic paste, olive oil, lemon juice in a

food processor and whizz until smooth. At this point, taste the dip and adjust with extra oil, lemon or seasoning as required.

Serve with grilled bread or homemade pita chips, vegetable sticks or as a side dish to just about anything!

Fava - yellow split pea dip

Fava is the Greek version of hummus but considered healthier as it is made using yellow split peas which are very rich in dietary fibre and minerals. The recipe originates on the island of Santorini, where the yellow split peas grow abundantly in the volcanic soil. Extremely versatile, fava is consumed by the Greeks as a filling snack, side dish or full main course. It is usually served warm or at room temperature, drizzled with olive oil and garnished with red onion or spring onion and parsley.

Preparation time: 70 mins

Cooking time: 60 mins

Servings: 4

Ingredients

225g yellow split peas

1 large red onion, chopped

2 cloves garlic, chopped

1L water

40ml olive oil

2 sprigs fresh thyme

1 bay leaf

salt and freshly ground pepper

olive oil to drizzle

small red or spring onion

fresh parsley, chopped

Method

Rinse the split peas to remove any residue and set aside. In a large saucepan, heat 2 tbsp olive oil and gently fry the chopped onions until soft and translucent. Add the garlic and thyme and cook for another minute.

In another pan put the split peas, bay leaf, salt and pepper then add the water and bring to the boil. Simmer with a lid on for 50-60 minutes, until the water is absorbed and the peas have almost disintegrated.

Remove the bay leaf and transfer the mixture to a food processor. Whizz until the peas become smooth and creamy with the consistency of a

puree. Add a little olive oil and further seasoning to taste. Serve warm on a large plate, garnished with red onion slices, a drizzle of olive oil and chopped parsley.

Fish roe dip - taramosalata

This popular Greek meze is made from tarama (salted and cured roe of cod, carp or grey mullet) mixed with olive oil, lemon juice and a starchy base of bread or potatoes. Usually served as part of a platter with pita or classic bread, taramosalata is a dip for all seasons but specifically served on Shrove Monday, the first day of Lent. It is a rich, salty dip containing an excellent source of Omega-3 fatty acids and protein. It is also high in monounsaturated fats from the olive oil and vitamin C found in lemon juice.

Preparation time: 15 mins

Cooking time: 20 mins

Servings: 12

Ingredients

100g white tarama (fish roe)

200g white stale bread (crust removed)

Or 1 medium potato, peeled

75ml olive oil

2 lemons, juiced

1 medium red onion, grated

1 olive to garnish

Method

Place the slices of bread in a shallow dish then pour some water over. Allow to soak for a few minutes before squeezing as much moisture as possible from the bread, discarding the liquid.

Alternatively, boil the potato for 20 minutes then using a fork, mash the warm pulp until it becomes a paste.

Blend either the soaked bread or the mashed potato with fish roe, olive oil, lemon juice and onion together in a food processor for around 1 minute, until fluffy. Add more olive oil if needed to reach the desired consistency and then chill. Garnish with one olive to serve.

Spicy cheese dip - tirokafteri

This creamy and spicy dip includes the most iconic staple of Greek cuisine: feta cheese. “Tiri” means cheese in Greek and “kafteri” means spicy or hot. This recipe is fairly simple but relies heavily on high-quality ingredients. Roasted red peppers bring a deep, smoky flavour and as with all Cretan recipes, extra virgin Greek olive oil (organic where possible) is a prerequisite. Barrel aged feta cheese makes all the difference in this dish as the aging process gives it a unique flavour. In the same way some wines improve with age, so does feta. For the perfect tirokafteri, cut the feta into large chunks and whizz in a blender just enough to break it up, without turning it into a puree.

Preparation time: 20 mins

Fridge time: 1 hour

Servings: 4

Ingredients

3 red Romano peppers

50ml olive oil

1 tbsp. white wine vinegar

500g feta cheese, cut into large chunks

2 tbsp. natural Greek yoghurt

1 tsp. red pepper flakes

Method

Preheat the oven to 180C.

Place the peppers on a lined baking tray and roast for 5 minutes. Allow to cool in a covered pan then carefully remove the skin and seeds and cut into chunks.

Put the peppers, olive oil and white wine vinegar in a blender and whizz for 1 minute until smooth. Add the feta cheese, Greek yoghurt, red pepper flakes and blend for a further 2 minutes until it becomes creamy. Transfer to a bowl, cover with cling film and place in the fridge for 1 hour to set.

Serve as a meze with toasted bread, pita, flatbread or fried potatoes.

Potato and garlic dip - skordalia

A dish of garlic and lemon infused mashed potato, made voluminous with olive oil, skordalia has a history going back to ancient Greek and Byzantine cuisine. The oldest cookbooks refer to skordalia as a combination of blanched almonds, mashed potato and garlic with the method of preparation using a mortar and pestle, almost like a ritual. The name comes from the term “skordo” which means garlic in Greek. Skordalia should always be served warm as an accompaniment to fried fish and seafood or to classics such as boiled beetroot.

Preparation time: 10 mins

Cooking time: 25 mins

Servings: 6

Ingredients

600g potatoes

6 cloves garlic, peeled

2 tbsp. red wine vinegar

50ml olive oil

100ml water (from the boiled potatoes)

Salt

Method

Peel and boil the potatoes for 25 minutes until very tender then drain, reserving 240ml of the boiling water.

Put 100ml of the potato water in a food processor, add the garlic, red wine vinegar, salt and blend until the garlic is pureed.

Cut the potatoes into cubes while still hot and add to the food processor. Whizz for 2 minutes then add the olive oil gradually, one tablespoon at a time. Blend until the oil is incorporated and the mixture is smooth and creamy.

If you prefer a milder garlic taste, boil the garlic cloves for 5 minutes in 100ml milk before adding to the blender.

Serve as a dip with pita bread or as a side dish with fried fish or seafood. It can be stored in the fridge, in an airtight container for up to one week.

Fennel pie - marathopita

Maratho (fennel) is among the most aromatic herbs of Crete. It is used often in Cretan cuisine to highlight and give flavourful emphasis to dishes such as snails or cuttlefish. Fennel is widely known in different world cuisines for its very aromatic root, the finocchio, which is mainly used in salads. However, most Cretan recipes use the leaves or frilly fronds that grow on thin stalks above the fennel bulb. Wild fennel along with wild greens and aromatic herbs grow in abundance across the island.

Pita (plural pites) is a general word to describe all types of handheld pie. The variety of fillings is endless, many of which are traditionally meat or dairy free. Marathopita is a true Cretan delicacy which can be enjoyed as a light lunch, snack or even breakfast.

Preparation time: 60 mins

Cooking time: 20 mins

Servings: 10 pies

Ingredients

Dough

500g all-purpose flour

200ml water at room temperature

2 tbsp. olive oil

1½ tbsp. raki (or vodka)

pinch of salt

Filling

200g fennel leaves, finely chopped

(use dill if fennel is not available)

100g spinach, finely chopped

(or kale, dandelions, mustard greens)

100g spring onions, finely chopped

50g fresh mint, chopped

50g fresh parsley, chopped

25ml olive oil

salt and freshly ground pepper

oil for frying

Method

Start with the filling: thoroughly wash all the greens and herbs, especially

if they are fresh from the garden or farmers market. Pat dry and finely chop, then place in a bowl and mix well.

Put the spring onions in a frying pan with the olive oil and fry on a low-medium heat until soft and translucent.

Add the greens to the pan and cook gently for a further 5 minutes over a low heat to release the oils and aromas. Season with salt and pepper and set aside.

Next, the dough: in a large bowl, mix all the dough ingredients together and knead for about 4-5 minutes until it forms a compact ball. Divide the dough into 20 equal pieces and roll each into a ball on a floured surface. With a rolling pin, flatten each ball into a thin circle of about 18cm diameter.

Divide the filling into 10 equal portions and place one in the centre of each circle. Cover with another thin circle of dough and using a fork, press down and close the edges to keep the filling inside. Place the pies on a baking sheet, being careful not to pierce them.

They are now ready to either freeze between sheets of parchment paper or fry immediately.

Heat 1 tablespoon olive oil in a frying pan and cook until each side turns to a golden crust before removing. Garnish with chopped fennel (or dill) stalks and serve warm.

Kalitsounia with spinach and goat cheese

Kalitsounia are small traditional cheese or herb pies, handmade in all households. They resemble a typical stuffed pie with the principal difference being the variations of filling and serving. In the town of Chania, you will find savoury kalitsounia stuffed with spinach and mizithra and Cretan herbs and also the sweet variety filled with mizithra and drizzled with honey.

Another version of kalitsounia, called “lychnarakia”, is made with dough, stuffed with mizithra and sprinkled with cinnamon. These are usually served for breakfast whilst the phyllo pastry pies are generally consumed as a dessert.

Kalitsounia are unique to Crete and are served throughout the island, from popular town restaurants to tiny mountainous villages. Every household has a reserve of kalitsounia in the freezer ready to be baked (or fried) on demand.

Preparation time: 60 mins

Cooking time: 40 mins

Servings: 4

Ingredients

Dough

150g flour

½ tsp. salt

3 tbsp. olive oil

70ml water

or buy 1 sheet (320g) frozen short crust pastry

Filling

100g goat cheese

50g feta cheese

300g spinach

3 tbsp. olive oil

1 medium onion, finely chopped

2 tbsp. fennel sprigs, chopped

salt and freshly ground pepper

oil for frying

Topping

1 egg, beaten

sesame seeds

Method

For the dough, combine all the ingredients in a bowl, bring together and knead until the dough forms a smooth ball. Set aside to rest for 1 hour, while you prepare the filling.

Remove the roots from the spinach, wash, drain, then cut into small pieces together with the fennel sprigs.

In a pan, fry the onion on a medium heat until translucent. Add the spinach and fennel and cook for around 5 minutes until any liquid is absorbed. Season with salt and pepper to taste. Leave the mixture to cool then add the cheese and olive oil until it becomes a paste.

Roll the pastry dough into a square sheet around 1/2cm thickness and cut into 16 squares of equal size. Place 1 heaped tsp of filling in the centre of each square and carefully bring the four corners together into the middle, pressing lightly to make the dough stick.

At this point, the pies can be frozen. Arrange them on a lined baking tray so there is no overlap and place in the freezer. When frozen, they can be stored together and kept for up to 6 months.

For baking, preheat the oven to 170C.

Arrange the kalitsounia on a lined oven tray, brush them with beaten egg and sprinkle with sesame seeds. Cook for 30-40 minutes, until they turn a slightly golden colour.

Spinach pie - spanakopita

Originating over 400 years ago from Turkish cuisine and introduced to Greece by Ottoman occupation, the spinach pie is a firm favourite in every Greek household. A versatile dish, spanakopita is essentially a mixture of spinach, aromatic herbs and feta cheese layered in phyllo pastry and baked until golden and crispy. In most bakeries, the small individual pies are sold in triangular form but the traditional recipe calls for a round or square baking dish, with the pie cut into slices.

Preparation time: 30 mins

Cooking time: 50 mins

Servings: 6

Ingredients

75ml olive oil

1 large onion, chopped

2 spring onions, chopped

2 cloves garlic, crushed

¼ tsp. grated nutmeg

500g fresh spinach, rinsed and chopped

2 tbsp. fresh parsley, chopped

2 tbsp. fresh dill, chopped (or 1 tbsp. dried dill)

2 eggs, lightly beaten

2 tbsp. sesame seeds

200g feta cheese, crumbled

200g mizithra cheese (or ricotta)

2 sheets country phyllo pastry

salt and freshly ground pepper

Method

To prepare the filling, wash and drain the spinach leaves, pat dry and finely chop.

In a deep pan heat the olive oil on a medium heat and gently fry the onions, spring onions and garlic until translucent. Add the spinach, parsley and dill, and cook for 2-3 minutes until the spinach has wilted and heated through. Season with salt and pepper and add the nutmeg. Remove from the heat and set aside to cool.

In a large bowl, combine the feta and mizithra cheese (or ricotta) then stir in the spinach mixture and toss to distribute evenly.

At this point, refer to the guide on [how to handle phyllo pastry](#) at the beginning of this book.

To assemble the spinach pie, use a round baking pan (approx. 28cm). Grease the base well and lay the first sheet of country phyllo, letting the excess hang over the sides. Brush with olive oil and add the second sheet, rotating 90 degrees.

Add the filling and distribute evenly by gently pressing the mixture into the baking pan with the back of a tablespoon. Fold the overhanging phyllo on to the top one piece at a time, brushing with oil in between.

Preheat the oven to 165C.

Score the top layer of phyllo into the desired slices, being careful not to cut all the way through.

Brush with the beaten eggs, sprinkle with sesame seeds and bake for 45-50 minutes, until the pie turns a golden brown colour.

Allow to cool before cutting into slices.

Mushroom pie - manitaropita

The most famous Greek pie may be the spinach-filled [spanakopita](#), but Cretan cuisine has countless varieties such as “hortopita” (wild greens), “kolokithopita” (pumpkin) and “kreatopita” (meat). They all descend from the same “börek” family of pies characteristic of Byzantine cuisine and this mushroom version is a favourite because it tastes amazing either hot or cold. Use any mushroom of your choice preferably big, meaty ones like Portobello or Champignons.

Preparation time: 50 mins

Cooking time: 60 mins

Servings: 4

Ingredients

500g Portobello mushrooms, finely chopped

3 tbsp. olive oil

2 cloves garlic, crushed

100g feta cheese

100g mizithra cheese (or ricotta)

25g Graviera cheese (or parmesan)

2 eggs, lightly beaten

4 spring onions, finely chopped

1 tbsp. fresh parsley, chopped

½ tsp. dried oregano

salt and freshly ground pepper

50ml olive oil

2 sheets country phyllo pastry

Method

In a large frying pan, heat 3 tbsp olive oil on medium heat and gently fry the mushrooms until they start to release water and soften. Add the garlic and continue to cook for around 10 minutes, stirring occasionally, until the water has evaporated. Remove from the heat and set aside to cool.

In a medium bowl, combine the cheese, spring onions, parsley and oregano. When the mushrooms have cooled, add them to the cheese mixture and season with salt and pepper.

Grease a round baking pan with olive oil. Place one sheet of country

phyllo pastry over the pan, letting the excess hang over the sides. Brush lightly with olive oil and add the second sheet, rotating 90 degrees. Do not brush the top layer of phyllo with oil.

Preheat the oven to 170C.

Place the mushroom mixture into the phyllo lined pan, pressing into the edges, and level the top with the back of a spoon. Fold the overhanging phyllo on to the top one piece at a time, brushing with oil in between. Brush with the beaten eggs and bake in the oven for 45 minutes until the top turns golden brown. Allow to cool for at least 20 minutes before serving.

Cheese balls - tirokroketes

Croquettes made out of cheese, “tiri” in Greek, these are the modern variation of classic spiced meat balls originating in Ancient Greece and which gained ground over the centuries throughout Middle East and Balkan countries. Molten cheese on the inside and with a glorious golden crust, this recipe is very simple to follow but needs careful attention to its ingredients. You can prepare this dish with any type of cheese but to achieve the gooey texture and strong flavour, these are recommended: tangy Greek feta, soft and sweet Gouda and salty mature Cheddar. You can experiment by adding any herbs of your choice such as fresh dill, mint or oregano.

Preparation time: 15 mins

Chilling time: 30 mins

Cooking time: 10 mins

Servings: 4

Ingredients

120g feta cheese, crumbled

120g gouda cheese, grated

120g mature cheese (Regato/Graviera), grated

1 egg and 1 egg white

40g self raising flour

1 tbsp. milk

salt and freshly ground pepper

all-purpose flour for dredging

vegetable oil for frying

Method

In a medium bowl, combine all the ingredients (except flour and oil) until the mixture becomes a compact paste. Cover with cling film and place in the fridge for 30 minutes to firm up.

When the paste is chilled, form into equal sized balls (a teaspoon of mixture) and dredge each one in flour, shaking off any excess. The role of the flour is to create a light crust that will keep the cheese from spilling out.

In a non-stick pan, heat the vegetable oil on a high heat until just before it

starts smoking. Check if the oil is ready by sprinkling a small pinch of flour into it; if it starts bubbling immediately, the oil is ready. Use a slotted spoon to carefully lower the cheese balls into the pan. It is vital not to overcrowd the pan, so the balls should be fried in a single layer to achieve the perfect crispy result. If you add too many, the oil temperature will decrease causing the balls to absorb too much oil and become soggy. Turn the cheese balls regularly in the pan until they form a rich, golden brown crust. You may need to adjust the heat to avoid burning. Remove the cheese balls and drain any excess oil by placing on kitchen paper. Serve hot.

Meatballs - keftedes

Popular all over the world, the spiced meat balls have their roots in Ancient Greece, the term “sikofto” meaning minced meat, as derived from the verb “kovo” - to cut. From here they have spread under the “kofta” family through Middle Eastern and Balkan cuisines during the Byzantine and Ottoman Empire. The recipe varies throughout Europe and Asia, but all consist of minced or ground meat mixed with different combination of spices.

The modern Greek meatballs - keftedes are generally made with a combination of lamb, beef, chicken or pork and served as an appetizer alongside tzatziki and pita bread. Leftovers can be made into a delicious main course when added to a tomato based sauce and served with boiled rice or pasta.

Preparation time: 20 mins

Chilling time: 1 hour

Cooking time: 20 mins

Servings: 6

Ingredients

500g beef mince

200g pork mince

200g breadcrumbs

1 large red onion, grated

1 clove garlic, crushed

1 egg

2 tbsp. fresh parsley, chopped

1 tbsp. fresh mint, chopped

½ tsp. oregano

2 tbsp. olive oil

salt and freshly ground pepper

oil for frying

flour for dredging

Method

Combine all the ingredients (except oil and flour) in a large bowl and mix well to allow the flavours to blend. If the mixture is a little wet, add some more breadcrumbs. Cover with cling film and chill in the fridge for 1

hour.

When chilled, use a tablespoon to scoop equal quantities of the mixture and roll between your palms to form small balls (around 2½ to 3cm in size). Dredge the meatballs in flour and shake off any excess.

Heat the oil on a high heat and, using a slotted spoon, add the meat balls in batches making sure not to overcrowd the pan and fry until nicely brown on all sides.

For a lighter version, the meatballs can be baked or grilled. Preheat the oven to 200C, place the meatballs on a greased baking sheet and bake for 20 minutes, turning the meatballs upside down midway through cooking time.

Fried courgette fritters - kolokithokeftedes

These delicious vegetarian fritters are part of the same family of “kofta” dishes, like the [tirokrokates \(cheese balls\)](#) and [keftedes \(meat balls\)](#). Its name comes from the Greek word “kolokithi” meaning courgette, combined with “keftedes”. During the summer, courgettes are grown in abundance which makes this a very popular Cretan appetizer.

The perfect fritters should be fried until extra crispy on the outside while still preserving the creamy and rich texture on the inside. To achieve this, the oil must be sizzling hot oil and the fritters cooked in small batches. For a lighter and healthier version, they can be baked in the oven. The courgette fritters are best served with a light yoghurt dip or [tzatziki](#).

Preparation time: 45 mins

Cooking time: 5 mins

Servings: 4

Ingredients

500g courgettes, grated
2 spring onions, finely chopped
1 tbsp. fresh mint, chopped
2 eggs
200g feta cheese, grated
salt and freshly ground pepper
4 tbsp. breadcrumbs
2 tbsp. olive oil
1 tbsp. fresh parsley, chopped
vegetable oil for frying

Method

Grate the courgettes and place them in a colander with salt. Squeeze out the excess water with your hands and leave for 30 minutes before squeezing again.

In a large bowl, add all the ingredients (except oil) and mix well with your hands until combined and the mixture is firm enough to make the fritters into a patty shape. In a frying pan, heat the vegetable oil on a high heat until it sizzles. Using a slotted spoon, gently lower the courgette patties into the hot oil one at a time, making sure there is enough space between them. Fry for 2-3 minutes each side, until golden brown. Scoop them out

and place on a paper towel to absorb any excess oil.

For the healthier version, preheat the oven to 180C and line a baking tray with parchment. Space the patties evenly on the tray and brush with olive oil. Bake for 25 minutes, turning the patties halfway through. Serve hot with yoghurt dip or [tzatziki](#).

Courgette flowers stuffed with goat cheese

Courgette flowers are either male, which have stems, or female, which are attached to the baby courgette - either will work for this recipe. It is best to use courgette blossoms that have been picked the same day you use them. They should be stored in a tightly sealed plastic bag in the refrigerator until you are ready to cook. These vibrant flowers are stuffed with a creamy goat cheese, then deep fried in a light and crispy tempura style batter and finally drizzled with a sweet and sour balsamic vinegar.

Preparation time: 10 mins

Cooking time: 10 mins

Servings: 4

Ingredients

240g all-purpose flour

240ml sparkling water

$\frac{3}{4}$ tsp sea salt, plus extra for seasoning

60g mizithra cheese, at room temperature

2 tbsp. cream cheese, at room temperature

2 tsp. double cream

1 egg

1 tbsp. fresh basil, chopped

1 spring onion, finely chopped

freshly ground black pepper

12 courgette blossoms

vegetable oil for frying

Method

To make the batter, whisk together the flour, water and salt in a medium bowl until smooth then set aside. In a separate bowl, combine the cream cheese, goat cheese, cream, egg, basil, onion until smooth and season with salt and pepper to taste.

Spoon 1½-2 teaspoon of filling into each blossom, closing them by gently twisting the petals to seal.

In a large heavy-bottomed saucepan, pour enough oil to fill the pan about a third of the way up. Heat on medium until a deep-frying thermometer reaches 180C. (If you don't have a thermometer, use a cube of bread, it

will brown in 1 minute). Dip the stuffed courgette blossoms in the batter and allow any excess to drip away. Fry for 1-2 minutes, turning occasionally, until golden brown then place them on kitchen paper to drain. Season with salt and serve with balsamic vinegar.

Romano peppers stuffed with mizithra

This delicious traditional Cretan recipe is very easy to make. The tanginess of the Cretan goat cheese combined with the sweetness of Romano peppers, enhanced with spice make for an extraordinary appetizer. The secret to achieving exquisite texture and flavour is to use good quality mizithra goat cheese in combination with yellow cheese. To bring Mediterranean aromas to the stuffed peppers, make sure to garnish with fresh garlic, parsley, extra virgin olive oil or for a spicy kick, chopped chilli.

Preparation time: 10 mins

Cooking time: 20 mins

Servings: 4

Ingredients

8 medium red Romano peppers

250g mizithra cheese

120g yellow cheese, grated

dash of olive oil

freshly ground pepper

1 tsp. chilli flakes

2 cloves garlic, crushed

1 tbsp. fresh parsley, chopped

Method

Wash and cut off the tops of the peppers, discarding the seeds and membrane by pulling them out with your fingers.

Prepare the filling by mixing the cheeses in a medium bowl. Add freshly ground pepper, garlic and chilli.

Stuff the peppers with the cheese mixture then place in a lined baking dish and drizzle with olive oil.

Bake in preheated oven at 180C for 15-20 minutes.

Garnish with finely chopped parsley and serve warm, with a drizzle of olive oil on top.

Stuffed vine leaves - dolmades

The Homeric word “thalami” meaning hole to be filled is at the origin of this popular family of dishes widely spread all over the Mediterranean, Middle East and Balkan countries.

It has later evolved into “dolma” which defines grape or cabbage leaves stuffed with rice, meat or grains. In each case, the filling includes onion and herbs such as dill, mint or parsley and various spices.

One of the most iconic recipes of Cretan cuisine is Dolmades (Dolmadakia), a meatless version made from tender vine leaves wrapped into little rolls and stuffed with rice and fresh herbs. In the warmer months, try to find fresh grape leaves as they are more tender and flavourful than the stored variety. However, out of season jars of leaves are a good substitute.

This vegetarian dish is the perfect recipe for Lent and should be served cold or at room temperature with a last minute squeeze of lemon juice and some thick creamy yoghurt.

Preparation time: 30 mins

Cooking time: 50 mins

Servings: 4

Ingredients

40 vine leaves, rinsed and drained

200g rice

60ml olive oil

2 onions, finely chopped

480ml warm water

2 lemons, juiced

2 tbsp. fresh dill, chopped

70g fresh parsley, chopped

70g mint leaves, chopped

salt and freshly ground pepper

Method

Start by preparing the vine leaves. If using fresh leaves wash them thoroughly, remove the stems and sink them into boiling water for 2 minutes. Using a slotted spoon, scoop them out and put into cold water immediately to stop further cooking and maintain the green colour. (For

the jarred leaves, rinse them well in cold water and remove the stems). Place the vine leaves in a colander until ready to use.

To make the filling, rinse the rice to remove any residue. In a medium saucepan, heat 3 tablespoons olive oil on a medium heat and fry the onions until soft and translucent. Add the rice and cook for 1 minute then pour in the warm water and lemon juice. Cover with a lid and simmer for 7 minutes, until the rice has absorbed all the water. Add the dill, parsley, mint and season with salt and pepper then set aside to cool.

Using a medium pot or pan, cover the bottom with a few vine leaves. To roll the dolmades, place one vine leaf (shiny side down) on a flat surface and add 1 teaspoon of the filling at the bottom end (the widest part of the leaf). Fold the left and right margins inwards and start rolling from bottom to top. They should be loosely rolled as the rice will expand during cooking and may break the dolma. Layer the stuffed vine leaves in the pot, closely together to prevent them from unfolding during cooking.

Pour over any remaining olive oil and lemon juice and season with salt and pepper. Put a plate on top of the dolmades, thus keeping them to the bottom of the pan and preventing unrolling while boiling. Add enough water to just cover the dolmades and boil on a low heat for 35-40 minutes, until the water has been absorbed and only the oil liquid is left.

Remove from the heat and allow to cool for at least 30 minutes.

Serve cold or at room temperature with a squeeze of lemon juice and natural Greek yoghurt.

Stuffed courgette flowers - kolokythanthí

An absolute delicacy in Mediterranean cuisine, stuffed courgette flowers are a variation of dolmades and sometimes even cooked together in the same pot. What makes this dish truly exquisite is that courgette blossoms are not frequently sold in the markets and they must be picked early in the morning during only a few hours of blooming. To keep them open until ready to use, the flowers should be stacked one inside the other otherwise they will close and make it difficult to fill.

The stuffed courgette blossoms - “anthí” are usually served at room temperature with creamy natural Greek yoghurt. The pistil and stamen do not necessarily need to be removed but most Greek chefs will take them out. You can use both winter and summer blossoms and if you don't have a vegetable garden of your own, look for them at your local farmer's market.

Preparation time: 10 mins

Cooking time: 40 mins

Servings: 4

Ingredients

20 courgette blossoms

250g long grain rice

1 medium onion, grated

3 tomatoes, finely chopped or grated

50g fresh parsley, chopped

50g fresh mint, chopped

2 cloves garlic, crushed

salt and freshly ground pepper

50ml olive oil

200ml water

Method

Rinse the courgette blossoms individually, carefully removing any external green leaves and the internal pistil and stamen with a sharp knife. Stack the blossoms one inside the other to prevent from closing and allow to drain on kitchen paper.

In a bowl, combine the rice, onion, tomatoes, parsley, mint and garlic. Season with salt and pepper and add 2 teaspoons olive oil to help with

binding.

Using a teaspoon, gently fill each blossom with the rice mixture, being careful not to overload them. The rice will expand during cooking and the flowers will break if there is too much filling.

Fold the open end of the stuffed blossom inward and turn underneath to seal. Place the courgette flowers in a medium pot, very close together, to prevent opening while cooking. Put a plate on top of the flowers to keep them weighed down, add the water and remaining olive oil and bring to boil. Simmer for 30 minutes, until the water has been absorbed and only the oil liquid is left.

Serve at room temperature with natural Greek yoghurt.

Figs with goat cheese

Figs were widespread in ancient Greece and their cultivation was described by both Aristotle and Theophrastus. Figs were a staple food of the poor along with apples, beans and chick peas and at the time, their export was forbidden. Greek people traditionally eat figs (fresh and dried) as a dessert and snack or in combination with cheese as an appetizer. This recipe combines the sweetness and compact texture of the fresh fig with the sweet and sour taste and fluffy texture of Cretan mizithra goat cheese. You can also use feta cheese although the contrast between sweet and salty taste is more pungent. These stuffed figs can be served as an appetizer or a side dish; a decadent looking plate that will impress your guests.

Preparation time: 5 mins

Cooking time: 20 mins

Servings: 4

Ingredients

12 fresh figs

120g mizithra goat cheese (or ricotta)

1 tsp. olive oil

salt and freshly ground black pepper

50ml honey

12 walnut halves

Method

Preheat oven to 170C.

Trim the stems of the figs and cut an “X” in the top of each one, slicing half way down. Place them on a lined baking tray. If they are a little wobbly, shave a bit from the bottom so that the fig stands upright.

Using a teaspoon, fill the top of each fig with goat cheese, dividing it equally between each fruit. Place one walnut half on top, lightly brush with olive oil and season with salt and pepper. Bake for 5 minutes, until the goat cheese has little golden flecks on the surface. Warm up the honey and drizzle over the figs as soon as they come out of the oven.

This dish can be served warm or at room temperature, as an appetizer or snack.

Cheese saganaki

In Greek cuisine, saganaki refers to various appetizers prepared in a small, two handled heavy bottomed frying pan called “sagani”. The name comes from the Turkish word “sahan” which stands for copper dish. If you don’t have a “sagani”, you can use any pan, cast-iron skillet or common saucepan. When preparing a Greek saganaki recipe, it is very important to choose the right kind of cheese which should be firm enough to hold-up against the heat. Cheese varieties traditionally used in Greek saganaki are Cretan Graviera, Kefalograviera or Kefalotyri but any other hard yellow cheese will do.

Preparation time: 5 mins

Cooking time: 5 mins

Servings: 2

Ingredients

200g Graviera cheese

(or any other hard yellow cheese)

100g flour for dredging

vegetable oil for frying

1 lemon

Method

Cut the cheese in 2 large slices, approximately 1cm thick.

Pass the cheese under running water and then dredge into the flour, shaking of any excess. This will help the cheese to hold its shape when fried and form a nice golden crust.

Add some oil to a “sagani” or a frying pan. As soon as the oil heats up, gently place the cheese into the pan and fry for a few minutes each side until a golden colour, turning carefully to avoid breakage.

Serve immediately with a squeeze of lemon juice.

Shrimp saganaki

Unlike cheese saganaki, this recipe has a completely different method, requiring baking the shrimps in a tomato based sauce with chunks of feta cheese. Any Greek taverna will serve this dish straight from the skillet with bread to soak up all the delicious juices. Instead of classical “sagani” you can use any oven proof ceramic or Pyrex dish, preferably round, with a diameter of 20 centimetres. For a truly exquisite taste, it is best to use fresh prawns and high-quality Greek feta.

Preparation time: 10 mins

Cooking time: 20 mins

Servings: 4

Ingredients

16 medium/large shrimps (fresh or frozen)

400g ripe tomatoes, finely chopped

1 red onion, finely chopped

2 spring onions, chopped

2 cloves garlic, crushed

50ml ouzo

250g feta cheese, crumbled

50ml olive oil

salt and freshly ground pepper

pinch of hot chilli pepper (optional)

pinch of sweet paprika (optional)

chopped fresh dill or parsley, to garnish

Method

Start by cleaning the shrimps: sink them in boiling water for 1-2 minutes so the shell comes off easily. Remove the heads from most of them, but leave the tails on a few for decoration. Devein by gently slicing with a knife across the back surface of the shrimp and removing the dark vein with a toothpick.

In a frying pan, heat 30ml olive oil and fry the red onion until soft and translucent. Add the garlic, spring onions, chilli peppers and paprika (if using) and season with salt and pepper. Next, add the tomatoes and simmer for around 5 minutes until the sauce thickens a little.

Preheat the oven to 180C.

In an ovenproof dish (if you don't have a "sagani" use Pyrex or ceramic) add the tomato sauce and shrimps. Pour over the ouzo and remaining olive oil, then top with crumbled feta. Bake for 15 minutes, until the feta slightly melts and the sauce is sizzling.

Decorate with the tail-on shrimps and garnish with parsley or dill. Serve immediately alongside a cold glass of ouzo.

Fried calamari

The culinary term “calamari” is often used to describe squid dishes from the Mediterranean. Popular around the world, fried calamari is nearly always made with a coating of batter. However, the Greeks prefer an even lighter version of simply seasoned flour for an amazing crispy crust. In ancient Greece squid was classified as “fish for the frying pan” and was usually served as an appetizer before a more substantial meal. Hardly anything has changed two thousand years later!

The most frequent problem relating to fried calamari is that it often appears chewy. Some recipes suggest rubbing the calamari with baking soda or soaking in milk for a few hours to tenderise them. The simple fact is that chewiness occurs if the calamari is overcooked. To avoid this, it should be fried in sizzling oil for no longer than 3 minutes then drained on kitchen paper for 1 minute for a crusty texture outside and tenderness inside.

Preparation time: 10 mins

Cooking time: 5-6 mins

Servings: 4

Ingredients

400g frozen calamari

100g flour

salt and freshly ground pepper

½ tbsp. paprika (optional)

1 tbsp. oregano (optional)

vegetable oil for frying

Method

For this recipe, either large frozen squid tubes or squid rings can be used. The advantage of this being that the seafood is already clean and only needs defrosting.

If using the squid tubes, cut them in slices of approx. 1cm width. Put them in a bowl and sprinkle with salt, pepper and any other seasoning of your choice. Paprika or chilli powder can be used for a more spicy flavour. Add the flour and mix well to coat evenly, shaking off any excess flour before cooking.

Heat the vegetable oil in a frying pan on a medium-high heat. To ensure the oil is hot enough, dip one calamari ring and it should sizzle. Fry in batches for no longer than 3 minutes and leave plenty of space between the rings. Using a slotted spoon, scoop the rings out and place on kitchen paper to dry for 1 minute.

Sprinkle with salt and serve immediately with lemon wedges.

Grilled octopus

The Greeks have been eating octopus since ancient times but there is an art in preparing this particular sea creature. A common sight in all the island beachside restaurants, the octopus can usually be seen hanging on a clothesline in the sun to dry.

In Greek cuisine, octopus is generally grilled over charcoal and seasoned with fresh lemon and onion slices.

The first step in preparing fresh octopus is to clean it thoroughly by removing the beak, eyes and internal organs. Frozen octopus is sold in most supermarkets and has the advantage of being already cleaned. It is vitally important in preparation to tenderize the octopus, otherwise it will not be edible. Traditionally, the fishermen would beat the octopus on rocks. However, freezing it overnight proved to be equally efficient as the low temperatures break down the proteins and help tenderize the meat.

The next step is to season the octopus with plenty of salt and oregano and dry. If drying in the sun is not possible, the octopus should be braised. To braise: place it in an empty pot over high heat, cover and allow roughly 10 minutes for the octopus to release its liquid. When the octopus is floating in its own juices, simmer until it has reduced to about half the original size. For an octopus of around 1kg, 60 minutes may be required. For anything larger, consider cutting it into 2 or 3 smaller pieces.

Preparation time: 10 mins

Chilling: 1 hour

Cooking time: 1 hour

Servings: 4

Ingredients

1 octopus approx. 1kg

100ml red wine

20ml red wine vinegar

1 tsp. dried oregano

1 tbsp. olive oil

salt and freshly ground pepper

lemon wedges, sliced onion and chopped parsley to serve

Method

Place the clean octopus into a pot on high heat and replace the lid. As the

octopus heats up, the juices will start to release. Check it after 5 and 10 minutes, at which time the octopus should be almost covered in liquid. (If most, or all of the liquid has evaporated, add some water and boil for up to 10 minutes). Reduce the heat and simmer for 45 minutes, stirring occasionally. It requires enough liquid to gently bubble (add a little more water if necessary) - continue until the octopus is fork-tender. Remove from the heat and add the wine, vinegar and dried oregano. Allow to cool for at least 1 hour or store in the fridge until ready to grill.

Preheat the grill on high heat. Take the octopus out of the liquid, put into a bowl then add the olive oil, a pinch of oregano, salt and freshly ground pepper. Place the octopus on the grill and sear on each side for around 2-3 minutes. It should be scorched and crisp on the outside, tender and white on the inside.

Garnish with sliced onion, chopped parsley and serve drizzled with olive oil and lemon wedges.

Squid or cuttlefish stuffed with goat cheese

Both squid and cuttlefish are part of Cephalopoda group; the name derives from the Greek word meaning “head-feet”, because their arms encircle their heads. Both are known as ten-armed cephalopods as they have eight short arms and two long tentacles. Squid have sleek, torpedo-shaped bodies, compared to the broader, stout body of the cuttlefish. The culinary term “calamari” is often used to describe squid dishes from the Mediterranean, notably fried squid (fried calamari).

For this recipe you can use either squid or cuttlefish. Generally, cuttlefish are the most flavoursome while the squid flesh is more tender. The original Cretan recipe requires a filling of mizithra goat cheese but this can be replaced with either ricotta or feta if necessary. The filling can be varied by adding fried onions and garlic, diced red peppers and tomatoes, fresh herbs (parsley, basil, mint, dill) or even spinach. In fact, the stuffing used for [spanakopita](#) is a wonderful alternative.

The most important rule for cooking squid and cuttlefish (calamari) is a simple one: both require short cooking times on a high heat (either grilled or baked).

Preparation time: 10 mins

Cooking time: 8-10 mins

Servings: 4

Ingredients

4 squid or cuttlefish (approx 1kg, 250g per piece)

400g mizithra cheese (or ricotta or feta)

4 spring onions or 1 small onion, finely chopped

30ml olive oil

1 clove garlic, crushed

1 tbsp. parsley, chopped

salt and freshly ground pepper

lemon slices to serve

Method

Turn the squid inside out to wash it (being careful not to tear the flesh), and place them in a shallow dish side by side.

In a bowl, combine the cheese, spring onions, oil, garlic, parsley, salt and pepper. Divide the mixture into 4 equal parts and start by stuffing the

squid with small quantities, pressing the cheese inside to fill the entire space. If the flesh tears, use a toothpick to keep the sides together while cooking. Then, brush the squid with olive oil.

Preheat the grill and cook on a high heat for 6 minutes. Carefully turn over and cook for a further 2 minutes. Alternatively, you can cook them in a preheated oven at 160C, on a lined baking tray until they turn a golden brown.

Serve on a platter with lemon slices and garnish with parsley.

Grilled squid with orange and herbs

This tasty and refreshing recipe is the perfect appetizer for a hot summer day. Squid should be cooked either very quickly or on a long low heat - anything in between will make it turn rubbery. For a crunchy and soft texture it is important to have the grill on maximum heat and to cook the squid rapidly for a few minutes each side. If using frozen squid, allow it to thaw completely in the fridge before grilling. If you are able to buy fresh squid from your local market, ask for it to be cleaned as this will save time.

Preparation time: 10 mins

Cooking time: 8 mins

Servings: 4

Ingredients

750g squid (fresh or frozen), cleaned and tentacles separated from the body

2 tbsp. olive oil

2 tbsp. orange juice

1 tbsp. lemon juice

2 tbsp. orange and lemon zest

4 tbsp. finely chopped mixed herbs (parsley/oregano/thyme/basil) or 2 tbsp. dried herbs

salt and freshly ground pepper

Method

Preheat the grill to maximum.

Rub 1 tablespoon olive oil on the squid and grill it on a high heat for roughly 3-4 minutes each side. The tentacles may need a little more time.

Slice the squid into thin circles (1cm) and place them into a bowl.

Add the remaining olive oil, orange and lemon juice, zest, herbs, salt and pepper then mix well.

Serve it as part of a meze together with a fresh green salad.

Grilled sardines

Sardines are loved and enjoyed by all the countries that hug the Mediterranean. The name can be traced back to the ancient Greek term “Sardo”, indicating the island of Sardinia around which sardines were once abundant. Widely available and affordable, the sardine is everyman’s fish in Greece, being prepared with minimal ingredients and served as an appetizer or light entree. Sardines are rich in omega-3 fatty acids (very good for a healthy diet) and have a strong, meaty flavour. This recipe calls for fresh sardines (they do not freeze well and tinned sardines do not taste the same) and they can be either grilled or marinated to enhance their taste.

Preparation time: 20 mins

Marinate: 30 mins

Cook time: 10 mins

Servings: 4

Ingredients

500g fresh sardines

75ml olive oil

3 cloves garlic, thinly sliced

juice from 2 lemons

salt and freshly ground pepper

fresh parsley and lemon wedges to serve

Method

With a sharp knife, remove the scales and intestines from the sardines, leaving the heads intact.

In a bowl, mix the olive oil with lemon juice, garlic, salt and pepper and toss the sardines until well coated. Cover and put in the fridge for 30 minutes.

Preheat the grill to its highest setting (or light a charcoal grill), making sure it is well heated for 10 minutes before starting to cook.

Remove the sardines from the fridge and place on the grill over direct heat until well-charred. Grill them for 2-3 minutes each side, then transfer to a serving tray.

Season with salt, sprinkle with chopped parsley and serve immediately with lemon wedges aside.

Marinated anchovies

Islanders just love to eat this popular meze accompanied by [dakos](#) and a selection of olives, while chatting with friends for long hours by the sea. It is best to use fresh anchovies of roughly 10-12cm, cleaned and “cooked” in the acidity of lemon juice and vinegar. The anchovies must be the freshest possible as there is no fire cooking involved. This is a simple recipe with the only time-consuming part being the cleaning. It requires precision and a very sharp knife to open up the small fish and remove the spine in order to create tiny fillets.

Preparation time: 60 mins

Rest: overnight

Marinate time: 6 hours

Servings: 4

Ingredients

500g fresh anchovies

250ml white wine vinegar

100ml olive oil

250g sea salt

4 cloves garlic, thinly sliced

1 tbsp. fresh parsley, chopped

1 tbsp. hot red pepper flakes

Method

Put a layer of sea salt on the bottom of a plastic bowl then place the cleaned and washed anchovies on top of the salt. Add another layer of salt and anchovies and repeat the process until all of them are fully covered in salt. Cover and leave to rest in the fridge overnight (the salt will draw out the moisture from the fish and make them firmer).

Wash the anchovies thoroughly and cut off the heads. Using a sharp paring knife, slit each fish along the belly from head to tail, remove the entrails and rinse well. Remove the backbones of the anchovies by slicing each one in half lengthwise, exposing the spine. Use the tip of the knife to lift the bone up and out. Separate the two fillets and rinse again.

Arrange a layer of the fillets in a large dish and sprinkle 2 tablespoons vinegar over the top. Continue until all the fish fillets are layered and

pour over any remaining vinegar. Cover and marinate in the fridge for 4 hours. The acidity of the vinegar will “cook” the fish fillets.

Remove from the fridge after 4 hours, rinse the fillets well and pat dry with a paper towel. In a large glass jar put one layer of anchovies and sprinkle with garlic, red pepper flakes and parsley. Pour over a little olive oil and continue with a second layer of anchovies, repeating the steps until all fillets are seasoned and covered in oil. Seal the jar and return to fridge for at least 2 hours before serving.

These marinated anchovies can be preserved in the fridge up to 30 days.

Cretan style snails - hohlloi boubouristoi

The lobsters of Cretan cuisine, snails are considered a delicacy by most island people and are frequently eaten in homes and taverns especially before the Greek Orthodox Easter. The snails are sold at farmers markets in net bags and will have already been cleaned, ready for cooking. Alternatively, snails can be picked up from the fields and gardens. However, this requires an extensive cleaning process; keeping them in aired cages and fed uncooked spaghetti or pasta for one week, in order to remove toxins.

There are two stories regarding the provenance of the Cretan name: according to local chefs it is onomatopoeia for the crackling sound the snails make upon contact with the hot salt; others believe it comes from the Cretan word “abouboura”, which means face-side down.

Preparation time: 10 mins

Rest: overnight

Cooking time: 30 mins

Servings: 4

Ingredients

750g large snails, membrane removed and washed well

3 tbsp. salt

50ml olive oil

100ml red wine vinegar

2 sprigs fresh rosemary

Method

Put the snails in a bowl with plenty of cold water, cover and leave overnight. One by one the living snails will start to come out of their shells and any dead ones can be discarded. Scrape the outer shells clean and remove the thin membrane covering the opening.

Bring a pot of water to the boil and blanch the snails for 3 minutes, then rinse under running cold water.

In a large skillet, spread the salt evenly and heat on a medium heat.

Place the snails open side down (“abouboura”), over the salt. As soon as the snails stop sizzling, add the olive oil and stir for 5 minutes.

Pour in the vinegar and add the rosemary sprigs. Lower the heat, cover the skillet and cook for another 5 minutes.

Serve piping hot on a serving plate, with crusty bread aside and a glass of ouzo or raki.

SALADS

Greek salad

Since Ancient Greece, the famous physician Hippocrates considered that eating salad/raw vegetables at the beginning of a meal aids digestion and stimulates the appetite. To this day, the Greek habit of eating salad as a first course has proved to be a healthier way to diet, as vegetables fill the stomach quickly (preventing overeating) and the nutrients are quickly absorbed.

The famed Greek salad is known locally as “horiatiki” which means village or peasant salad and is typically a rural dish made with ingredients farmers would take to the field for a lunch break. Although a simple dish with basic ingredients, this salad has a few essential tips to ensure its perfect taste; vegetables must be prepared immediately before serving, cucumber should be coarsely peeled, the order in which the vegetables are layered on the plate must be respected (it is never served mixed), tomato and cucumber form the base ingredients, a few slices of onion and pepper, a compact slice of feta cheese on top, drizzled with olive oil and a pinch of oregano.

Preparation time: 10 min

Servings: 4

Ingredients

300g ripe fresh tomatoes (organic, if possible)

300g cucumber

1 green bell pepper

1 medium onion

200g feta cheese (2 slices)

20-25 olives

pinch of dried oregano

4 tbsp. olive oil

Method

Thoroughly wash the vegetables, halve the tomatoes and remove the stems. Coarsely peel the cucumber, leaving some areas unpeeled. Cut the cucumber into slices of about 1/2 cm thickness and layer them on the bottom of a salad bowl. Chop the tomatoes into 2cm cubes and place them on top of the cucumber. Slice a few thin rings of pepper and lay them over the tomatoes, adding a few onion rings. Decorate with olives

around the side then top with the slice of feta cheese. Sprinkle with oregano, drizzle with olive oil and serve immediately.

In Crete, “horiatiki” is often served with mizithra goat cheese instead of feta. The locals often mix a few drops of water with the olive oil. This, together with the tomato juice and the goat cheese makes a delicious sauce, perfect for dipping chunks of fresh bread.

Cretan salad

A richer version of the “horiatiki”, the Cretan salad features potato, egg, mizithra goat cheese, Cretan rusks and purslane (Portulaca oleracea) a common weed found in most gardens all over the world and often mistaken as a noxious weed. “Glystrida” (the Greek term for purslane), is a miracle plant containing more Omega-3 fatty acids (alpha-linoleic acid in particular) than any other leafy vegetable. It is also packed with vitamins and dietary minerals such as magnesium, calcium, potassium and iron. So, if you come across this weed in your garden, don't throw it away - add it to your Cretan salad for extra flavour!

Preparation time: 10 min

Cooking time: 20 minutes

Servings: 4

Ingredients

300g cucumbers

300g ripe tomatoes (preferably organic)

1 green bell pepper

1 medium onion

4 hard-boiled eggs

150g boiled potatoes

1 medium carrot

20-25 olives

100g barley rusks

200g mizithra cheese

pinch of dried oregano

4 tbsp. extra virgin olive oil

few purslane sprouts (optional)

Method

Gently clean the potato skin and put them in a pan to boil (skin on) for 20 minutes. In a separate saucepan, boil the eggs with 1 teaspoon salt for 6-7 minutes.

Wash the vegetables, halve the tomatoes and remove the stems. Coarsely peel the cucumber, leaving some stretches of peel on then, cut into slices of about 1/2cm thickness and layer on a salad serving dish. Chop the tomatoes into 2cm cubes and place over the cucumber. Cut the pepper

and onion into thin rings and add them to the tomatoes, spreading evenly. Follow with the carrot cut in round, thin slices and with the boiled potatoes cut into cubes of 2cm. Garnish with round slices of boiled egg, barley rusks, olives and purslane sprouts (if using).

Add the goat's cheese on top, sprinkle with oregano and drizzle with olive oil over the entire plate.

Shrimp and avocado salad

Introduced to Crete after 1970 and with a few experimental plantations, the avocado gained tremendous popularity among the Cretan farmers who began to extensively cultivate them, especially around Chania area. Nowadays, the Chania avocado is not only exported to various countries within Europe, it has also gained an important place in Cretan cuisine. [Tzatziki with avocado](#) is another classic Cretan recipe born in Chania due to the abundance of the fruit. The combination of avocado with shrimp makes this healthy Cretan recipe full of flavour and ideal for a light summer lunch.

Preparation time: 20 min

Servings: 4

Ingredients

12 medium size pink shrimps, frozen

2 medium ripe avocado

1 medium carrot, sliced

1 Romaine lettuce

40ml olive oil

salt and freshly ground pepper

For the cocktail sauce

4 tbsp. mayonnaise, well heaped

2 tbsp. tomato chutney

2 tsp. Worcestershire sauce

2 tsp. creamed horseradish

juice from 1 lemon

Method

Start by adding the frozen shrimps into a large bowl and cover with hot water. Leave for 10 minutes until they can be easily peeled (leave the heads and tails on).

Wash the lettuce leaves, pat dry and cut into large chunks. Mix in the carrot slices and arrange the lettuce in a pile on a serving dish.

Heat half the olive oil in a pan on medium heat and add the shrimps, cooking them for 2-3 minutes until they change colour. Season with salt and pepper and set aside.

In a small bowl, mix together all the ingredients for the cocktail sauce until it becomes a compact cream.

Cut the avocado in half lengthways, remove the stone and carefully peel them. Place the avocado halves on top of the lettuce, with the hole facing up. Using a tablespoon, fill the hole with cocktail sauce and arrange 2-3 shrimps on top of each. Season with the remaining olive oil, salt and pepper and serve immediately.

TIP: How to determine if an avocado is ripe? Flick the brown nub of the stem. If the stem comes off clean and is green underneath, the avocado is ripe. If the stem does not release and the fruit is still hard, it is not ready yet. If fruit is soft and the pulp brown, the avocado is overripe and not good to eat.

Rocket (arugula) salad with Graviera

Often served in restaurants around the harbour of Chania Old Town, this salad is a Cretan interpretation of the famous Italian rocket-Parmesan salad, with additions such as walnuts, figs and raisins. It is delightfully refreshing and combines the unexpected flavours of peppery rocket and the burnt caramel taste of Graviera cheese together with a sweet and sour dressing made with honey and balsamic vinegar. Although this recipe is simple, it certainly creates an impressive dish to serve either as a starter or side.

Preparation time: 10 min

Servings: 4

Ingredients

500g rocket salad (or mixed lettuce and rocket)

100g Graviera cheese

40g raisins

40g walnuts

60g dried figs

20 cherry tomatoes, halved

salt and freshly ground pepper

For the dressing

2 tbsp. honey

1 tbsp. balsamic vinegar

1 tbsp. sweet mustard

60ml olive oil

Method

Wash and pat dry the rocket leaves, then slice them into large chunks. Cut the dried figs into quarters and coarsely chop the walnuts. Place the salad leaves in to a bowl.

In a small bowl, combine the honey, balsamic vinegar and mustard and mix until smooth and creamy. Add the olive oil a little at a time and mix continuously until a thick sauce is formed, then transfer to a piping bottle. The mixture can be stored at room temperature for up to 1 week.

Pour the dressing over the salad (keeping a little back) and toss to coat it thoroughly. Add the raisins, walnuts, dried figs and cherry tomatoes.

Season with salt and pepper then toss to distribute evenly.

Transfer on a serving plate and using a potato peeler, add thin slices of Graviera cheese on top, drizzle with the remaining dressing and serve immediately.

Tuna salad

A refreshing and light classic tuna salad requiring only a few simple ingredients - perfect for a hot summer day. This recipe is based on tinned tuna in olive oil but for a lighter version, tuna preserved in brine can be used. An important source of iron and potassium, tinned tuna contains less than 1 gram of fat, making it an excellent choice for a healthy eating plan.

Preparation time: 10 min

Servings: 4

Ingredients

1 Romaine lettuce

300g canned tuna (in olive oil or water), drained

300g canned sweetcorn, drained

4 medium spring onions, thinly sliced

15ml olive oil

pinch of salt

sunflower seeds (optional)

Method

In a pan on medium heat, add 1 tbsp (10ml) olive oil and the sweetcorn. Season with salt and cook for 3-4 minutes, until the liquid has dried and the corn is slightly roasted.

Thoroughly wash the lettuce leaves, pat dry and cut into large chunks. Arrange the lettuce in a pile on a serving dish. Add the chunks of tuna, spring onions and sweetcorn then top with a few sunflower seeds (if using). Sprinkle with salt, drizzle with olive oil and serve with toasted bread or breadsticks.

Avocado and orange salad

A typically Cretan salad with a modern twist. The main ingredients have been produced in Crete since ancient times (oranges and olive oil) while the relatively modern avocado, has gained much terrain and is now mass cultivated in the areas around Chania. According to experts, the Mediterranean climate of the island is extremely favourable to the production of this super fruit. Because the avocado is highly rich and filling, the salad does not need to be made in large quantities. This dish is packed full of healthy monounsaturated fats from the olive oil and avocado, vitamin C from the orange and lemon juice.

Preparation time: 10 min

Servings: 4

Ingredients

4 medium avocado, peeled and sliced
2 medium oranges peeled and segmented
1 tbsp. orange zest
2 tbsp. olive oil
juice from 1 lemon
½ tsp. ground cumin
salt and freshly ground pepper

Method

For the dressing, mix the olive oil with the lemon juice, cumin and a pinch of salt and pepper. Place the avocado and orange in a small bowl and mix carefully to avoid crushing the avocado. Pour the dressing over the salad and blend gently, adding the orange zest. Season with freshly ground pepper and serve in small, individual bowls.

Salad with figs and goat cheese

Ancient Olympians earned figs for their athletic prowess and the fruits were considered so valuable that, even if they were widely available, it was illegal to export them. Some records claim that the fig tree originated in northern Asia Minor and spread with the Greeks and the Romans throughout the Mediterranean region. Rich in calcium, potassium and dietary fibre, the fig is a superfood, both nutritious and delicious that compliments the rich, creamy mizithra goat cheese in this recipe. Add them to any fresh salad for a distinctive sweet and fruity flavour. See also the recipe for Figs with goat cheese, an exquisite warm starter.

Preparation time: 10 min

Servings: 4

Ingredients

1 Romaine lettuce (or any mixed greens), chopped

1 medium carrot, finely grated

80g white cabbage, finely cut

2 tomatoes, chopped

100g cucumber, sliced

200g fresh figs, chopped

200g soft goat cheese, crumbled

2 tbsp. fresh dill, chopped

2 tbsp. fresh parsley, chopped

4 tbsp. olive oil

juice from 1 lemon

4 tsp. balsamic vinegar

salt and freshly ground pepper

Method

In a large bowl, combine the lettuce (or mixed greens), add the carrot, cabbage, tomato, cucumber, figs, dill, parsley and stir. Pour over the lemon juice, olive oil and balsamic vinegar, season with salt and pepper and toss gently.

Transfer the salad to a serving dish and top with the crumbled goat cheese. Serve with toasted bread and a glass of chilled white wine.

Beetroot salad with Greek yoghurt

This salad is simple to prepare and with its vivid pink colour, stands out from the crowd! The sweet beets are complimented by pungent yoghurt and finished with a hint of garlic, fresh herbs and roasted walnuts. The beetroot salad can be enjoyed as a light lunch together with a slice of toasted bread or served as a side dish paired with chicken, rabbit or fish. It can be prepared several hours in advance and stored in a closed container in the fridge.

Preparation time: 15 min plus

30 min chilling

Cooking time: 30 min

Servings: 4

Ingredients

500g beetroot

250g natural Greek yoghurt

1 clove of garlic, minced

2 tbsp. fresh dill, chopped

2 tbsp. fresh mint, chopped

150g roasted walnuts

2 tbsp. vinegar

2 tbsp. olive oil

salt and freshly ground pepper

Method

Scrub the beetroots and wash thoroughly under running water. Put them in a pan, cover with water, then bring to the boil and simmer on a medium heat for 30 minutes, until they are tender (test with a fork).

Rinse under cold water, the skin should come off easily with just a little squeeze of the fingers. Cut into cubes of 1cm and sprinkle with vinegar.

In a small pan, on medium heat, roast the walnuts for 5 minutes, stirring occasionally until they reach a golden colour. Put them on a chopping board and allow to cool before cutting into medium sized chunks.

Keep a few walnut halves back for garnishing.

In a bowl, combine the yoghurt, garlic and olive oil and season with salt

and pepper. Add the beetroot cubes and mix in the dill, mint and roasted walnuts. Stir well and rest in the fridge for at least 30 minutes.

To serve, arrange the salad on a serving dish and sprinkle with a few walnuts halves and dill.

Spinach apaki salad

One of the most loved leafy green of the Greek cuisine, the spinach is extensively used for various pies such as the world-famous [spanakopita](#) or main dishes like [spanakorizo – rice with spinach](#), chickpeas with spinach, pork with spinach and avgolemono sauce or as a filling for the Cretan [kalitsounia](#). It is thought to have originated in ancient Persia and spread around the Mediterranean by the Saracens sometime around AD 820. Today the spinach is considered a superfood for its anti-inflammatory, antioxidant and immunity boosting powers. This salad combines the iron packed leaves with the aromatic cured pork meat apaki, complemented by blue cheese and grilled mushrooms. A rich and tasteful salad, excellent as a light lunch on a hot summer day next to a chilled glass of rose wine.

Preparation time: 10 min

Cooking time: 10 min

Servings: 4

Ingredients

300g fresh spinach

100g Pleurotus mushrooms

20g apaki (or bacon)

20g blue cheese

4 tbsp. olive oil

1 tsp. mustard

1 tbsp. lemon juice

salt and freshly ground pepper

Method

Gently fry or grill the mushrooms and sprinkle with salt. Set aside. Thinly slice the apaki and fry or grill for few minutes, until crisp.

Thoroughly wash and pat dry the spinach leaves and cut them in large chunks. Add the mushrooms, apaki and crumbled blue cheese.

In a small bowl mix the mustard and lemon juice and add the olive oil, one tablespoon at a time.

Pour over the salad and toss gently. Sprinkle with salt and freshly ground pepper and serve with breadsticks.

Lentils and feta salad

A powerful source of protein, lentils are extensively used in the Cretan diet and this salad is both healthy and delicious, bursting with Mediterranean flavours and vibrant colours. Whether eaten as a snack, side dish or light vegetarian meal, this simple and easy recipe never fails to impress! Unlike most dried beans, lentils do not require overnight soaking, just a boil for around 20 minutes then finished with a dressing of olive oil and balsamic vinegar. The garlic, roasted peppers, onions and juicy tomatoes combined with creamy feta cheese make this salad a rich and flavourful dish.

Preparation time: 10 min

Cooking time: 20 min

Servings: 4

Ingredients

300g brown medium lentils

3 Romano peppers, roasted

1 medium onion, sliced

12 cherry tomatoes, cut in half or

1 juicy tomato, cut in cubes

12 black olives, pitted and sliced

200g feta cheese, crumbled

2 tbsp. fresh parsley, chopped

2 tbsp. fresh mint, chopped

salt and freshly ground pepper

For the dressing

4 tbsp. olive oil

4 tbsp. balsamic vinegar

1 clove of garlic, minced

pinch of sweet paprika

Method

Start by preheating the oven to 200C. Place the peppers on a lined baking tray and cook for around 15 minutes or until soft.

At the same time, put the lentils in a pan, cover with water, add a pinch of salt and boil over a medium heat for 20 minutes. The lentils should be cooked but retain a firmness, so check them after 15 minutes to ensure

they are not getting too soft. (Depending on the type and size of lentils, they can cook faster or slower than 20 minutes).

When the lentils are ready, drain them in a colander and place under cold running water to stop the cooking process.

Peel the roasted peppers, slice into quarters and remove the seeds.

In a large bowl, put the lentils, peppers, onion, tomatoes, olives and mix well. Combine the ingredients of the dressing in a small piping bottle and shake well until smooth.

Pour most of the dressing over the salad mix and toss gently. Then add the herbs and crumbled feta and transfer the salad to a serving dish. Drizzle with the remaining dressing.

Avocado, tomato and feta salad

Even though it is a late introduction to Cretan cuisine, the avocado fits perfectly with other foods that constitute the base of the Mediterranean diet. It is packed with healthy fats, antioxidants and high levels of fibre and combined with olive oil and lemon it becomes a superfood. With the avocado so rich in flavour and the feta cheese complimenting its taste and texture, this salad does not need sophisticated dressing. By keeping it simple, the taste of the dish is enhanced.

Preparation time: 10 min

Servings: 4

Ingredients

1 Romaine lettuce

2 ripe tomatoes, sliced

1 large avocado

120g feta cheese, cubed

½ small red onion, thinly sliced

1 clove of garlic, minced

juice from 1 lemon

40ml olive oil

salt and freshly ground pepper

Method

Wash the lettuce leaves, pat dry and cut into large chunks.

Halve the tomatoes, remove the stems and cut into slices. In a bowl, mix the lettuce, tomatoes, onions and garlic with lemon juice and olive oil. Toss to coat and add a pinch of salt.

Arrange the mixed salad on a serving dish.

Halve and peel the avocado (removing the stone) and cut into slices. To help maintain its green colour (avocado oxidizes quickly once the pulp is exposed to air), squeeze lemon juice over the fruit.

Add the feta cheese and season with freshly ground pepper. Drizzle with olive oil and serve immediately.

Potato salad with Greek yoghurt

A healthier version of the classic potato (mayonnaise) salad, this recipe reduces the calories and is a wonderful accompaniment for grilled or roasted meat, especially lamb. The natural Greek yoghurt has been strained giving it almost double the protein, while the saturated fat and carbohydrates are reduced by half. Due to its thick texture and tangy flavour, natural Greek yoghurt is often used as a healthy substitute for sour cream, crème fraîche or mayonnaise.

Preparation time: 15 min

Cooking time: 20 min

Servings: 4

Ingredients

800g potatoes

1 tsp. Dijon mustard

250g plain natural Greek yoghurt

2 tsp. fresh parsley, chopped

1 medium onion, finely chopped

salt and freshly ground pepper

Method

Scrub the potatoes and boil (with skins), for 20 minutes on a medium heat until they are easily pierced with a fork.

Drain the potatoes and allow to cool in cold water for around 10 minutes. The skins should easily fall off at this point.

Cut the potatoes into cubes of roughly 1cm.

In a bowl, combine the yoghurt, mustard, dill, salt and pepper and add the potatoes cubes, onion and parsley, tossing gently.

Decorate with parsley and keep refrigerated until serving.

Cabbage, lettuce and apple salad

A winter salad because in Crete cabbage is mainly cultivated and consumed during winter months as the rainy weather permits salads and other foliage vegetables to grow easily. This is a simple, rustic salad but packed with minerals, vitamins and fibres, it is deliciously filling and refreshing. To make the most out of this recipe, use only organic ingredients. The dressing is nothing more than a simple mix of lemon juice and olive oil that will enhance the taste of the vegetables.

Preparation time: 10 min

Servings: 4

Ingredients

1 Romaine lettuce

100g cabbage (white or red or mixed)

100g carrots

100g apples

juice from 1 lemon

40ml olive oil

Salt

Method

Wash the lettuce thoroughly, pat dry and cut into large chunks.

Chop the cabbage using a mandolin, then peel the carrots and grate them coarsely.

Peel the apples, remove the cores and cut into cubes of roughly 1cm squared.

Mix all the ingredients together in a large bowl, add the lemon juice, season with salt and olive oil and toss to coat evenly.

All ingredients can be prepared several hours before serving (except the apples as they will go brown), and add only the dressing at the last moment.

Boiled green beans salad

A summer variation of the boiled wild greens which is a staple in the Cretan diet, this green beans salad is a favourite for a light lunch meal during the hot season. Served lukewarm and seasoned only with salt, lemon and olive oil, this recipe can be used with any leafy greens available in your local market - spinach, kale, chicory and even asparagus. The green beans we are using are very thin and long but any type will do as long as they are fresh and snap easily.

Preparation time: 10 min

Cooking time: 10 min

Servings: 4

Ingredients

500g fresh green beans (snap beans)

200g courgette

2 eggs

4 tbsp. olive oil

2 tbsp. lemon juice

sea salt

Method

Rinse the green beans, trim their stem ends and snap in pieces of 4-5cm each. Rinse the courgettes and cut in circles of 2-3cm.

In a large pot, bring water to a rolling boil and add the green beans, courgette and eggs. Boil for 10 minutes or until the green beans are crisp-tender. Drain and let cool.

Transfer the green beans and the courgette on a serving plate. Peel the eggs, slice and add them on top of the boiled green beans.

Boiled greens are always served warm and with the seasoning ingredients aside: sea salt, lemon wedges and olive oil. This is because the acidity of the lemon juice changes the colour of the green vegetables and alters their taste. This salad is best served with whole grain or multi-grain bread or crackers.

MAINS

Cretan Boureki

Probably the most particular Cretan dish, boureki was born in Chania and has become famous all over Greece. Its roots go back to the Turkish “borek”, a family of baked pastries made of thin, flaky dough and various fillings ranging from vegetables to cheese or meats or combinations of them. The Cretan boureki is made with layers of courgette and potatoes bind together by tart mizithra and flavoured with fresh mint and sesame seeds. It is an exclusively summer dish, when the gardens are full of vegetables and the heat calls for tepid food.

Preparation time: 30 mins

Cooking time: 120 mins

Servings: 4

Ingredients

800g potatoes peeled

800g courgette (medium size)

200g mizithra cheese (or ricotta)

100g feta cheese

10-15 fresh mint, finely chopped

150ml olive oil

150ml milk

salt and freshly ground pepper

2 tbsp. all-purpose flour

For the phyllo pastry

200g flour

2 tbsp. olive oil

100ml water

pinch of salt

1 tbsp. raki (or vodka)

50g sesame seeds

Method

Cut the potatoes in very thin slices (use a mandolin slicer for fast and best results), sprinkle with salt and pepper and set aside. Do the same with the courgette. In a baking pan, layer courgette slices then add a thin layer of potatoes and sprinkle with small pieces of mizithra cheese, grated feta and chopped mint. Add a tablespoon of olive oil and a tablespoon of milk

on top and continue by adding new layers in the same order until all the ingredients are finished.

In a bowl, mix the flour with water, olive oil, salt and raki and make dough of medium consistency. Open the dough to make a phyllo pastry of about 0,5 cm, then layer it on top of the dish, gently pressing with fingers to make it stick. You can also pre-cut the phyllo in portions in such a way that after cooking will be easy to divide in slices. Spray with a bit of oil on top and add sesame seeds.

Preheat the oven at 180C, cover the boureki with aluminium foil and bake for 60 minutes. Remove the foil and bake uncovered for another 60 minutes until the potatoes are tender and the crust on top becomes golden. You can test by poking a knife into the boureki's centre, if it slides in easily, the potatoes are done. Let sit for at least 15 minutes before serving, this allows bubbling juices to be reabsorbed by the potatoes.

Gemista – stuffed vegetables

Another exclusively summer dish, very popular all over Greece, the gemista (sometimes spelled “yemista”), consists of rice stuffed tomatoes and other vegetables that are baked until soft and served usually tepid or at room temperature. Gemista in Greek means “filled with” and this dish is part of the Dolma family of stuffed vegetables common in the Mediterranean cuisine and surrounding regions including the Balkans, the Caucasus, Russia, Central Asia and Middle East. It is a vegetarian dish, a favourite for the August lent, when the tomatoes and peppers are at their best flavour. Extremely easy to make, this recipe needs only good quality olive oil and organic vegetables to have the Greek summer in your plate.

Preparation time: 30 mins

Cooking time: 75 mins

Servings: 4

Ingredients

4 medium tomatoes

4 medium bell peppers

2 medium courgette (approx. 150 g each)

300g uncooked, non-aromatic, long-grain rice

1 large onion

2 tbsp. tomato puree

1 tbsp. fresh mint leaves, chopped (or 1 tsp. dried)

1 tbsp. fresh dill (or 1 tsp. dried)

1 cup (200 ml) of fresh parsley, chopped

75ml olive oil

2 tbsp. fine breadcrumbs

Method

Wash all vegetables thoroughly and place them in the baking tray to make sure that there is enough space for all of them. Slice off the top of the tomatoes and bell peppers (about 2,5 cm) and put them aside.

Using a scoop or a teaspoon, remove the flesh of the tomatoes and reserve in a bowl. Remove the seeds and membranes of the bell peppers. Cut each courgette in 2 pieces that can stand vertically in the baking tray and scoop the flesh from the inside up to 0,5 cm thick margins. Season the empty

vegetables with a pinch of salt and add a little butter on the bottom of each one.

In a blender add the flesh of the tomatoes, 4 tablespoons of olive oil, the tomato puree, salt and pepper. Whizz to obtain a homogenous mash. In a large bowl add the rice, onion, parsley, dill and mint and pour over the tomato mash. Mix well to distribute evenly.

Using a spoon, fill the vegetables with the rice mixture about 2/3 (make sure not to over-stuff them, as the rice will expand while cooking and will break them). Pour the remaining sauce over the vegetables and in the baking tray. Add back the tops and sprinkle with breadcrumbs.

Cover the tray with aluminium foil and bake in preheated oven at 165C for 60-75 minutes. Halfway through cooking, remove the aluminium foil and bake until nicely coloured.

Serve tepid or at room temperature, with a dollop of Greek yoghurt or with feta cheese!

Imam bayildi

This is the vegetarian version of the [paputsakia](#) recipe, a delicious stuffed eggplant dish that is popular all over Turkey and Greece.

The phrase “imam bayildi” means in Turkish “the priest fainted”. It is believed the aroma and appearance of this dish when was first served to the priest was so overwhelming, it caused him to faint! Some say the priest fainted from eating too much. Others believe he was shocked by the abundance of oil in the dish!

This recipe is very simple to make and only takes a few ingredients. The amount of oil is reduced because this dish is oven-baked; it is healthier and equally tasty.

Preparation time: 30 mins

Cooking time: 60 mins

Servings: 4

Ingredients

50ml olive oil

2 small eggplants (approx. 150 g each)

2 courgette (approx. 100 g each)

1 medium onion, finely sliced

3 cloves garlic, crushed

400g chopped tomatoes (1 can)

3 tbsp. fresh parsley, chopped

salt and freshly ground pepper

Method

Wash well the eggplants and courgette and then cut them lengthwise in slices of around 1cm thick. Sprinkle generously with salt on both sides and place them in a colander to draw out the bitter juices. Allow to sit for 20 minutes then rinse and pat dry with paper towels.

Meanwhile, fry the onions in olive oil over low heat until translucent. Add the garlic, tomatoes, parsley, salt and pepper and allow simmering for around 20 minutes.

Lightly fry the eggplant and zucchini slices in oil until they start to change colour and arrange in layers in a medium baking dish, around 20cm x 30cm, spreading some of the tomato sauce between layers, and topping

with remaining tomato sauce.

Preheat oven to 180C. Cover with aluminium foil and bake for around 40 minutes or until the surface gets a nice brown colour.

Imam Bayildi is traditionally served at room temperature, but can be eaten warm also, topped with crumbled feta or dollops of Greek yoghurt.

Vegetarian stifado with chestnuts

The famous Greek stew but a vegetarian version, with hearty mushrooms and chestnuts slowly cooked together with pearl onions and wine. More of a recipe from the mountain, the stifado is made a little differently in each family and it is usually made when the weather becomes colder.

The word comes from the Venetians (in Italian “stufato” means stewed meat) and the dish was probably born in the Middle Ages by the influence of Venice over-lordship over the Greek islands which commenced around the early 13th Century.

This is a recipe that can be altered with a variety of ingredients, just as a Greek cook would do. Maybe you would like to add carrots or potatoes or remove the chestnuts, well, as long as you keep the onions it is a free-form Greek stew!

Preparation time: 15 mins

Cooking time: 55 mins

Servings: 4

Ingredients

500g fresh mushrooms (Portobello, Champignons)

400g chestnuts (fresh or frozen)

1kg fresh tomatoes or 450g canned tomatoes

500g pearl onions (or small onions)

100ml olive oil

250ml dry red wine

1 bay leaf

pinch of nutmeg

½ tsp. cinnamon

1 tsp. whole allspice

salt and freshly ground pepper

Method

If using pearl onions, soak them in water to peel easier, then pat dry with a paper towel. For classic onions, peel them and cut in quarters.

Clean the mushrooms with a soft brush to remove dirt (do not soak), separate the foot from the hat and cut the hat either in two or four (depending on the size). If they are smaller, leave them whole.

If using fresh chestnuts, use a sharp knife and cut a line along one side, deep enough to open the shell but not to section the core. This will let the shell loosen itself from the nut as it cooks. Put them in the microwave for 1-2 minutes, in small batches (10-12 at a time). As soon as they are cool enough to handle, pull and snap off the shells, making sure to take off also the skin between the shell and the chestnut. You will end up with a pile of yellowish-white chestnuts that can be stored in the sealed bag in the fridge for several days. If using frozen chestnuts, they are already cleaned; you just need to thaw them few hours before cooking.

If using fresh tomatoes, grate them on a fine grater.

In a wide, non-stick pot, heat the olive oil and fry the mushrooms for 10 minutes. Add the onions and continue to fry for another 2 minutes, until soft and translucent. Add the wine and let simmer on low heat for 10 minutes.

Add the tomatoes, chestnuts, bay leaf, nutmeg, cinnamon and allspice and let simmer for 30 minutes, until the sauce thickens.

Taste for salt and pepper and add if necessarily. Serve hot, with a slice of feta cheese and crunchy bread aside.

Green beans in tomato sauce - fasolakia

Fasolakia, the green beans cooked in tomato sauce is one of the Greek “lathera” dishes, a general term defining a peasant-style cooking, based on olive oil and whatever vegetables are in season. The Greek word for oil is “lathi” and the oil-based sauce often includes tomatoes, onion, garlic, herbs and spices. This dish is often prepared in the summer months and is a favourite for lent and other times of fasting, when meat and dairy products are restricted in Greek Orthodox tradition. Using fresh or frozen green beans will not make a huge difference, neither the variety, you can use the flat and wide Romano beans or the long, rounded string or snap beans, any of them will make a delicious vegetarian meal.

Preparation time: 10 mins

Cooking time: 30 mins

Servings: 4

Ingredients

500g fresh or frozen green beans

1 medium onion, chopped

1 medium carrot, sliced

1 medium potato, cubed

2 cloves garlic, sliced

60ml olive oil

200ml tomato juice

300ml water

salt and freshly ground pepper

Method

If using fresh green beans wash under cool water, trim their stem ends and snap in pieces of 4-5 cm each. The frozen ones come ready to cook.

In a non-stick pot, heat the olive oil and fry the onion until soft and translucent. Add the green beans, carrot, potato, garlic, tomato juice and water and bring to boil. Lower the temperature to minimum and simmer covered for 30 minutes, shaking the pot occasionally to avoid sticking to the bottom. Be sure to monitor the liquid levels while the beans are cooking, they have to be at the same level with the beans. Add a little bit of water if needed. In the last 10 minutes, season with salt and pepper to taste. Let cool for 15 minutes and serve with crusty bread, feta cheese and

olives.

Briam – greek mixed roasted vegetables

What is better on a hot summer day than a tepid dish packed with vegetables, served with a slice of feta sprinkled with oregano and olive oil? Briam, or the Greek ratatouille, is an oven-roasted vegetable dish that makes use of whatever vegetables are in season and at hand. Potatoes, courgette, eggplants, peppers baked in a savoury tomato sauce; this is the best example of how Greek cuisine takes simple ingredients and transforms them in savoury dishes.

Briam can be served also as a side dish to accompany roast lamb, chicken or pork. It is easy to prepare and inexpensive, a vegetable medley full of Mediterranean flavours where the quality of olive oil can make or break the success of this dish.

Preparation time: 20 mins

Cooking time: 120 mins

Servings: 4

Ingredients

400g ripe tomatoes, peeled and sliced

400g potatoes, cubed

250g eggplants, cubed

250g courgette, cubed

70ml olive oil

1 red onion, coarsely sliced

2 cloves garlic, crushed

1 tsp. dried oregano

2 tbsp. fresh parsley, chopped

salt and freshly ground pepper

Method

Peel the potatoes and cut in medium sized (about 2cm) cubes. Wash the eggplants and the courgette and cut in cubes of the same size.

Mix in a large bowl, together with the onion, garlic and sliced tomatoes. Season with oregano, salt and pepper and mix well. Add the olive oil and coat thoroughly.

Transfer in a large baking pan so that the vegetables fit in one layer. Cover with aluminium foil and bake in the preheated oven at 180C for 1½

hours.

Uncover the pan, toss the vegetables and continue to bake at the same temperature for another 1/2 hour, until the surface gets a nice golden colour.

Serve at room temperatures, sprinkled with chopped parsley and, optionally, feta cheese crumbles.

Okra in the oven - bamies

Known in many parts of the world as ladies' fingers, okra is a flowering plant that is most highly prized because of its seed pods. Even if it's not endemic to the area, as it arrived in Crete after the 18th century, okra has found its way on the islanders' tables due to the particular taste but also its benefits for general health. It boosts digestive system and cardiovascular health, balances cholesterol levels, aids the immune system, lowers blood pressure and improves skin condition. This recipe can be served as a stand-alone vegetarian dish or as a side to fish or meat, mainly white meat such as chicken or rabbit. If you can't find fresh okra in your local market, the frozen one is just as good.

Preparation time: 40 mins

Cooking time: 75 mins

Servings: 4

Ingredients

600g cleaned okra

2-3 tbsp. apple vinegar

100ml olive oil

1 medium onion, finely chopped

1 tsp. sugar

30ml balsamic vinegar

400g chopped tomatoes

250ml hot water

2 tbsp. fresh parsley, chopped

salt and freshly ground pepper

Method

Cut the stalks from the okra, wash and drain well. Place them in a bowl and pour 2-3 tablespoons of apple vinegar on top, stir well and let sit for 1/2 hour, to cut down on the slime.

If you use frozen okra do not thaw them, just pour some vinegar on them and let sit for 1/2 hour like the fresh ones; the result is excellent with the frozen ones too.

Preheat the oven to 180C. Drain the okra and mix with the rest of the ingredients, lay them in a baking pan and cover with aluminium foil.

After one hour, remove the aluminium foil and stir well, increase the temperature to 190C and let them bake for another 10-15 minutes, or until the liquid has evaporated and the okra start to get a nice golden brown colour. Remove the pan and let cool for at least 20 minutes before serving.

Sprinkle on top with a pinch of chopped parsley and serve with feta cheese and fresh bread.

Green peas with artichokes

The artichoke is mentioned as a garden plant in the 8th century BC by Homer and Hesiod. Native to the Mediterranean area, the artichoke was used as food by the ancient Greeks who ate the leaves and flower heads in various ways. According to Greek myth, the artichoke owes its existence to the philandering Zeus who fell in love with Cynara, made her a goddess, and took her back with him to Mount Olympus. In a fit of temper, he tossed her from Olympus and turned her into an artichoke.

A vegetarian recipe, this dish can be made in two ways - with a white sauce based on lemon juice and dill or with red, tomato sauce. Both variants are equally tasty and need frozen peas and frozen artichoke hearts, which make the preparation quick and easy.

Preparation time: 10 mins

Cooking time: 30 mins

Servings: 4

Ingredients

500g frozen peas

250g frozen artichoke hearts

1 bunch of fresh dill or fennel, chopped

4 medium spring onions, chopped

1 medium carrot, sliced

1 tsp. salt

½ tsp. pepper

60ml olive oil

250ml water

juice from 2 lemons

1 tbsp. corn flour (for the white sauce)

2 medium ripe tomatoes, grated or finely chopped (for the red sauce)

Method

Heat the olive oil in a pot on medium to high heat and fry the spring onions until they are soft and translucent. Drain the thawed artichokes and add them to the fried onions. Fry them for 3 minutes and add the thawed peas, carrot, water, salt and pepper. Simmer for about 30 minutes or until the artichokes have become tender – check by inserting a fork, they have to be soft. Add the fennel or dill, simmer for 1 more minute and

turn off the heat. Add lemon juice mixed with corn flour, shake the pan to distribute (do not stir), cover, and let sit for 10 minutes. Serve with fresh crusty bread and feta cheese.

For the red sauce, add the tomatoes together with peas and carrots and let boil as described above. Do not add the corn flour with lemon juice at the end.

Baked giant beans - gigantes plaki

“Gigandes plaki”, also spelled “gigantes” or “yigandes”, is a Greek dish that translates in English as “giant baked beans”. The name “gigantes” comes from the Greek word for giants, hence giant beans. As for the cooking method, the Greek “plaki” refers to a food being baked in tomato sauce until softened and absorbed the juices and herbs around.

If you cannot find giant beans in your local market, large lima beans are suitable substitutes. Beans are rich in high-quality protein as well as soluble fibre which help regulate blood sugar levels and lowers cholesterol. They also contain insoluble fibre, which helps to prevent constipation and digestive disorders. A healthy Cretan diet includes beans or other legumes three times a week.

Preparation time: 60 mins plus soaking over night

Cooking time: 110 mins

Servings: 4

Ingredients

500g dried beans (gigantes, or white lima beans)

60ml olive oil

1 medium onion, chopped

1 carrot, sliced

1 clove garlic, crushed

250g fresh or canned tomatoes, chopped

2 tbsp. tomato paste

1 tsp. dried oregano

2 tbsp. fresh parsley, chopped

salt and freshly ground pepper

Method

Soak the beans overnight, in a bowl with plenty of water.

Drain, rinse and place in a pan, then pour water enough to cover them. Bring to the boil, reduce the heat, then simmer for approx. 50 mins until slightly tender but not soft. Drain and set aside.

Heat the oven to 180C.

In a frying pan heat the olive oil on medium to high heat and fry the onions until softened and translucent. Add the garlic and the carrot and

continue to cook for another 2 minutes. Add the tomatoes, tomato paste, oregano and parsley and simmer on low heat for 2-3 minutes. Season with salt and pepper.

In a large, non-stick baking pan, add the beans in a thin layer and pour the sauce over them, stirring to coat them well. Bake for 1 hour, uncovered and without stirring, until the beans have absorbed all the fabulous flavours and the sauce has thickened. Allow to cool, sprinkle with parsley and serve next to a slice of feta cheese and sliced red onion.

Lentils stew - fakes

The oldest traces of lentils were discovered in Greece in the area of Peloponnese, apparently dating back in the Palaeolithic and Mesolithic, some 9,500 to 13,000 years ago. Lentils have a long history in the Mediterranean and together with wheat, beans of all kinds, chickpeas and split peas, form the very foundation of the Greek diet and have done so since ancient times.

As a superfood, they are rich in protein — without the fat or cholesterol of animal sources — and provide B vitamins, magnesium, iron and zinc. In fact, lentils have the second highest protein content of all legumes, after soybeans.

Many Greek recipes list the lentils as a soup, consumed mostly in winter months when the weather is colder. The lentils stew has the same cooking process as the soup but uses less water.

Preparation time: 10 mins

Cooking time: 30 mins

Servings: 4

Ingredients

500g lentils

60ml olive oil

1 large onion, finely chopped

2 cloves garlic, crushed

2 carrots, coarsely chopped

250g fresh or canned tomatoes, chopped

2 tsp. tomato paste

2 bay leaves

salt and freshly ground pepper

Method

Boil the lentils in plenty of water for about 10 minutes. Drain, reserve the water and set aside.

In a large saucepan, heat the olive oil and fry the onion until soft and translucent. Add the garlic and carrot and cook for another minute. Pour in the lentils and mix vigorously for 2 minutes, until they are all coated with olive oil.

Add the tomatoes, bay leaves and the tomato paste and stir. If it's too dry, add more water from the reserved one, so that the lentils have enough moist to cook but the mixture remains slightly thick. Let simmer for 20 minutes, stirring in occasionally so that it doesn't stick on the bottom of the saucepan. Season with salt and pepper and when ready, remove from the heat and cover with a lid.

This dish can be served with feta cheese and onion or as a complement dish for [grilled sardines](#) or [marinated anchovies](#).

Rice with spinach - spanakorizo

Part of the staple diet of Cretans, this vegetarian dish is rich in nutrients, antioxidants and fibre as the spinach is well known as a 'super food' packed with iron, calcium, vitamins, potassium and lutein. Cooking spinach actually increases its health benefits as the body cannot break down completely the nutrients in raw spinach while the lemon juice helps the absorption of calcium and iron. This classic vegetarian dish can be served either as a side dish or a vegetarian main meal and it is important to use the right type of rice, which in this case is medium grain. The short grain rice may become too sticky while the long one will not have the smooth texture we are looking for in this recipe.

Preparation time: 10 mins

Cooking time: 30 mins

Servings: 4

Ingredients

1kg spinach, rinsed and stemmed

300g medium grain rice

50ml olive oil

4 spring onions, chopped

1 red onion, finely chopped

1 leek, sliced

1/2 bunch dill, finely chopped

juice from 1/2 lemon

salt and freshly ground pepper

Method

In a large skillet, heat the olive oil over medium high heat. Fry the onions and leek for 3 minutes, until soft and translucent.

Add the spinach and cook on medium heat, stirring continuously until wilted. Add the rice and a cup of hot water and bring to boil.

Reduce the heat to low and simmer for about 20-25 minutes, until the rice becomes tender.

During cooking, check if the rice becomes dry and add a little water if needed. Stir occasionally to avoid the rice sticking to the pan.

At the end, add the fresh dill and cook for another 2-3 minutes. Serve warm, with a squeeze of lemon and olive oil on top.

Rice with orange juice

In Crete, lemon and orange trees are everywhere and if the lemons are the absolute star of the Greek cuisine as they are present in or next to almost every dish, the oranges are following closely, being paired especially with pork meat due to their acidity and sweet taste. Whether used only for the zest, juice or the entire fruit, oranges are present in a variety of salads, stews and braises but also with side dishes such as this white rice risotto with particular sweet and sour flavour.

Preparation time: 5 mins

Cooking time: 30 mins

Servings: 4

Ingredients

1 tbsp. olive oil

250g long-grain white rice

250ml vegetable stock

juice and zest from 1 orange

1 spring onion, chopped

Method

In a non-stick pan, heat the olive oil on medium heat. Pour the rice and fry for about 3 minutes, stirring continuously, until it smells slightly toasty.

Add the vegetable stock and half of the orange zest and juice. Bring to a boil, stir once more, then cover and reduce the heat to low.

Simmer for 15 minutes, remove from heat and mix in the rest of the orange zest and juice.

Let stand, still covered, for another 15 minutes, until the rice has absorbed all the liquids.

Garnish with chopped spring onions and serve immediately.

Chickpeas lemongrass – revitia lemonoriganata

Present since the late Neolithic in the area of actual Turkey and Greece, chickpeas have a long history in the Greek diet, being one of the earliest cultivated legumes, very nourishing and an excellent source of protein and fibre. As the Cretan diet implies eating pulses three times a week, chickpeas have become a staple in the regular menu of most of the island's households. For this recipe you can use either canned or dry chickpeas, the later need to be soaked in water overnight, before cooking. This recipe makes an excellent vegetarian stand-alone dish or can be served together with smoked fish and onion slices.

Preparation time: 10 mins plus overnight soaking

Cooking time: 90 mins

Servings: 4

Ingredients

500g chickpeas

1 large onion, finely chopped

60ml olive oil

2 bay leaves

2 tsp. oregano

2 tbsp. all-purpose flour

juice from 1 lemon

200ml vegetable broth

salt and freshly ground pepper

Method

If using dry chickpeas, put them in a bowl, cover with enough water and let them soak overnight. Drain and wash thoroughly, then add them in a pot with fresh water and bring to boil. Let simmer for 20 minutes until they are half-cooked. Drain and set aside. If using canned chickpeas, skip this part.

In a non-stick pot, heat the olive oil on medium to high heat and fry the onions until soft and translucent. Add the chickpeas, bay leaves and the vegetable broth and bring to boil, cover and let simmer for about 50 minutes or until the chickpeas become soft. Add more water or vegetable broth if needed, but keep the liquid at the same level or slightly lower than the legumes. Add the oregano, salt and pepper.

In a small bowl stir the flour with lemon juice and, with a ladle, gradually add liquid from the pot until you get a creamy sauce. Pour the mixture back into the pot and gently stir until the sauce thickens. Serve warm, sprinkled with pepper and with lemon slices aside.

Potatoes with lemon in the oven

Crispy on the outside, soft on the inside, the lemon roasted potatoes are a staple of the Greek cuisine and widely popular around Mediterranean. Three elements define the flavours of the Greek cuisine: olive oil, lemons and oregano and adding them to any basic ingredient will turn it into a delicious dish. Oregano was first used in ancient Greece and the legend says that it was created by the Goddess Aphrodite as a symbol of joy. The word “oregano” comes from “oros”, meaning mountain, and “ganos” means joy, so oregano stands for “joy of the mountains”. This recipe is extremely simple and stands either for an excellent side dish for meats or a filling vegetarian main dish.

Preparation time: 5 mins

Cooking time: 40 mins

Servings: 4

Ingredients

1kg potatoes

zest and juice from 2 lemons

2 tbsp. olive oil

1 tsp. dried oregano

sea salt and freshly ground pepper

Method

Pre-heat the oven to 180C

Peel, wash and cut the potatoes into quarters, lengthwise.

In a small bowl mix the olive oil with lemon juice and zest and pour over the potatoes to completely coat them. Generously sprinkle with salt and oregano.

Bake uncovered for around 30 - 40 minutes, until they get a golden brown colour.

Serve hot as a side dish or a main vegetarian meal. Try it also with grated Graviera or any other yellow cheese on top.

Soutzoukakia smyrneika – Smyrna meatballs

Known as Smyrna in antiquity, the actual city of Izmir (Turkey) was founded by the Greeks, taken over by the Romans and rebuilt by Alexander the Great before becoming part of the Ottoman Empire in the 15th century. Smyrna used to be one of the wealthiest cities of the Ottoman Empire and hosted one of the largest populations of Greeks and Armenians until their forced expulsion and purge in the early 20th Century.

This traditional soutzoukakia smyrneika recipe was introduced to the Greek cuisine in the beginning of the 20th century by the Greek refugees fleeing their homes and seeking shelter in Greece after the Great Fire of Smyrna. Soutzoukakia are spicy oblong keftedes with cumin, cinnamon, and garlic served in tomato sauce.

The ingredient that makes these meatballs unique is the cumin. Cumin is a very fragrant spice that will soak through the meat and infuse it with its unique aroma, but because it is very strong, needs to be moderately used as it can be a little overpowering!

Preparation time: 50 mins

Cooking time: 35 mins

Servings: 4

Ingredients

For the meatballs:

500gr ground beef

2 thick slices of bread, soaked in white wine

1 egg, beaten

1 medium onion, finely chopped

3 cloves garlic, crushed

2 tsp. cumin

1 tsp. dried oregano

3 tbsp. fresh parsley, finely chopped

2 tsp. sea salt & 1/2 tsp. pepper

1 glass white wine

30gr flour, for frying

vegetable oil for frying

For the tomato sauce:

1 can of plum tomatoes, pureed and strained to remove seeds

50ml olive oil
3 cloves garlic, crushed
¼ tsp. of cumin
1 medium onion, chopped
50ml white wine
1 bay leaf
¼ tsp cinnamon
salt and freshly ground pepper

Method

Meatballs:

In a soup plate, pour the wine and soak the bread for few minutes. Discard the crust and squeeze the liquid out from the bread loaves.

In a bowl, add the ground beef, egg, onion, garlic, cumin, oregano, parsley, salt, pepper and the soaked bread and mix well. Place in the fridge for ½ hour to rest.

Tomato sauce:

In a sauce pan, heat the olive oil and fry the onions until soft and translucent. Add the garlic, cumin, bay leaf, cinnamon, wine and plum tomatoes, season with salt and pepper and simmer on low heat for 30 minutes.

With dampened hands, form the beef into quenelle-shaped little sausages. If frying, lightly coat the meat in flour and fry in enough vegetable oil over medium-high heat, making sure that they are well cooked on all sides.

Alternatively, to obtain a lighter dish, the sausages can be either grilled or cooked in the oven (20 min at 170C) until lightly brown.

Transfer the sausages to the saucepan containing the tomato sauce and simmer for 10-15 minutes. Remove the bay leaves and garnish with chopped parsley. Serve with plain white rice, kritharaki (orzo) or pasta.

Moussaka

The epitome of Greek comfort food, moussaka is basically a hearty eggplant casserole with a juicy, flavour-packed meat sauce. Topping the meat is either a rich béchamel sauce (a French influence that was introduced lately), or a cheese-based sauce.

Moussaka to the Greeks is like shepherd's pie to the English. Just like shepherd's pie, moussaka is a satisfying casserole that is a meal in itself. You can simply add a side salad and call it dinner; or, you can even add it as part of a larger holiday meal.

Moussaka is known all over the world as the quintessential Greek dish. It was only introduced in the twentieth century around Balkans and its roots go back to the Arabian cuisine, similar recipes appearing since the thirteenth century in cookbooks around Iraq, with later versions in Lebanese or Palestinian cuisine. Although it is considered as the national dish of Greece, moussaka is actually a Balkan food prepared and enjoyed in various ways in Turkey, Bulgaria, North Macedonia, Serbia and Romania.

Preparation time: 40 mins

Cooking time: 120 mins

Servings: 4

Ingredients:

Base:

2 medium potatoes (300g)

2 medium eggplants (500g)

100g Graviera cheese (or any other yellow cheese)

vegetable oil for frying

Meat sauce:

750g beef or lamb mince

1 medium onion, chopped

1 clove garlic, minced

200g tomatoes, chopped or canned

1 tsp. tomato paste

150ml dry red wine

75ml olive oil

Sea salt and freshly ground pepper

1 bay leaf

pinch of cinnamon or one cinnamon stick

Béchamel sauce:

300ml milk

40g butter

40g flour

pinch of nutmeg

1 egg yolk

100g Graviera cheese (or other yellow cheese)

bread crumbs

Method

Rinse the eggplants and cut them on the length, into slices of about 0.5cm thick. Season with salt and place them in a colander for about ½ hour, in order to release their liquid.

Peel the potatoes and, using a mandolin slicer, cut them into paper thin crisps. Rinse the slices into plenty of water to remove the starch and fry them in small batches in plenty of oil, until nicely coloured. Place them in a bowl lined with paper towels in order to absorb the oil and let them cool.

Pat dry the eggplants and fry them in the same oil of the potatoes, repeating the steps or, for a much lighter version of the traditional recipe, try drizzling them with some olive oil and bake on parchment paper, for 20 minutes, in the preheated oven at 180C.

The meat sauce for the moussaka can be prepared one day in advance and refrigerated. In a large pan add the olive oil and the chopped onions and fry on medium heat, until they become soft and translucent. Add the garlic and the minced meat, stirring with a wooden spoon until the meat breaks in small pieces. Pour in the red wine and wait to evaporate. Add the tomatoes puree and the tinned tomatoes, cinnamon, bay leaf and a good pinch of salt and pepper. Bring to boil, turn the heat down and simmer with the lid on for about 30 minutes, until most of the juices have evaporated.

Assemble the moussaka. You will need a medium baking dish, approx. 25x35 cm. Butter the bottom and sides of the pan and layer the eggplants. Top with a layer of crisps and pour some of the meat sauce over them and even out. Sprinkle with shredded cheese. Continue adding layers in the

same order and top up with eggplants.

For the béchamel sauce, melt the butter in a medium sized saucepan over a medium-low heat. Add the flour whisking continuously to avoid getting lumpy. Then add the warmed milk in a steady stream and keep whisking to keep the sauce smooth. If the sauce still needs to thicken, boil over low heat while continuing to stir. Remove the pan from the stove and stir in the egg yolk, salt, pepper, nutmeg and the grated cheese. Pour this béchamel sauce no thicker than 1 cm over the layered moussaka and smooth out with a spatula. Sprinkle with bread crumbs and the remaining grated cheese and bake for 40-45 minutes in the preheated oven at 175C until the top is nicely browned.

Serve at room temperature with a nice refreshing [Greek salad](#) aside.

Pastitsio

The Greek version of lasagna, pastitsio is a baked pasta dish that contains ground lamb and béchamel sauce. The name comes from the Italian “pasticcio”, a large family of baked savoury pies which are based on meat, fish and pasta. Many Italian versions include a pastry crust and some include béchamel. The word pasticcio comes from the Latin word “pasticium” derived from “pasta” which means “pie”, and has developed the figurative meanings of “a mess”, “a tough situation”.

The typical Greek version has a bottom layer of some tubular pasta, with cheese and egg as a binder; a middle layer of ground beef, veal or lamb with tomato and cinnamon, nutmeg or allspice; another layer of pasta; and a top layer of sauce, varying from an egg-based custard to a flour or cheese based béchamel sauce. Grated cheese is often sprinkled on top. Pastitsio is a common dish in Cretan households especially during winter months and is usually served with green salad aside.

Preparation time: 20 mins

Cooking time: 75 mins

Servings: 4

Ingredients

Base:

250g thick pasta (bucatini or similar)

Meat sauce:

400g minced beef

30ml olive oil

1 medium onion, finely chopped

1 carrot, grated

1 clove garlic, crushed

200g canned tomatoes, chopped

2 tbsp. cognac

1 tsp. sugar

1 stick of cinnamon

1 bay leaf

salt and freshly ground pepper

Béchamel sauce:

500ml fresh milk

2 tbsp. corn flour

25g butter
1 egg yolk
pinch of nutmeg
salt
100g grated Gravieria (or other yellow cheese)

Method

The meat sauce

In a saucepan, heat the olive oil and fry the onion until translucent. Add the garlic and the minced meat, breaking it with a fork. Cook for about 8 minutes, until it changes its colour. Pour the cognac and allow for 1-2 minutes until it evaporates. Add the tomatoes, carrot, sugar, salt, pepper, bay leaf and cinnamon stick. Let the cinnamon to flavour the mixture for 5 minutes and remove it. Cover the saucepan and lower the heat. Let simmer for 20 minutes until the fluids condense and become a thick sauce.

The béchamel sauce

In a frying pan warm up the milk, add the corn flour, nutmeg, salt and butter and stir very well so it doesn't become lumpy. When it's starting to thicken, remove from heat and, stirring continuously, add the egg yolk. Finally, mix in half of the cheese.

Mounting the dish

Boil and drain the pasta. In an oiled baking dish, layer half of the boiled pasta and pour on top a spoonful of béchamel sauce. Stir lightly to coat evenly. Pour a tablespoon of béchamel into the minced meat sauce and stir well. Add the minced meat on top of the pasta and cover with a new layer of pasta. Pour the rest of the béchamel sauce on top. Shake gently the baking dish as for the sauces to penetrate to the bottom. Sprinkle on top with the remaining grated yellow cheese. Bake in a preheated oven at 180C, for 45 minutes. Serve warm with a green salad and a glass of white wine.

Stuffed eggplant – melitzanes paputsakia

“Paputsakia” means in Greek “little shoes” from the shape of the eggplants cut longitudinally and scooped, which resembles exactly that! The taste and the ingredients used for this ‘papoutsakia’ recipe are very similar to the popular [moussaka](#). To prepare this delicious Greek dish, the eggplants are first seasoned and baked until soft and sweet and then stuffed with a delicious tomato based meat sauce, topped with a cheesy béchamel sauce and baked to golden perfection. It is a summer recipe when eggplants are in season and tomatoes taste divine. The vegetarian version of this dish is the [imam bayildi](#).

Preparation time: 60 mins

Cooking time: 80 mins

Servings: 4

Ingredients

4 small eggplants (approx.150 g each)

400g minced beef

1 medium red onion, finely chopped

2 cloves garlic, crushed

200ml red wine

1 tin chopped tomatoes or tomato juice

1 cinnamon stick

1 tsp. oregano

100g grated Graviera (or any other hard yellow cheese)

50ml olive oil

salt and freshly ground pepper

2-3 tbsp. fresh parsley, chopped

For the béchamel sauce:

50g flour

50g butter

350ml milk

1 egg yolk

pinch of nutmeg

Method

Start by cutting the eggplants longitudinally, in two pieces and scoop the flesh leaving a margin of about 1 cm deep. Reserve the scooped flesh in a

bowl, will be used later for the filling.

Salt generously and place the eggplants in a colander for about half an hour, to draw out the bitter juices. Wash well and drain on kitchen paper towels.

Preheat the oven at 200C. Season the eggplants with salt and pepper and drizzle with olive oil. Place the halves with the skin facing up in a baking tray, lined with parchment paper. Bake for 30 minutes, until softened.

The meat sauce for this recipe is exactly the one we use for moussaka. You can prepare it ahead of time or even have small frozen portions, ready to thaw when needed.

Peel and chop the onions and garlic. Place a large pan on medium heat and fry the onions with one tablespoon of olive oil until softened. Stir in the garlic and continue to fry. Turn the heat up, add the minced meat breaking it up with a spoon and fry for few minutes.

Deglaze with the red wine and wait 1-2 minutes to evaporate. Stir in the canned tomatoes, the cinnamon stick, a pinch of sugar, oregano and other condiments, if using.

Bring to boil, turn the heat down and simmer with the lid on for about 30 minutes, until most of the juices have evaporated.

Remove from heat and let cool down for a few minutes. Add the eggplant flesh cut in small cubes.

Lay the eggplant halves in a baking pan, with the skin down. Sprinkle with some grated cheese and add the meat sauce filling, dividing it in equal parts for all eggplant halves. Sprinkle again with grated cheese on top.

Prepare the béchamel sauce. In a large pan, melt the butter over low-medium heat. Add the flour whisking continuously to make a paste. Add warmed milk in a steady stream; keep whisking in order to prevent getting lumps. If the sauce still needs to thicken, boil over low heat while continuing to stir.

The consistency has to be strong enough to not pour out from the top of the filled eggplant halves. Remove the pan from the stove, stir in the egg yolk and season with salt, pepper and a pinch of nutmeg. Whisk quickly,

in order to prevent the egg from turning into an omelette!

Cover the stuffed eggplant halves with a generous layer of béchamel sauce. Bake them at 180C for 20 minutes, until nicely coloured.

Stuffed cabbage rolls - lahanodolmades

Like its appetizer sister dolmades, these cabbage rolls are part of the same family of “dolma” with roots in Persian cuisine and very popular in Middle East and Balkans. They are mostly winter dishes in countries such as Azerbaijan, Romania and Moldova, Poland, Ukraine, Hungary, Russia, Croatia, Serbia or Bulgaria.

The Cretan version uses fresh cabbage that is immersed into hot, salty water until the leaves become soft and easy to roll. Northern Balkan countries use the cabbage pickled because in older times it was the only way to preserve it during cold winter months. The filling is more or less the same everywhere – a mixture of rice and minced meat, pork or veal or combination of the two.

Preparation time: 60 mins

Cooking time: 45 mins

Servings: 4

Ingredients

1 cabbage about 1kg

500g ground pork or veal (or a mixture of both)

200g rice, Carolina or other short grain rice

1 onion, finely chopped

2 spring onions, finely chopped

1 tbsp. fresh parsley, finely chopped

1 tbsp. fresh dill, finely chopped

1 tbsp. fresh mint, finely chopped (or 1 tsp. dried mint)

70ml olive oil

200ml vegetable stock

salt and freshly ground pepper

For the avgolemono sauce:

2 eggs

juice from 2 lemons

Method

Bring water to boil in a large pot, add salt and immerse the cabbage leaves, few at a time, until they become soft (about 5 minutes).

Stack them on a plate, one on top of each other. If they are very big, cut them in pieces of about 10 cm and remove the hard core off the leaf.

Mix the ground meat with the rice, onions, parsley, dill and mint, add salt and pepper and half of the olive oil.

Take one cabbage leaf and add one heaped spoonful of meat mixture in the centre. Fold first the edges and then roll into a cylinder shape but not too tight (if it is too tight it will break during cooking as rice will expand). Repeat with the rest of the cabbage leaves until you finish the meat filling.

Place the cabbage rolls in a pot, next to each other, starting from the edges to the centre. Add a second or third layer if needed. Add the remaining olive oil and enough water just to cover them.

Place a lid or a plate the exact size of the pot on top, to keep the dolmades in place while boiling, so they won't open. Bring to boil and let cook for 45 minutes.

When the time is up, drain most of the broth and reserve one cup for the egg-lemon sauce. See the guide for the [avgolemono sauce](#) at the beginning of the book.

Add the sauce and let rest uncovered for 15 minutes. Serve hot, with yoghurt and toasted bread aside.

Stifado

A very popular Greek dish, stifado (sometimes spelled stifatho) it's a stew dish introduced by the Venetians in the 13th century after the fall of Constantinople and before the Ottoman invasion. It is usually made with either rabbit or veal as a central ingredient and a lot of small boiler or pearl onions. Besides tomatoes, wine or vinegar, it also includes a selection of spices such as cinnamon and cloves which create a particularly flavourful base. Like the best of Greek food, a good stifado combines great local and seasonal ingredients with a little or a lot of creativity and a personal touch – there are many variations of the basic dish, not just between regions but even between families. You can easily tailor this dish to your own preferences by adding or leaving out other ingredients with the exception of the onions.

Preparation time: 10 mins

Cooking time: 105 mins

Servings: 4

Ingredients

750g of fresh rabbit, cut into serving size pieces

(approximately 1/2 rabbit)

or 750g good quality stewing beef, cut into cubes approx. 3-4 cm

750g pearl onions or small onions

75ml olive oil

250ml tomato sauce

60ml red wine vinegar

1 large, juicy ripe tomato, chopped

1 tsp. tomato purée

3 cloves garlic, peeled

1 whole cinnamon stick, cut in half

2 bay leaves

2 sprigs rosemary

1 tsp. nutmeg

1 tsp. whole allspice

salt and freshly ground pepper

Method

Heat the oil in a saucepan; add the meat in batches and fry until browned

on all sides. Remove with a slotted spoon, place on a platter, cover and set aside.

Peel the onions. The ones which are very small, leave whole, for those which are slightly larger, score them in half, but not all the way. Add in the same oil used for the meat, turn down to medium heat and fry until they have softened, but not browned (about 10 minutes).

Pour in the wine and vinegar, cover and let simmer for 3 minutes.

Add the meat along with its juices to the saucepan; add the chopped tomato, tomato puree, garlic cloves, salt, cinnamon stick, bay leaves, rosemary, nutmeg and allspice. Bring to a boil, turn the heat down and simmer for 1 ½ hours or until the meat is fork tender and the sauce has thickened. While simmering, gradually add small quantities of boiled water to keep the sauce liquid enough for cooking the meat. At the end, season with salt and pepper and let cool for 10 minutes.

Chicken with mustard slow cooked

Another easy-to-make, one-pot-meal that needs minimal skills and it's surprisingly tasty. Suitable for any cut of chicken, with or without skin or bones, this recipe allows for any type of mustard you prefer: honey, spicy, Dijon, English, hot or sweet. The result is a tender and juicy meat and full of flavour. This is a low calorie dish, excellent for a light lunch or dinner that can be prepared in advance and warmed up just before serving.

Preparation time: 5 mins

Cooking time: 60 mins

Servings: 4

Ingredients

1kg boneless, skinless chicken thighs
or use any cut of chicken you prefer
(for bone-in chicken add 250g)

50ml olive oil

100ml dry white wine

2 tbsp. mustard

300g potatoes

juice from 1 lemon

salt and freshly ground pepper

Method

Season the chicken with salt and pepper and place it in a large non-stick skillet.

Peel and cut the potatoes in large wedges and add them to the skillet.

In a bowl, mix the olive oil with the mustard and pour it over the chicken and potatoes. With your hand, rub the mustard over the chicken and potato wedges until they are well covered.

Add the wine by pouring it slowly on the sides, as to not "wash" away the mustard from the pieces of meat or potatoes.

Cover and heat on medium to high heat until it starts boiling. Reduce the heat to minimum and let it cook slowly for about 50-60 minutes, turning the pieces occasionally so they will get brown on all sides. The wine will evaporate and will remain a creamy mustard sauce on the bottom of the pot.

Remove from heat and add the lemon juice, shaking the pot gently so that it distributes evenly. Let it sit covered for at least 10 minutes before serving, so that the lemon juice will be well absorbed.

Serve this dish at room temperature, paired with a green salad and a glass of chilled white wine.

Chicken with Graviera cheese

This recipe is the Cretan interpretation of the famous Italian chicken-Parmesan dish, with Graviera cheese which is certified local, made from sheep's milk and very similar in taste and texture with its Italian counterpart. It is a dish from the "tigania" family, such as pork with peppers and feta, because they use a "tigani" – a deep frying pan to make a tasty and quick hearty meal.

Preparation time: 10 mins

Cooking time: 20 mins

Servings: 4

Ingredients

Chicken:

2 large boneless and skinless chicken breasts,
halved horizontally to make 4

2 tbsp. flour

2 tbsp. finely grated Graviera cheese (or Gruyere or Parmesan)

salt and freshly ground pepper

Sauce:

2 tbsp. olive oil

2 cloves garlic, crushed

200ml chicken broth

100ml milk or heavy cream

50g finely grated Graviera cheese

1 tsp. corn flour

juice from 1 lemon

1 tbsp. fresh parsley, chopped

Method

Mix the flour and Graviera cheese and dredge the seasoned chicken, shaking off the excess. Set aside.

In a large skillet, add the oil and over medium high heat fry the chicken until golden on each side and cooked through (about 3-4 minutes, depending on the thickness). Transfer onto a warm plate.

In the remaining oil, add the garlic and fry for about 1 minute. Reduce heat to low and add the broth and milk or heavy cream. Bring the sauce to

a gentle simmer and season with salt and pepper. Mix in the grated Graviera cheese and continue cooking for about 2 minutes, until thickens. If the sauce is too runny, add the cornflour and mix well to combine into the sauce. It will begin to thicken immediately.

Pour in the lemon juice and simmer for another minute then add the chicken back into the pan. Let the sauce simmer for another minute with the meat in, remove from the heat and cover allowing the chicken to soak up all the flavours. Serve warm with boiled pasta or baked potatoes. Sprinkle with parsley and grated cheese before serving.

Rooster in wine - kokoras krasato

This traditional Greek rooster stew in wine is slightly different from the French version coq-au-vin but just as delicious. The basic component of this dish is the free range rooster which is readily available in Crete as everybody in the country side has free range chicken around their household and the traditional red wine, romeiko – slightly bitter and with a persistent aftertaste that makes this dish a real delicacy.

The recipe is not dissimilar from other well-known traditional Cretan dishes, most begin with frying onions, then browning the meat and pouring some liquid – wine or broth and cooking slowly into perfection. This recipe is best prepared in a Dutch oven and can be made either on the stovetop or in the oven, as long as the pot is covered. The longer you cook, provided the contents of the pot remain moist, the richer the flavour and the softer the meat as rooster is much tougher than chicken, requiring long slow braising to make it edible.

Preparation time: 10 mins

Cooking time: 150 mins

Servings: 4

Ingredients

1 rooster (cut in helping sizes)

75ml olive oil

500ml red wine

5-6 cloves garlic, crushed

200g onions finely chopped

1 tbsp. dried thyme

200g tomatoes, peeled and chopped

1 carrot, chopped

salt and freshly ground pepper

Method

Pour the olive oil in the Dutch oven or any non-stick pot, on medium to high heat and brown the rooster pieces equally on each side.

Transfer the meat on a warm plate and, in the remaining oil, fry the garlic and the chopped onion until soft and translucent.

Return the rooster to the pot and add the wine, thyme, tomatoes and

carrot, bring to boil and reduce the heat to low, letting them simmer for at least two hours or until the liquid has reduced to one third and the meat breaks easily with a fork.

Serve hot, with boiled rice or pasta.

Rabbit with oregano and lemon

Rabbit meat is an integral part of the Cretan diet and traditional cuisine abounds in tasty recipes, most of them easy to prepare and slow cooked. With a lot of people living in country side areas and the unspoiled secular tradition to consume mainly local produce, growing free range rabbits along with chickens around their household is a common habit among Cretans. The rabbit is one of the healthiest meats, high in protein and with very low in fat (only 4%) making it an ideal choice for slimming or to fight hypertension and heart disease. It is easy to digest, tasty and loaded with potassium, magnesium, iron, zinc and other useful elements for the body. Most famous recipe is stifado but this rabbit with oregano and lemon is equally tasty and very easy to prepare.

Preparation time: 10 mins

Cooking time: 120 mins

Servings: 4

Ingredients

1 rabbit (approx. 2 kg), jointed in small pieces

500ml dry white wine

75ml olive oil

juice from 1 lemon

1 tbsp. dried oregano

Method

Wash the meat well and put it in a large non-stick pot, adding water to cover it.

Bring to boil, reduce the heat to minimum, cover the pot and allow simmering until the water has reduced to one third (about 50 minutes).

Add the wine and bring to boil again. Let it simmer stirring in occasionally, until the wine has evaporated and the remaining liquid is about or less than one third (another 50 minutes). You will know that the meat is ready when it easily breaks with a fork.

Add the olive oil and let it fry, gently turning the pieces on both sides or shaking the pot slightly to help the oil cover the meat. Fry for about 5 minutes or until the meat gets a golden brown colour.

Remove from the heat and add the lemon juice, shaking the pot to distribute it evenly. Sprinkle with dried oregano and cover for at least 10 minutes, before serving.

This dish can be served at room temperature as an appetizer, or as a main dish together with fried potatoes.

Souvlaki - skewers

The well-known Greek “souvlaki” is a diminutive of the Medieval Greek “souvla” which means skewer and so, the dish consists of small pieces of meat or fish, with or without vegetables, grilled on a wooden or metal skewer. It is eaten straight off the stick and is usually served with pita bread, fried potatoes, lemon and obligatory tzatziki.

As in other parts of the world, the practice of cooking food on spits or skewers has an ancient history in Greek culture. Homer in Iliad mentions pieces of meat roasted on spits and so does Aristophanes, Xenophon or Aristotle.

Modern-day souvlaki was described in the mid-19th century by a French traveller in the Boeotia region (North of Athens), but was not widely distributed in Greece until after World War II. Souvlaki skewers served as fast food started to be sold widely in the 1960s, after being introduced by vendors from Boeotia.

The issue of whether modern-day souvlaki skewers came to Greece via Turkish cuisine, and should be considered a Greek styling of shish kebab, or is a contemporary revival of Greek tradition dating as far back as 17th century BC Minoan civilization, is a topic of sometimes heated debate, at least between Greeks and Turks.

Preparation time: 15 mins plus 3 hours to chill

Cooking time: 35 mins

Servings: 4

Ingredients

700g pork (neck or shoulder) or chicken breasts

1 medium onion

2 bell peppers (red and green)

For the marinade

200ml dry white wine

juice from 1 lemon

1 tbsp. fresh thyme, chopped or 1 tsp. dried

1 tbsp. mustard

25ml olive oil

Method

Cut the meat in cubes 2-3cm. Cut the onion in quarters and the peppers

in squares of about 3cm.

In a bowl, mix the ingredients for the marinade and toss the meat cubes to coat evenly. Cover and chill for at least 3 hours or, even better, overnight.

You can use metal or wooden skewers; start by adding alternatively pepper – onion - meat cube – until the skewer is filled.

Season with salt and pepper and grill, preferably on charcoal, for 3-4 minutes on each side.

Serve hot, with fried potatoes, lemon wedges, [tzatziki](#) and [Greek salad](#).

Pork with orange and thyme in the oven

A roasted pork leg recipe that Cretans would enjoy for a cosy Sunday family meal or during a friendly get together. The sweet and sour aromas of oranges and lemons blended with the sweet honey mustard based sauce and enhanced by rosemary and thyme make this dish an exquisite treat. The secret for perfectly crispy and succulent roast pork is to bake it initially at high temperature to get a crust and then reduce the heat and bake slowly for a longer time. You can choose either a boneless, no skin piece for which make sure to coat the leg with the sauce every 30 minutes of cooking time to help it remain juicy, or prepare a crackling roast pork leg with skin on, by scoring the skin in cross parallel lines of about 2 cm apart. Cut all the way through the skin and rub it with salt, pepper, rosemary and thyme before baking it in the oven.

Preparation time: 10 mins

Cooking time: 90 mins

Servings: 6

Ingredients

1 – 1.3kg pork leg

1kg potatoes, cut into wedges

juice from 3 oranges

juice from 2 lemons

2 tbsp. mustard

1 tbsp. honey

2 tbsp. olive oil

1 clove garlic, peeled

½ tbsp. rosemary

½ tbsp. thyme

salt and freshly ground pepper

Method

Start by rubbing the pork well with salt and place on large baking tray. Peel and cut the potatoes into wedges and place them next to the meat.

Into a large bowl, add the orange juice, lemon juice, mustard, honey and olive oil and blend with a wooden spoon, until the ingredients are combined. Pour the mixture over the pork and the potatoes. Add the garlic clove into the pan and sprinkle the pork with rosemary. Season the

potatoes with salt, pepper and thyme.

Bake uncovered for 20 minutes in the oven at 220C, until a crust forms at the surface of the meat. Cover with aluminum foil and lower the heat to 180C. Bake for 1 more hour, checking the pan to not get dry (add half a glass of hot water in the pan if needed). Serve hot, with roasted potatoes.

Pork with peppers and feta - tigania

A common Cretan dish, “tigania” takes its name from the pan in which is cooked, called “tigani”, a skillet that is used to fry and simmer the meat until fork tender. Tigania is generally a pork dish but it can also be made with chicken or lamb. The recipe is very easy and quick to make, a hearty meal of fried pork bites with colourful peppers cooked with mustard and vegetable broth and topped with crumbles of feta cheese. A satisfying dish, usually served with fried potatoes or rice.

Preparation time: 10 mins plus 2 hours to chill

Cooking time: 30 mins

Servings: 4

Ingredients

750g of pork meat, cut into 3cm cubes

1 green pepper

1 yellow pepper

1 green pepper

10-12 fresh white mushrooms cut into thick slices (optional)

1 medium onion, chopped

2 cloves garlic, crushed

1 tbsp. mustard, preferably spicy

100g Feta cheese, crumbled

50ml olive oil

150ml dry white wine

juice from 1/2 orange

1 tsp. dried oregano

salt and freshly ground pepper

Method

In a bowl mix the orange juice with wine, olive oil, oregano, salt and pepper and add the meat cubes to coat well. Cover with cling film and let the meat marinate for a couple of hours in the fridge.

Cut the peppers into 2 cm squares.

Warm up 2-3 tablespoons of olive oil in a large frying pan on medium heat. Use a paper towel to roughly dry the pork cubes. Add the meat in the frying pan and cook until it becomes golden brown on each side.

Add the peppers, mushrooms (if using), garlic and onion and cook them for 5 minutes, until softened.

Pour 1/2 cup of the remaining marinade in the pan and add the mustard. Season with salt and pepper, stir well and let simmer on low heat until most of the juices have reduced, approx. 20 minutes. When almost ready, add the Feta crumbs, stir well and cook for another 1-2 minutes.

Serve warm, next to potatoes, rice or chunky bread.

Pork with chestnuts and prunes

It is not unusual for the Greeks to pair meat with various fruits and the pork seems to be the most versatile of all. Dried fruits like prunes or apricots, orange juice or chestnuts are frequently combined to bring out the softness of the pork meat and to create sophisticated dishes, suitable for relaxed Sunday's family meals. The western side of Crete is a heaven of chestnuts with over 110.000 trees, most of them concentrated around Kissamos area. In October, the village of Elos celebrates the chestnut festival, a weekend long marathon of traditional music and dances where locals roast chestnuts on the spot and give them for free to their guests. Local Cretan women stock up on their chestnuts supply for the year to come.

Preparation time: 10 mins plus overnight chill

Cooking time: 60 mins

Servings: 4

Ingredients

750g boneless pork, cut in 3cm cubes

20 prunes

20 chestnuts (thawed if frozen)

1 glass of sweet wine (we use mavrodafni but any sweet wine will do)

1 glass of dry red wine

1 cup of black tea

1 glass of water

75ml olive oil

1 tsp. dried oregano

salt and freshly ground pepper

Method

In a bowl, mix the sweet wine, prunes, chestnuts and tea. Leave overnight to chill in the fridge.

Heat oil in a large saucepan and fry the pork cubes until golden brown.

Add the glass of red wine and one glass of water and when it starts boiling, reduce the heat to minimum and let simmer for about one hour or until the meat is fork tender. Add the mix of chestnuts and prunes and bring again to a boil. Let the pork meat absorb most of the juice and be

sure that is tender enough before you remove from heat.
This dish is usually served with boiled rice aside.

Pork with celery and avgolemono sauce

This is one of the most unusual traditional dishes in Cretan diet, with a pungent aroma given by the spicy, strong taste of celery that grows abundantly in winter months and is used in various combinations of meat or beans. Cretan celery grows wild and has a spicier taste; it looks a lot like large-leafed parsley with a dark green colour, very leafy and a thick stem. When preparing this dish with local celery it's necessary to boil it separately (a first boil) to get rid of the strong aroma (similar with boiled cabbage or cauliflower). If using the standard celery from the local market, this first boil is not needed. Also, you can use any another of your favourite leafy green such as kale or spinach. A hearty, comfort dish made for a holiday or special occasions, this recipe is finished with the famous avgolemono sauce.

Preparation time: 20 mins

Cooking time: 90 mins

Servings: 4-6

Ingredients

750g of pork (shoulder or neck)

1 large onion, chopped

1 small glass of dry white wine (optional)

500g celery stalks

60ml olive oil

250ml meat stock or water

2 tbsp. fresh dill, chopped

salt and freshly ground pepper

Avgolemono sauce:

2 eggs

juice from 2 lemons

Method

Using a large pot, boil the celery for 20 minutes until softened, as the stalks tend to be bulky. Strain and set aside.

In a large pot, warm the oil on medium-high heat and fry the onions until soft and translucent. Add the pork chunks and sear on all sides until they get a lightly brown color. Season with salt and pepper then add the wine and just enough water to cover the meat. Place the lid on the pot and let

the meat simmer for 15 minutes.

Add the celery chunks and continue simmering, on low heat, for another 45 minutes, until the meat breaks easily with a fork.

Remove from the heat and prepare the [avgolemono sauce](#) by following the guide at the beginning of this book.

Serve hot, with fresh bread or barley rusks.

Kleftiko

What means “kleftiko”? The word comes from the Greek “klephti” which means to steal (from where the English word “kleptomaniac” comes) and the name of the dish dates back to the times of Klephts - 15th century bands of Greek brigands turn guerrillas turn tax collectors fighting against or serving the Ottoman rule. Their behaviour of alternating between sides was common at the time. In order to survive during times that they were persecuted by the Sultan’s forces, the Klephts would steal a lamb or a goat from a flock as it grazed on a hillside. The thieves would cook the meat over many hours in a hole in the ground, with red hot stones and glowing embers, sealing the hole with soil so that no steam could escape and give them away. They would go on their missions and come back after hours to find a cooked meal. No other ingredients were added except maybe some salt or herbs, if they had any.

Nowadays lamb kleftiko is baked sealed, wrapped in parchment paper or in casserole dish with a lid, to keep all the juices and flavours inside and slow cooked for 3-4 hours to allow the meat to absorb all the wonderful Mediterranean aromas.

Preparation time: 15 mins

Cooking time: 4.5 hours

Servings: 6

Ingredients

1.5 kg shoulder of lamb (bone in)
6 medium potatoes, peeled and cut in quarters
6 carrots, peeled and sliced
2 large tomatoes, cut into thick slices
2 onions, sliced
3 bay leaves
5 cloves garlic, cracked open
3 sprigs of fresh rosemary
50ml olive oil
1 lemon
1 tbsp. dried oregano
Salt and freshly ground pepper

Method

Wash and pat dry the meat, then season with salt and pepper. Make slits in the meat and add the garlic.

Line a baking dish with aluminium foil and place on top 4 pieces of parchment paper, to form a star. Place the potatoes and carrots in the centre of the parchment paper and season with salt and a pinch of oregano. Add half of the sliced onion, a bay leaf, some rosemary and a few tomato slices. Drizzle with olive oil and place the meat on top. Add the remaining ingredients, drizzle with lemon juice and the remaining olive oil.

To enclose the lamb kleftiko, hold the parchment paper from the edges crosswise and grab with your hand in the middle, just above the stuffing and squeeze. Tie tightly the whole thing together to form a pouch and cover several times in aluminium foil to make sure that no steam will escape!

Bake in the preheated oven at 160C for 4 hours. After the time is up, remove the aluminium and parchment paper and cook uncovered at 180C for another half an hour, until golden.

Serve on a dish in the middle of the table for people to help themselves.

Tsigariasto – fried goat or lamb

In Greek “tsigarisma” means frying and so the name of this dish can be translated as “fried goat or lamb.” The extra virgin olive oil being so abundant in Crete, the frying is always done in lots of it and the secret of this dish is slow cooking the meat at very low temperature. This recipe is traditional of western Crete and has migrated across the island because of its delicious taste.

Years ago, the locals used the meat of the Cretan wild goat known to most as Kri-Kri, in order to make this delicious food. Today Kri-Kri is a protected species as it threatened with extinction so hunting it is banned. It is endemic and lives in the White Mountains, mainly in the Samaria Gorge and it is a symbol of Crete.

Locals use the term “tsigariasto” also for fried wild greens which are growing abundantly during the winter months. The cooking process is the same, times vary because the weeds need less time to fry but the dish is equally delicious and very popular during the lent preceding Easter.

This is a very easy to make recipe but its success depends on good quality ingredients and patience for slow cooking on low temperature.

Preparation time: 5 mins

Cooking time: 120 mins

Servings: 4

Ingredients

1kg of lamb (shoulder) or goat, cut into medium pieces

200ml olive oil

Salt and freshly ground pepper

250ml dry wine (white or red)

Method

Cut the meat into medium (to small) pieces and season with salt and pepper.

Heat the oil in a large skillet with high sides and fry the meat on medium to high heat until golden brown on all sides.

When done, add the wine and bring to boil.

Cover and lower the heat to a minimum (enough to broil) and let it cook for about two hours, stirring occasionally not to stick to the bottom.

This dish is generally served with fried potatoes and is thoroughly enjoyed for long family lunches or dinners.

Grilled lamb chops - paidakia

The best cut of the lamb, the most sought after due to its crunchiness and the smoky, charcoal grilled taste, the Greek “paidakia” – lamb chops - are considered a delicacy to be honoured by eating with bare hands.

Lean meat surrounded by delicious fat, the lamb chops are traditionally grilled well and seasoned with sea salt and oregano and finished with a last minute squeeze of lemon. A marinade of olive oil, mustard, thyme, garlic and lemon will enhance their flavour and if you don't have the time or place for a proper barbeque, they can equally be cooked on a grill pan or in the oven.

Preparation time: 10 mins plus 3 hours chilling

Cooking time: 30 mins

Servings: 4

Ingredients

1.5kg lamb rib chops

50ml olive oil

2 cloves garlic, crushed

2 tbs. mustard

2 tbs. fresh thyme, chopped or 1 tsp. dried

1 tbsp. fresh rosemary, chopped

1 tsp. dried oregano

zest from 1 lemon

Method

In a large bowl mix all the ingredients for the marinade. Toss the lamb chops and rub them to coat evenly. Cover with plastic wrap and place in the fridge for at least 3 hours or better overnight.

If you are using a charcoal grill, cook the ribs on each side for 10 minutes, until crunchy and brown.

For oven baking, preheat your oven to 200C. Place the ribs in a large pan, on a single layer and bake for 20-25 minutes, flipping them halfway through cooking time, until they become crispy and golden brown.

Season with oregano and serve hot, with fried potatoes, lemon wedges and [tzatziki](#).

Lamb in the oven with tomato sauce

A simple yet delicious recipe that involves little preparation and slow cooking in the oven so that the fat from the lamb melts away, the connective tissues break down and the braising liquid helps transform the muscular meat into a succulent, flavourful delicacy. Accompanied by heaps of delicious oven-roasted potatoes, this is a classic Greek dish that everybody loves.

Preparation time: 10 mins plus 2 hours chilling

Cooking time: 120 mins

Servings: 4

Ingredients

1 – 1.2kg bone-in lamb shanks

1kg potatoes cut into wedges

200ml tomatoes juice

50ml olive oil

100ml red dry wine

1 tsp. dried oregano

1 tsp. paprika (sweet or spicy)

1 tsp. garlic powder

salt and freshly ground pepper

Method

Rinse the lamb in cold water and pat dry with a paper towel.

In a small bowl combine the tomatoes juice, olive oil, wine, oregano, paprika, garlic powder, salt and pepper and dip the lamb shanks before arranging them on a large roasting pan, in such a way to occupy half of it. Dip the potatoes in the tomato mix then lay them in the same pan, on the other half. Pour the rest of the tomato mix over the lamb and potatoes. Cover with aluminium foil and let the lamb shanks marinate in the refrigerator for at least 2 hours or better overnight.

Preheat the oven to 230C and introduce the roasting pan covered with the aluminium foil for 20 minutes. Reduce the temperature at 180C and continue to bake for another 60 minutes, making sure to baste the potatoes and the lamb with pan juices every 20 minutes while they are cooking. Remove the aluminium foil and bake for another 30 minutes

until the meat and potatoes gain a nice brown crust while the juices dry. The meat has to be fork tender inside and crusty outside. Serve with a traditional [Greek salad](#) or a mixture of green salads.

Lamb and artichokes avgolemono

By far, lamb is one of the most popular meats in Greek cuisine because the climate and terrain has tended to favour the breeding of goats and sheep in the mountainous islands scattered along the Mediterranean. Artichokes grow abundantly in Crete but because their season lasts only for few months, locals are used to stock on them by freezing the cleaned hearts in handy batches. In fact there is no significant difference in taste between the fresh and frozen ones therefore you can save time using the latter. The avgolemono sauce gives a particular creamy texture to this dish and a unique lemony aroma.

Preparation time: 20 mins

Cooking time: 60 mins

Servings: 4-6

Ingredients

1kg of lamb leg or shoulder, cut into large chunks

70ml olive oil

200ml dry white wine

4 green onions, chopped

1 medium onion, chopped

10-12 small frozen artichokes, thawed

1 fennel bulb, sliced

1 large carrot, peeled and sliced

few sprigs of fresh dill

2 bay leaves

Salt and freshly ground pepper

For the avgolemono sauce:

2 eggs at room temperature

juice from 2 lemons

Method

Place a large deep-sided casserole dish over a medium heat and add half of the olive oil.

Season the lamb with salt and pepper and brown the chunks on each side. Add the remaining oil and the onions and fry on low heat until soft and translucent (about 5 minutes).

Pour in the wine and let simmer on low heat until it evaporates.

Add enough water to just cover the meat, add the bay leaves and bring to a gentle simmer.

Cover and cook on low heat for 30 minutes or until the meat is fork tender and becomes easy to remove from the bone.

Add the fennel, carrot and artichokes and cook for 10-15 minutes more.

Season with salt and pepper, take off the heat and add the chopped fresh dill.

Follow the guide for [avgolemono sauce](#) at the beginning of this book and finish the dish.

Serve hot with fresh crusty bread.

Cretan pilafi - gamopilafo

In the Greek cuisine, “piláfi” is the fluffy and soft, but neither soupy nor sticky rice that has been boiled in a meat stock or bouillon broth. “Gamo” means “wedding” and the “gamopilafi” is the prized pilaf served traditionally at weddings and major celebrations in Crete: rice is boiled in lamb or goat broth, then finished with lemon juice. Rice also symbolizes fertility and prosperity therefore, for Cretans, the pilafi is the celebration dish by default; there is no wedding, baptism, engagement, or special occasion without it.

Every Cretan cook will put their own signature in preparation of the pilafi and, as tastes vary with type of rice or amount of fat or lemon, chefs know they will be evaluated by the pilafis they will serve. The pilafi is so important that, for example, the classic questions to someone who has gone to a wedding are whether the bride was beautiful and how was the pilafi!

Although a simple dish to prepare, a good pilafi needs to respect certain rules: to be served at the right temperature, to be creamy, not too much or too little cooked, to be well balanced in the amount of lemon or butter but most important to use high quality meat for the broth. The golden ratio for rice / broth is 1 to 3, for 1 cup of rice you have to use 3 cups of broth.

Preparation time: 10 mins

Cooking time: 75 mins

Servings: 6

Ingredients

1kg. lamb, cut in 6 parts

½kg free range chicken or hen

3 cups Carolina rice or similar

juice from 1 lemon

salt and freshly ground pepper

2 tbsp. butter, melted

Greek yoghurt for serving

Method

Add the meat in a large pot, fill with water and bring to boil. Remove the foam that forms at the surface with a straining ladle. Lower the heat and

boil for one hour, until the meat is well cooked.

Remove the meat on a hot plate and strain the broth. With the same cup used for measuring the rice, take 3 cups of broth for each cup of rice. Bring to boil stirring in constantly to avoid sticking. When the rice is boiled (10-15 minutes) and water is absorbed, add the salt and the lemon juice.

In a small saucepan, melt the butter and pour over the rice, stirring continuously. Serve immediately with Greek yoghurt, freshly ground pepper and the warm meat aside.

Veal with mushrooms and carrots

Slow cooked beef is one of the favourite Greek dishes and comes out in thousands of versions. From stifado to youvetsi or lemonato, the beef stew implies hours of cooking on low temperatures until the meat becomes soft and breaks easily with a fork. This recipe combines the acidity of lemon and wine with the aroma of mushrooms and the sweetness of carrots, creating a taste that fits well with any side dish like potatoes puree, boiled spaghetti or simple steamed rice. It is technically an easy recipe with few ingredients and no extra time required by you, as long as it is simmering for itself. It will take you around 2 – 2 ½ hours, from which you will need to be actively on it for about half an hour.

Preparation time: 10 mins

Cooking time: 2,5 hours

Servings: 4

Ingredients

1kg stewing beef, cut into 4 cm cubes

75ml olive oil

250ml dry white wine

4 medium carrots, peeled and sliced

250g Portobello mushrooms, coarsely sliced

Juice from 2 lemons

Salt and freshly ground pepper

Method

In a large pan with high sides, heat the olive oil and fry the beef cubes on medium to high heat until browned on all sides.

Pour in the wine and bring to boil. Reduce the heat, cover the pan and let simmer on the lowest temperature, until the wine has almost evaporated (20-30 min). Stir in occasionally to prevent sticking on the bottom.

Add 250ml water and continue to simmer on low heat for another hour or until the meat becomes so soft that breaks easily with a fork. Add more water if necessarily.

Have ready the mushrooms and carrots and when the water has reduced to one third and the meat has become soft, add the vegetables and cover the pan, allowing them to cook for no more than 15-20 minutes, so they

will retain their firmness.

Remove from the heat and add salt, pepper and lemon juice, stirring carefully or shaking slightly the pot so the lemon juice will distribute evenly.

Serve on a bed of boiled pasta or rice, or with fried potatoes.

Giouvetsi

Like the all-time-favourite [moussaka](#), this traditional comfort dish is one of those delicious Sunday lunch Greek casseroles that allows variations in ingredients and is usually adapted by each family to their own taste.

Giouvetsi comes from Turkish language “güveç” which is the name of a variety of earthenware pots, a kind of glazed terracotta vessels baked in the oven. If you don't have one, you can use a Pyrex or any other pot suitable for the oven.

This dish is usually cooked with veal but also lamb, pork or chicken can be used. It is cooked in a tomato sauce and various spices according to preferences, like allspice, cinnamon, cloves or bay leaves. After the meat is cooked, pasta (usually kritharaki or hilopites) is added and boiled in the hot sauce.

Preparation time: 15 mins

Cooking time: 90 mins

Servings: 4

Ingredients

½kg veal or beef cut in 4 cm cubes

30ml olive oil

1 medium onion, grated or finely chopped

1 clove garlic, crushed

1 cup dry red wine

1kg ripe fresh tomatoes, blended or 500 gr tomato juice

1 tbsp. tomato paste

400ml water

Salt and freshly ground pepper

1 cinnamon stick

1 bay leaf

1 tbsp. allspice

2 cups hot water (or more as needed)

500g medium or large kritharaki pasta (or orzo)

100g Graviera cheese, grated

Method

Heat the olive oil in a large pot on medium heat and sear the meat on all sides, until golden brown. Add the onion and garlic and fry for a few

minutes, until soft and translucent.

Add the wine and cook for a couple of minutes until the alcohol evaporates. Add salt, pepper, cinnamon stick, bay leaf, allspice, tomato paste, blended tomatoes and 2 cups of water.

Bring to a boil, cover the pot with the lid and simmer for 1 hour and 15 minutes, until the meat is tender and easily breaks with a fork.

Preheat the oven to 180C and transfer the cooked meat with the sauce into an oven proof dish. Discard the bay leaf and cinnamon stick and add the hot water.

Add the pasta and cook for about 20 minutes, stirring occasionally. Add more water if necessary.

Allow to rest for 10 minutes and serve while hot, with grated Graviere or other hard yellow cheese on top.

Cuttlefish with fennel and green olives

A recipe specific to the Western side of Crete, the cuttlefish with fennel is very popular during the lent period preceding Easter also because the wild fennel is growing abundantly from February to April and the fishing season for cuttlefish is about in the same time. The olives used in this recipe are green olives conserved in salted water and lemon juice – also because during winter months there are a lot of lemon trees bearing fruits. For this recipe you can use frozen cuttlefish and any non-salted, medium green olives you can find in your local market, preferably without the pits.

Preparation time: 10 mins

Cooking time: 45 mins

Servings: 4

Ingredients

1kg cuttlefish, cleaned

2 bunches of fennel, chopped

3 onions, chopped

250ml red wine

2-3 cloves garlic, crushed

200gr green olives, pitted and sliced

60ml olive oil

Salt and freshly ground pepper

Method

Remove the pits (if they have) and put the olives in a bowl filled with water to remove the extra salt.

If using frozen cuttlefish, thaw first, wash and pat dry. Cut in strips of approx. 2cm.

Heat the olive oil in a sauce pan on medium to high heat, add the onions and fry until soft and translucent. Add the garlic and the cuttlefish strips and continue to for 3-4 minutes, until brown. Add the wine and let simmer until alcohol evaporates.

Add 2 glasses of water, bring to boil then lower the heat and let simmer with a lid on for 30 minutes or until the water has almost evaporated. Stir in occasionally.

Add the fennel and the olives, season with salt and pepper and let the food simmer for another 10 minutes, until the cuttlefish becomes tender and the sauce thickens.

This dish is best served with a slice of feta or Graviera cheese, drizzled with olive oil and oregano.

Pan fried sole fish with peppers

The Greek name of sole is “glossa” meaning tongue, named after its distinctive flat shape and it’s a fish that is commonly found close to the shores of Crete and other Mediterranean islands. This is a quick dish that not only looks good but it tastes great also. Sole is a versatile fish that can be prepared in many ways and is loved by adults and children alike. It’s easy to cook, economic and healthy, being ideal for a light lunch or dinner next to a glass of chilled white wine. The sole is usually sold as frozen fillets in the frozen section of most supermarkets.

Preparation time: 10 mins

Cooking time: 20 mins

Serves: 4

Ingredients

4 sole fillets (approx. 200 g each)

2 bell peppers

2 spring onions, chopped

1 carrot, peeled

250ml dry white wine

30ml olive oil

2 tbs. fresh parsley, chopped

2 cm ginger root, finely grated

Salt and freshly ground pepper

Method

Dice the peppers and the carrot into small cubes.

In a non-stick frying pan heat the olive oil on medium high heat and fry the spring onions until soften and translucent.

Add the peppers and the carrot and continue to fry for 3-4 minutes or until the peppers become softer.

Place the sole fillets over the vegetables and add the ginger, parsley, salt and pepper. Carefully pour the wine on the sides and bring to simmer.

Lower the heat to minimum and cover with a lid, letting to simmer until the wine will evaporate, approx. 10 minutes.

When ready, transfer on a hot plate and serve immediately.

Seabass in the oven with herbs

Seabass was considered in Ancient Greece to be the smartest of all fish, as it was the most difficult to catch. Today, in modern Greece, it is so rare to catch one that the expression “I caught a seabass” literally means “I hit the jackpot”.

Easy to make, very healthy and low in calories, the Seabass (“lavraki” in Greek) stuffed with herbs and then cooked and served in parchment paper is a winning recipe for a light lunch or dinner, perfect on a hot summer day. Simply layer vegetables and fish on parchment paper, seal tightly and bake. These individual pouches can be made several hours in advance and refrigerated until ready to cook. The seabass is easy to find in the frozen section of most supermarkets, in the form of fillets or entire fish.

Preparation time: 15 mins

Cooking time: 45 mins

Servings: 4

Ingredients

4 seabass (about 300g each) or 1 kg fillets

2 tbsp. fresh parsley, finely chopped

1 tbsp. oregano

5 cloves garlic, sliced

2 tbsp. lemon juice

2 tbsp. olive oil

4 large tomatoes, sliced

sea salt

Method

If using whole fish, clean well and rinse. Pat dry with a paper towel and add some salt inside and outside.

In a bowl combine the parsley, oregano, garlic, lemon juice and olive oil and stuff the fish stomach cavities with it.

On individual pieces of parchment paper brush a bit of oil in the centre and line 2-3 slices of tomatoes. Place the fish over them and another 3 slices of tomato on top. Drizzle with lemon juice and olive oil and wrap each fish in paper, seam side down.

If using fillets, place on the parchment paper first tomato slices, then herbs, add on top the fillet and finish with another layer of herbs and tomatoes. Add lemon and olive oil on top and wrap the paper to seal the pouches.

Bake at 210C for about 45 minutes for the entire fish or 30 minutes for the fillets. Serve with rice and green salad.

Perch with mustard and lemon

In Ancient Greece, sardines and anchovies were regular fare for the citizens of Athens while eels, carp and sea-perch were considered to be great delicacies. Very low in fat but nutritious and tasty, the perch is a versatile fish that can be cooked in various ways due its mild taste and compact fillet texture. Nowadays, sea-perch can be found frozen as fillets in the frozen section of any supermarket and it is fairly inexpensive. Fresh perch has moist, translucent, deep-pink flesh with no fishy odour. Cooked, the lean meat is white, with a mild, sweet flavour and firm but flaky texture. It combines well with various spices and sauces.

Preparation time: 10 mins

Cooking time: 30 mins

Servings: 4

Ingredients

4 medium perch fillets (thawed)

juice and zest from 1 lemon

3 tbsp. olive oil

2 tbsp. mustard

100ml dry white wine

1 tbsp. dry oregano

Salt and freshly ground pepper

Fresh parsley, chopped

Method

After thawing, wash the fillets carefully and pat dry with a paper towel.

Pour half of the lemon juice on them and season with salt and pepper.

In a bowl, mix the mustard with olive oil, add the lemon zest and the remaining lemon juice, wine and oregano.

Coat each fillet well in the mixture and lay them on an oven tray lined with parchment paper.

Pour the remaining mixture on top of the fillets and bake at 180C for about 30 minutes.

Serve with freshly chopped parsley on top.

Risotto with shrimps – garidopilafo

If you think of something delicious, light, fast and with the scent of sea, this particular dish is the answer. “Garida” means shrimp and “pilafi” is rice cooked in a seasoned broth. The term “pilafi” comes from the Turkish “pilav” which in turn comes from Persian “polow”, Hindi “pulao” and Sanskrit “pulaka” meaning a ball of rice.

This dish is prepared often during lent periods but it’s equally popular any time of the year. It is a filling comfort food but because shrimp is seafood that incurs an increase in cholesterol and allergic reactions, it has to be consumed with care. It is also considered a “dish of the poor” because it needs small, inexpensive shrimps. Use frozen shrimps as they are already deveined.

Preparation time: 10 mins

Cooking time: 40 mins

Servings: 4

Ingredients

700g prawns, frozen

2 tbsp. olive oil

1 tbsp. dill, parsley and spearmint, finely chopped

3 spring onions, finely chopped

3 cups basmati rice

6 cups boiled water

Salt and freshly ground pepper

Method

Use a large pot to bring the water to boil, add the shrimps and cook for 3 minutes. Remove the shrimps with a straining ladle and place them in a separate bowl. Do not throw away the water from the pot.

In a non-stick saucepan, heat the olive oil and fry the onion for 2-3 minutes, until soft and translucent. Remove from the heat and set aside.

Peel the shrimps and remove their heads, then place the shells back into the large pot where they have been boiling. Reserve the shrimps in a separate bowl.

Simmer the shells for 20 minutes over a low flame. All the flavours and juices of the shrimps will be released into the water to obtain a delicious

stock to cook the rice in!

Strain the stock from the shells and measure 6 cups of liquid to boil the rice in. In a separate pan add the rice and stock and simmer for 12 minutes, stirring frequently.

Add the fried onions, chopped herbs and prawns. Cook for 5 more minutes, turn off the heat and cover with a lid.

Season with salt and pepper and serve hot, with lemon wedges aside.

Octopus with pasta

The name “octopus” comes from the Ancient Greek “okto” meaning eight and “pous” meaning foot, and has been perpetuated in Latin as “octopus”, which we use even today. The octopus was known to Minoans since the Bronze Age, as depicted on some clay vases discovered in Knossos and was also known in ancient Greece, being mentioned by Aristotle in his *Historia animalium*.

The Greeks love octopus and cook it in many ways. The most popular is drying in the sun and grilling - see Grilled octopus, but other slow cooked recipes are equally delicious.

Traditional octopus processing often involved beating or pounding the flesh to damage and tenderize its fibres. Freezing does the same thing and is already clean, saving you a lot of time in the kitchen.

Preparation time: 20 mins

Cooking time: 70 mins

Servings: 4

Ingredients

400g short pasta of your choice

750g octopus

200ml dry red wine

50ml olive oil

1 big onion, chopped

2 cloves garlic, crushed

250g fresh or canned tomatoes, chopped

2 tbsp. chopped parsley

salt and freshly ground pepper

pinch of cinnamon (optional)

Method

Thaw and wash the octopus; if it is large, cut it into several pieces to make the process of braising faster. Put it in an empty saucepan on high heat and let it release its liquids for about 10 minutes. Add the wine, lower the heat to medium and let it braise for 40 minutes.

Scoop out from the pot and cut into bite-size pieces. Reserve the liquid where it has been braising, you will need 1-2 cups.

In a non-stick pot, heat the olive oil and fry the onion until soft and translucent. Add the octopus and fry for 3 minutes. Remove the octopus and put it on a hot plate. In the remaining oil add the garlic, tomatoes, parsley, salt and pepper and the cinnamon, if using. Let simmer for 10 minutes, until the sauce has thickened.

Measure the pasta with a cup and follow the ratio 2 cups of reserved liquid to 1 cup of pasta. Add them to the pot and, on medium-high heat, let the pasta boil (check the recommended minutes on the package but taste before removing from heat). Half way through cooking the pasta, add the octopus back into the pot. If necessarily, add more liquid or hot water to keep enough liquid for the pasta to boil.

Serve hot with green salad and a glass of chilled white wine aside.

Lobster with pasta – astakomakaronada

The king of the seafood chain, the precious lobster is considered a delicacy all over Greece and this classic summer recipe that represents Greek nouveau cuisine will successfully deliver all the Mediterranean aromas in your plate. The lobsters that are found in the Aegean Sea are much different than the ones in North America; they lack claws and have meat also in their antennae. They fabulously combine with any type of fresh pasta but the most commonly they are cooked with spaghetti. The lobster pasta sauce is usually made of garlic, onions and fresh tomatoes with the magic addition of a splash of wine or ouzo. For this recipe you can use any type of lobster you find in your local market (lobsters must always be alive when you buy them).

Preparation time: 10 mins

Cooking time: 35 mins

Servings: 4

Ingredients

1 lobster (approx. 1 kg) or 2 smaller (approx. 0.5 kg each)

500g spaghetti or any other similar pasta

50ml olive oil

1 medium onion, chopped

3 cloves garlic, crushed

1 tsp. red pepper flakes

400g fresh tomatoes, chopped

100ml ouzo or 250ml dry white wine

Salt and freshly ground pepper

3 cups fish or lobster stock

3 tbsp. fresh parsley, chopped

Method

If you've never boiled a lobster at home, the instructions below will guide you through the process step by step:

Fill a large pot with salted water (sea water if possible or add enough salt into tap water). Bring to boil and put the live lobsters into the pot (leave the bands on the claws, if they have).

The best way to quickly kill your lobsters is to put them in the water

upside down and head first. They will be disoriented that way and will die without thrashing about.

It is not recommended to kill the lobsters before immersing them in hot water; cutting their shells releases a lot of coagulated proteins into the boiling water and can ruin the bright red roe which is delicious.

Once the lobsters are in the pot, cover with the lid and wait for the water to return to a boil. Count 15 or 20 minutes, depending on their size. A small 500g lobster takes 15 minutes to cook.

Remove the cooked lobsters and place them on a plate to cool and drain. When cold enough to handle, cut the lobster in half, scoop out the meat and cut it in bite size pieces.

In a large non-stick skillet heat the olive oil and fry the onion until soft and translucent. Add the garlic and the red pepper flakes, stirring continuously. Add the lobster pieces and cook for another 2 minutes.

Pour the tomatoes, ouzo (or white wine) and let simmer for 10 minutes on low heat.

Boil the pasta in the same water where lobster has been boiling, two minutes less than the time recommended on the package. Strain it and add it to the simmering sauce, stirring it constantly to coat evenly.

Transfer the pasta on a large serving dish, add the remaining parts of the lobster (legs, claws, antennae) on the sides and serve with freshly chopped parsley on top. This dish pairs well with chilled dry white or sparkling wine.

SOUPS

Kakavia soup

The name of this soup comes from the term “kakavi”, a large cooking pot used by ancient fishermen to boil their fish soups. The kakavia soup used to be made only once a year, on 6th of December, on Saint Nicholas day. He is the patron of sailors, fishermen, ships and sailing. In centuries of Greek folklore, Nicholas was seen as “The Lord of the Sea”, often described by Modern Greek scholars as a kind of Christianized version of Poseidon.

Considered nowadays a true delicacy, this was initially a poor fisherman’s soup made with any leftover fish that the fishermen could not sell, usually smaller or of lesser quality. Because the sailors were mostly out at the sea, their “bread” was barley rusk so this soup was made with sea water and consumed with traditional barley rusk.

Kakavia is similar to other types of Mediterranean fish stew, such as the French bouillabaisse, Italian cacciucco, Spanish zarzuela, and Portuguese caldeirada.

Preparation time: 30 mins

Cooking time: 30 mins

Servings: 4

Ingredients

1kg mixed fish (grouper, scorpion, snapper, cod, halibut, bass, trout)

1L water

125ml olive oil

1 small tomato

1 onion

1 stick of celery

1kg potatoes

125ml lemon juice

Salt and freshly ground pepper

Method

Peel the potatoes and halve them. Leave the tomato and the onion whole. Wash and drain the fish pieces.

In a high stock pot, layer the potatoes and other vegetables on the bottom and add the fish on top. Pour in the water and oil and bring to boil at very high heat.

The secret of this recipe is to use a gas flame (not electric) capable to increase the temperature rapidly as to emulsify the oil and fat from the fish into the water.

Cover with a lid and boil at the same high heat for 30 minutes.

When the time is off, add the lemon juice and turn off the heat.

Scoop the pieces of fish and vegetables out of the soup with a slotted spoon and arrange them on a serving tray.

Place in the middle of the table so everyone can serve themselves.

The kakavia soup must be served immediately and it's best together with barley rusk, like the fishermen used to and still do today.

Chickpeas soup with cod

This is a traditional soup that comes from the Rethymnon area, in central Crete. The chickpea is the world's second most widely grown legume after the soybean, and one of the firsts founder crops of the origins of agriculture on our planet. In ancient Greece, the austerity of everyday life was considered a great virtue and frugal diet based on olive oil, wheat, pulses and wine was the key for healthy living. In the same time, even if most fish was considered a luxury, anchovies and cod ("bakaliaros" in Greek) were quite common and affordable. Chickpeas are still a favourite dish nowadays, frequently cooked in the Cretan households, especially during colder months.

Preparation time: 10 mins plus soaking overnight

Cooking time: 60 mins

Servings: 4

Ingredients

400g cod fillet, cut into strips

250g chickpeas

1 medium onion, chopped

250g tomatoes, peeled and sliced (or canned tomatoes)

50ml olive oil

juice from 1 lemon

1 tbsp. fresh parsley, chopped

salt and freshly ground pepper

Method

Put the soaked chickpeas in a pot and cover well with water. Add 1 teaspoon of salt and bring to boil. Lower the heat and simmer for 50 minutes, skimming the froth off the surface with a slotted spoon.

In a frying pan, heat the olive oil and fry the onions until soft and translucent. Add the tomatoes and cook for another 3 minutes. Pour the mixture in the pot with the chickpeas and season with salt and pepper to taste. Add the cod fillet strips and continue to simmer for another 30 minutes, until the chickpeas have become soft. Add the lemon juice at the end.

Serve in individual bowls, sprinkled with pepper and parsley and

breadsticks aside.

Green peas soup

Pea soup has been eaten since antiquity, it is mentioned in Aristophanes' "The Birds" and according to one source "the Greeks and Romans were cultivating this legume about 500 to 400 BC. During that era, vendors in the streets of Athens were selling hot pea soup". In fact, by necessity the Greeks and the Byzantines relied a lot on "outgoing" menus, meaning all kinds of food, especially pies and thick soups were prepared and sold on streets and squares. That's because chimneys did not exist until the very late in the 12th Century. Besides, cooking inside the house posed a fire hazard and for that the ancients either built their stoves and ovens outside the house, or in urban centres, they had the option of consuming goods prepared by local vendors.

This vibrantly coloured soup is very easy to make and it's an excellent starter dish for a cold, rainy day. It is usually paired with cheese or garlic rusks and apaki (Cretan smoked and salted lean pork).

Preparation time: 5 mins

Cooking time: 25 mins

Servings: 4

Ingredients

400g frozen green peas

1 medium onion, chopped

1 medium potato, chopped

50ml olive oil

100ml milk

salt and freshly ground pepper

2 tbsp. fresh parsley, chopped

Method

In a medium saucepan heat the olive oil on medium heat and fry the onion until tender and translucent. Add the green peas, the potato and 250ml of hot water and let simmer on low heat for 20 minutes, stirring occasionally.

Remove from heat and allow the mixture to cool down. Pour the mixture into the blender and mix until smooth.

Transfer the mixture into a deep non-stick pan and add the milk, salt and

pepper and 750ml hot water. Bring to boil and let simmer on medium heat for another 5 minutes, stirring in occasionally.

Sprinkle with freshly chopped parsley and serve warm, with yoghurt on top and garlic bread.

Cretan pepper soup

Sweet, spicy and refreshing, this vegetarian soup is an exclusively summer dish, when the Florina peppers (the Greek equivalent of Romano peppers) are fully ripe and the hot days call for light food. The Greek Florina peppers have been cultivated first by the Macedonian Greeks in Florina (hence their name) and have been introduced in the Cretan cuisine sometime after the 18th century. They are used for their deep red colour, thick texture and sweet-spicy taste in dishes like [tirokafteri](#), [Romano peppers stuffed with goat cheese](#) or [imam bayildi](#).

Preparation time: 10 mins

Cooking time: 25 mins

Servings: 4

Ingredients

4 Romano peppers, chopped

4 medium tomatoes, peeled and chopped

1 medium onion, chopped

1 tsp. chilli paste

3 tbsp. all-purpose flour

4 tbsp. Greek yoghurt

1L water

50ml olive oil

Salt and freshly ground pepper

1 tsp. fresh mint, chopped

Method

In a sauce pan heat the olive oil on medium heat and fry the onion and peppers until soft. Add the tomatoes and chilli paste and, stirring gently on low heat, simmer for 5 minutes. Add the flour and continue to stir until it becomes a homogenous cream.

Pour the water slowly and in small doses while stirring continuously. Simmer for 15 minutes on low heat.

In a bowl, add the yoghurt and start to add gradually 1 spoonful of soup, mixing it in. Like in the case of avgolemono, it is important to equalize the temperatures (cold yoghurt with hot soup). Add at least 20 spoons of soup into the yoghurt until you have a warm mixture. Remove from the

heat and pour the yoghurt mix back into the soup, stirring continuously so it doesn't curdle. Season with salt and pepper to taste.

Serve at room temperature with dash of freshly chopped mint and toasted bread or croutons.

Fish soup

Very popular in the coastal fishing villages along the island, this fish soup is usually consumed during winter months and it is light, delicious and very simple. It can be made with any kind of fish (code, bluefish, grey mullet, white grouper, dentex, scorpion fish) or a mixture of them. There are two tips that you have to consider if you want your soup to go from very good to simply divine: the fish you choose needs to be as fresh as possible and the olive oil to be of very good quality. This soup is usually served with traditional Cretan barley rusk but if you can't find in your local market, croutons go as well.

Preparation time: 15 mins

Cooking time: 30 mins

Servings: 4

Ingredients

1 large fish (approx. 1 kg), cleaned

2 large potatoes, peeled and cut in quarters

1 large onion, cut in quarters

200g small courgettes

200g fresh or canned tomatoes

2 bay leaves

2 celery sticks, coarsely chopped

Juice from 2 lemons

100ml olive oil

Sea salt and freshly ground pepper

Method

Cut the fish in large pieces or, if using small fish, leave them whole. If using fresh tomatoes peel them and remove the seeds before cutting them in small cubes. If the courgettes are small, leave them whole, otherwise cut in halves lengthwise.

In a 4L pot arrange most of the vegetables on the bottom and place the fish on top. Cover with the rest of the vegetables, add a pinch of salt and pepper and fill with water enough only to cover the ingredients (approx. 2 – 2 1/2L).

Place the pot on a medium heat and bring to boil. In a small bowl mix the

olive oil with the lemon juice until creamy. When the water starts boiling, pour the mixture into the pot. Lower the fire, cover and let boil for 25 minutes. Adjust the salt and lemon to your taste and let boil for another 5 minutes. Remove from heat.

Carefully scoop out the vegetables and the fish pieces and arrange them on a serving tray. Strain the soup and put in a blender a few vegetables and one piece of fish together with a cup of soup. Pulse until you obtain a creamy texture then pour it back in the soup and stir well.

Serve the soup hot, together with the vegetables and fish. Make sure you have extra lemon juice and pepper on the table and barley rusks or breadsticks.

Bean soup - fasolada

Very nourishing, packed with protein, fibre and iron, the Greek bean soup known as “fasolada” is the national food of the Greeks. That’s right, not moussaka, not souvlaki, nor tzatziki but the plain old bean soup that nourished generations and is present on every family table at least once a week. It may be related to the Ancient Greek dish of broad beans, vegetables, and grains, with no meat, which was used as food and sacrifice to Greek God Apollo during the Pyanopsia festival. Variations of the bean soups can be found in the traditional cuisines of Turkey, Arabian countries and all over Balkans and it is generally a lent dish enriched with olive oil.

Preparation time: 10 mins plus soaking overnight

Cooking time: 65 mins

Servings: 4

Ingredients

400g dry white beans

3 medium carrots, sliced

1 large onion, finely chopped

3 stalks of celery, finely chopped

50ml olive oil

2 tbsp. tomato puree

pinch of paprika (hot or sweet)

salt and freshly ground pepper

fresh parsley for serving

Method

It is important to select the right beans for this recipe, look for freshly dried beans that are white, with a smooth shiny skin outside. Soak them overnight, in a bowl with plenty of water and salt or soda to help with digestion. Discard this water prior to cooking.

Boil the beans in water for 30 minutes until they soften a little. Drain, reserve one cup of water and set the beans aside.

In a large saucepan, heat the olive oil and fry the onion for 2 minutes. Add the celery and carrots and continue to fry for another 2 minutes. At the end, add the tomato paste and stir well to distribute evenly.

Pour the beans in the pan and add gradually some of the reserved water until they are just covered. Stir lightly and bring to boil, keeping a lid on. Simmer for about 30-35 minutes, until the beans become soft. Pour the remaining olive oil, stirring in gently. Season with salt and pepper and boil for another 5 minutes until the soup thickens.

Serve with slices of red onion, olives and crusty bread.

Chicken soup avgolemono

A trademark dish that has nourished generations, the chicken soup avgolemono is perhaps the most iconic of all Greek soups that one can find on the menu at every Greek restaurant or diner but also as a first course for Christmas or other Greek holiday celebrations.

With only three basic ingredients, it is simple, easy yet unique in taste. With a creamy texture achieved through the avgolemono sauce, this soup is a classic delicacy where the chicken is boiled until tender and rice or orzo is added for more consistency.

Preparation time: 10 mins

Cooking time: 75 mins

Servings: 4

Ingredients

1kg chicken, cut into pieces

1,5L water

2 carrots, peeled and halved

2 celery stalks, halved

1 large onion, quartered

2 bay leaves

120g orzo or rice

salt and freshly ground pepper

Method

Wash the chicken pieces and place them on the bottom of a soup saucepan. Add the carrots, celery, onion and bay leaves then pour enough water to slightly cover the ingredients.

Bring to boil and let simmer on low heat for 1 hour. Use a slotted spoon to collect the foam that sometimes surface of the water. The meat is boiled if it can be easily separated from the bones.

Remove the meat and vegetables to a warm plate and strain the broth. Return it into the saucepan and bring again to boil. Pour the orzo or rice slowly, stirring continuously and continue to boil on low heat for another 10 minutes.

In the meantime, prepare the [avgolemono sauce](#) by following the instructions at the beginning of this book. Remove from heat and let the

soup rest for 10 minutes before adding the sauce. Taste for salt and pepper.

Serve warm with chicken and vegetables on top and sprinkled with freshly ground pepper.

Onion soup

Also called “monk” soup, this dish is popular in the monasteries throughout Greece because it uses simple, humble ingredients. The monks in the Greek monasteries are among the healthiest people on earth because they base their diet on Mediterranean ingredients and follow a strict weekly plan: three days fasting with vegetables only and without meat or animal produce, three days moderate meals only with white meats and fish and one day feasting, with any food allowed. Unlike its sister, the French onion soup, this Greek “kremidosoupa” (“kremidi” in Greek means onion), uses only olive oil as fat (no butter) making it a healthier version, suitable for fasting periods.

Preparation time: 5 mins

Cooking time: 70 mins

Servings: 4

Ingredients

50ml olive oil

3 large onions, cut into quarters and thinly sliced

1L water

salt and freshly ground pepper

barley rusk or whole grain bread croutons

1 tbsp. fresh parsley, chopped

Method

In a medium saucepan heat the olive oil on low heat and fry the onions for 10 minutes, stirring in occasionally so they won't stick or caramelize. Sprinkle with 2 tablespoon of water and stir.

Cover with a lid and let simmer for 40 minutes, stirring in occasionally and making sure they have enough liquid to simmer. If needed, add a few more tablespoons of water.

When time is up, add 1L of water, salt and pepper and bring to boil. Let simmer for another 20 minutes on low heat.

This soup is served by adding barley rusk or bread croutons in soup bowls and covering them with liquid in equal amounts. Garnish with lots of freshly chopped parsley and serve hot.

Tomato soup with bulgur wheat

A very hearty dish, this soup is the perfect combination of summer and winter textures, with the flavours of tomatoes ripe under the Mediterranean sun combined with the hearty and filling bulgur wheat, so much appreciated during colder months. The bulgur wheat originates in Middle Eastern cuisine and is a cereal food made from the parboiled groats of several different wheat species, most often from durum wheat. The name comes from the Turkish “bulgur” which traces back to the Arabic “burghul” and the cereal is extensively used in the Mediterranean dishes, being a healthier option than rice or wheat. It is often confused with cracked wheat but the difference is that bulgur has been partially cooked.

Preparation time: 10 mins

Cooking time: 50 mins

Servings: 4

Ingredients

3 medium tomatoes, grated

200g coarse bulgur

1 large onion, chopped

2L water

50ml olive oil

salt and freshly ground pepper

4 tbsp. Greek yogurt

1 tsp. fresh mint, chopped

Method

In a sauce pan, heat the olive oil and fry the onions until soft and translucent. Add the grated tomatoes and simmer for 5 minutes.

Add the bulgur wheat and the water and bring to boil. Reduce the heat and allow simmering for 45 minutes, until the soup thickens and the bulgur has become soft. Add salt and pepper to taste.

Serve warm in individual bowls, with a spoonful of yogurt in the middle and sprinkled with chopped mint.

Meatball soup - giouvarlakia

A classic Greek delicacy, “giouvarlakia” (or sometimes spelled “youvarlakia”) comes from the Turkish word “yuvarlak” which means spherical, referring to the shape of the meatballs that are the centre piece of this hearty, wintery soup.

Although it is easy to prepare, like most of the Greek dishes, what makes this giouvarlakia soup exquisite is the avgolemono sauce. The meatballs combined with rice boiled until tender and creamy texture of the egg and lemon sauce make it an excellent comfort dish to be enjoyed on a cold, rainy day.

Preparation time: 30 mins plus 30 mins chilling

Cooking time: 30 mins

Servings: 4

Ingredients

500g lean minced beef

100g long-grain rice

2 tbsp. fresh parsley, finely chopped

1 medium sized onion, chopped

1 egg

2 tbsp. olive oil

½ carrot, grated (optional)

2 tbsp. fresh dill, finely chopped (optional)

pinch of coriander

salt and freshly ground pepper

freshly parsley, chopped, for serving

Method

In a large bowl, mix all the ingredients, kneading until becomes a smooth paste. Cover with transparent foil and let it rest for 30 minutes in the refrigerator (this will help the meatballs to maintain their shape when boiled).

Form the meatballs with your hands by taking with a teaspoon a small amount from the mixture and roll between palms until they forms into small balls. Put them on a tray next to the other, in a single layer.

In a soup pot bring to boil 1L water. After it starts boiling, turn the heat

down and with a slotted spoon gently lower the meatballs into the water, few at a time. Once all the meatballs are inside, the water should be enough to only cover them. Add more if needed and, with the lid on, let boil for 25 minutes.

Prepare the [avgolemono sauce](#) according to the instructions at the beginning of this book. Remove the pot from the heat and stir the sauce into the meatballs soup, shaking the pot to distribute evenly. Do not cover with a lid before it has cool down, otherwise the egg can still curdle.

Serve this deliciously warming Greek meatball soup while still hot, with a sprinkle of chopped parsley on top and toasted bread aside.

Beef soup

For those few cold, rainy and windy days of Cretan winter, when locals halt their work and linger indoors, this hearty veal soup is a favourite lunch dish. Filling and comforting, it is usually enjoyed next to a burning fireplace. As bad winter weather is rare in Crete, this soup doesn't get a chance of being prepared often, making it even more appreciated and sought after on cold days.

Preparation time: 10 mins

Cooking time: 75 mins

Servings: 4

Ingredients

600gr beef, cut in 3-4cm cubes

400g canned tomatoes

4 celery sticks

1 onion, whole

2 carrots

50 ml olive oil

100g orzo

salt and freshly ground pepper

Method

In a medium saucepan, heat the oil and gently fry the meat cubes until golden brown on all sides. Stir often to avoid sticking to the bottom.

Pour 2L water and bring to boil. Reduce the heat and let simmer for 40 minutes, occasionally collecting with a slotted spoon the foam that forms on the surface.

Add the vegetables and continue to boil for another 20 minutes, until the meat is soft and easily breaks with a fork. At the end, add the orzo and boil for another 10 minutes, until it softens. Season with salt and pepper to taste.

Serve hot, with a dash of lemon juice on top and toasted bread aside.

Tripe soup - patsas

A common dish in Balkan, Macedonian, Bulgarian, Greek, Turkish, and Eastern European cuisine, the tripe soup is widely considered to be a hangover remedy. The Greek version is called “patsas” and includes calf feet with the tripe. Originally lamb feet and tripe was used. It is commonly served in specialized taverns where the dish is cooked overnight and is ready to serve people returning home after dinner or clubbing, at early hours in the morning.

In Ancient Sparta this soup was the ideal meal for warfare – rich in calories but light enough so it didn’t weigh the warriors in battle. During the Ottoman period it became even more popular with the arrival of the refugees from Asia Minor in 1922; it was the working man’s breakfast for the same reasons the Spartans liked it – nourishing and light.

Preparation time: 10 mins

Cooking time: 3 hours

Servings: 4-6

Ingredients

500gr veal tripe

500gr veal leg (cut in 3-4 pieces)

juice from 2 lemons

salt and freshly ground pepper

1 tbsp. chilli pepper

4 cloves garlic, crushed

2 tbs. vinegar

Method

Make sure you ask your butcher to cut the leg in 3-4 pieces so it can easily fit into the pot.

Wash the meat and place it into the pot.

Cut the tripe into small cubes (2-3cm) and add it to the pot then cover with water and bring to boil.

After 15 minutes, remove from the heat and throw away the water.

Place the meat in a bowl and thoroughly clean the pot.

Add fresh water and place back the meat into the pot.

Throwing the first boiling water is for removing the unpleasant smells and toxins from the meat.

Bring back to boil and let simmer covered, on medium heat, for two hours.

When the time is up, take out one piece of leg and try to remove the meat from the bone. It is supposed to come out easily.

Put the meat without the bone back inside the pot and add the salt, pepper, lemon juice and chilli pepper.

In a small bowl mix the crushed garlic with vinegar and add it to the pot.

Continue to boil for another hour; the soup is ready if the tripe has become soft and easy to bite.

This soup is served with crushed chilli pepper on the table, to be seasoned according to each one's preferences.

DESSERTS

Greek yoghurt with honey and nuts

One of the best and simplest desserts of the Greek cuisine, the yoghurt with honey and walnuts is a traditional honeymoon food in Greece, being considered an aphrodisiac. It is such a simple combination that we can barely call it a recipe. It is a no-bake treat that Greeks enjoy at any time of the day, be it a delicious breakfast, an afternoon snack or a refreshing dessert after a hearty meal. The most important tip for this simple dessert stays in the quality of the ingredients. Use good quality, authentic Greek strained yoghurt, organic thyme honey and fresh walnuts and, if you want a lighter version, look for the low fat Greek yoghurt.

Preparation time: 5 mins

Servings: 4

Ingredients

500g Greek yogurt (full or low fat)

100g fresh walnuts

4 tbsp. thyme honey

Method

In a pan on low heat, toast the walnuts for 2-3 minutes, until they get a nice golden colour. Transfer on a plate to cool down.

Use four short and wide glasses and divide the yoghurt equally among them.

With a teaspoon, arrange the top to be roughly uneven.

Add a generous tablespoon of honey on top of each and add the roasted walnuts on top.

Serve immediately or store in the fridge for few hours before serving.

Kalitsounia with goat cheese and honey

A special Cretan dish, the kalitsounia is the quick and easy way out for a dessert or afternoon snack that any Cretan housewife is supposed to know how to do. It uses phyllo pastry and mizithra goat cheese plus fresh mint, ingredients that are never missing from any respectable Cretan household. Because they use ready phyllo dough and are fried, not baked, these kalitsounia are ready in no time, once you get the hand of folding them in the wonderful triangle shape. Follow the scheme below and you will master the technique in no time, making Cretan kalitsounia like the locals do.

Preparation time: 15 mins

Cooking time: 15 mins

Servings: 4

Ingredients

120g phyllo pastry

200g mizithra cheese (or ricotta)

5-6 mint leaves, thinly chopped

40ml olive oil

honey for serving

Method

See the instructions of [how to handle phyllo pastry](#) at the beginning of this book.

If using frozen phyllo pastry, thaw and lay 2-3 sheets on a baking pan lined with parchment paper.

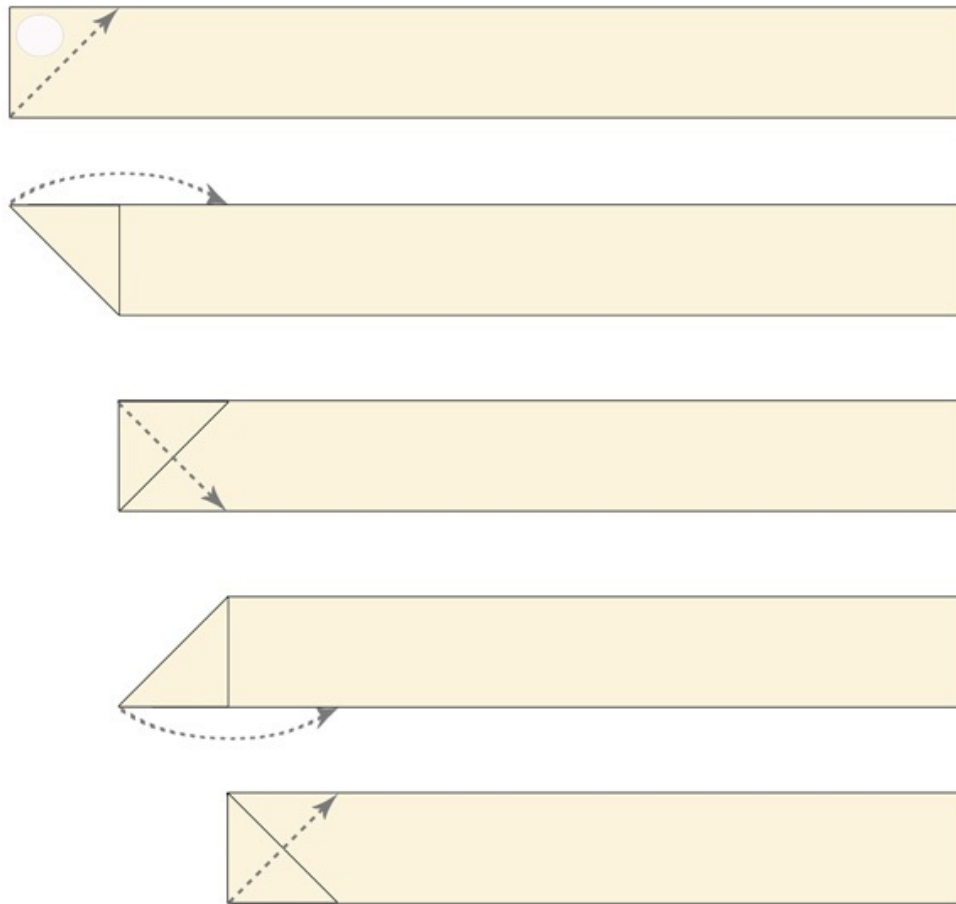
In a bowl, mix the goat cheese with mint leaves and using a fork, work it to avoid getting lumpy.

Take one phyllo sheet and cut it longitudinally, in pieces of about 10-12 cm height. It has to divide into 4 or 5 strips, depending on the brand of phyllo you are using.

Gently brush a little olive oil on each strip (they will be fried anyway but oil at this phase will help closing the cheese inside the triangles).

Add a tablespoon of cheese mixture in the upper corner at the beginning of the strip. Start lifting the corners to form the triangle, following the

steps in the scheme below.



Keep repeating the steps until the triangle is shaped and the cheese is well sealed inside. Each triangle needs about 6-7 folding steps.

Once folded, lay the triangle on a flat surface preferably lined with parchment paper, until ready to be fried. Do not stack the triangles before frying.

Continue with next triangle until you finish the cheese filling. You should be getting 10-12 kalitsounia ready to fry.

Heat the olive oil in a frying pan on medium to high heat. Add the kalitsounia one by one in the oil, with plenty of space around and fry quickly on each side, until they get a nice golden colour.

Serve hot, with honey aside.

Semolina halva with orange

A dessert with roots in Indian and Persian cuisine, the semolina pudding halva is widely spread in Balkans and very popular during fasting periods because it doesn't include eggs or dairy products. In fact, it is often the subject of fights between Greek Macedonians and their Northern neighbours who share the same name. It is non-expensive, very easy to make and wonderfully refreshing after a sumptuous meal. Most of the restaurants in and around Chania offer complimentary desserts to their guests and halva is often among them. Traditional semolina halva is made only with sugar and water but the combination with the orange juice turns it into a colourful, sweet and sour, delicious dessert.

Preparation time: 5 mins

Cooking time: 10 mins

Servings: 4

Ingredients

500g coarse semolina

200ml vegetable oil

For the syrup:

250g sugar

1L water

1 cinnamon stick

2 cloves

zest from 2 oranges

juice from 2 oranges

Method

In a pan on medium-low heat, pour the vegetable oil and the semolina and gently fry until golden. Stir constantly so it doesn't burn.

In a separate pot, place all the ingredients for the syrup and, on medium to high heat, bring to boil. Lower the heat and let simmer for 5 minutes. Remove the cinnamon stick and the cloves then slowly pour the fried semolina into the syrup and continue to stir so it doesn't get lumpy.

When it starts to thicken (after 4-5 minutes) remove from heat and transfer into a cake mould or Pyrex dish to cool.

This semolina halva can be stored in the fridge for several days. Cut in

squares and serve with a slice of orange on top.

Juicy chocolate cake – zoumero

Originating in Chania at the famous Koukouvaya café, this rich, decadent chocolate dessert has become a staple in most of the locals' homes and restaurants. "Zoumero" means juicy in Greek and considering that most of the traditional desserts are on the syrupy side, this cake brings the custom one step further with its strong chocolate flavour. Extremely easy-to-make and with the chocolate syrup that remains fluid even when the cake is cold, this delicious dessert is usually served with a scoop of vanilla ice cream on top.

Preparation time: 15 mins

Cooking time: 60 mins

Servings: 6-8

Ingredients

For the syrup:

1L milk

400g sugar

250g butter

8 tablespoons of cocoa

For the dough:

600g self-rising flour

1 tbsp. baking powder

4 eggs

2 tsp. vanilla extract

4 tbsp. cocoa powder

Method

Start with preparing the syrup. In a saucepan, combine the sugar with cocoa, milk and butter. On medium heat bring to boil and whisking continuously simmer for 5 minutes until thick. Set aside and let cool. Pour one glass (250 ml) of syrup separately.

To prepare the dough, combine the flour with baking powder and cocoa, add the eggs and vanilla extract and mix well. Add the glass of syrup reserved and whisk to homogenize the dough.

Preheat the oven at 200C. Pour the mixture in a buttered baking pan, shaking slightly to even out. Bake for 30 minutes or until the dough is

thoroughly cooked (check by poking the middle of the cake with a toothpick, if it comes out clean, the cake is ready).

Remove from the oven and while hot, pour the cold syrup slowly over the entire surface of the cake. Let it absorb and cool down for at least 1 hour before serving.

Baklava

The oldest records of Baklava date back to 1473, from a notebook of the Topkapi Palace kitchens where apparently was regularly baked. Till the 19th century it was considered a luxury that only the rich people could afford. The modern day baklava went through a number of transitions as the history of the area kept on changing but we should not forget that Middle East, Eastern Mediterranean, Balkans, Caucasia, Turks, Arabs, Jews, Greeks, Armenians, Bulgarians of today who include baklava into their national cuisines were all part of the Ottoman empire once.

The Greek sailors and merchants who were traveling to Mesopotamia were fascinated with the taste of Baklava and so, they brought the recipe to Athens. The Greeks' major contribution to the development of this pastry is the creation of a dough technique that made it possible to roll it as thin as a leaf, compared to the rough, bread-like texture of the Turkish dough. In fact, the name "phyllo" was coined by Greeks, which means "leaf" in Greek.

Preparation time: 20 mins

Cooking time: 90 mins

Servings: 16

Ingredients

For the baklava:

1 pack of phyllo dough (450 g, about 40 sheets)

500g walnuts, chopped (or a mix of walnuts, pistachios, almonds)

2 tsp. cinnamon powder

2 tsp. ground cloves

150g butter, melted

For the syrup:

300g sugar

400g water

80g honey

zest from 1 lemon

1 cinnamon stick

Method

Please see the instructions on [how to handle phyllo pastry](#) at the beginning of this book.

Chop the walnuts and other nuts (if using a mix) into small pieces or pulse them a few times only to be coarsely grounded. Mix in the cinnamon and grounded clove.

For a flavourful baklava, use good quality fresh butter. Start by melting it in a saucepan over low heat, being careful not to burn it.

In a baking pan, brush some butter on the bottom and start layering sheets of dough, one at a time, brushing each with a bit of butter. Use 15 sheets for the bottom side.

Add the mixed nuts and spread them evenly. Layer again with phyllo sheets on top of the filling, one sheet at a time, brushed with butter. Do so for another 15 sheets.

Place the baking pan in the fridge for 15 minutes. Preheat the oven at 150C. Remove the pan from the fridge and cut portions, all the way down to the bottom.

Bake for 90 minutes until the phyllo layers are crisp and golden and the lower layers are thoroughly baked through. To test this, use a knife to lift up a corner of one of the pastry rectangles from the centre of the pan so you can peek at the bottom layers. If the top starts to get too brown before the pastry is cooked through, lay a piece of aluminium foil over the top.

While the baklava is in the oven, prepare the syrup. Add all the ingredients into a saucepan and bring to boil. Let simmer for 5 minutes, until the sugar is dissolved. Let cool down to room temperature. See the guide on how to use syrups for desserts at the beginning of this book.

As soon as the baklava is ready, start by pouring with a ladle the syrup, really slow, so that it is absorbed evenly. Wait for the baklava to cool down completely before serving.

Kataifi

Alongside the [baklava](#), this dessert exists in the traditional cuisines of Greek, Turkish, Middle Eastern and some Arabic nations since the Ottoman Empire. It is made with special pastry dough that is in the form of thin thread-like strands that resembles “shredded wheat” or vermicelli noodles. When using kataifi the same rules of phyllo dough apply – needs to be well thawed, then worked quickly and kept moist while handling. Like its sister the baklava, this wonderful Greek dessert requires syrup after baking, which not only sweetens the pastry but acts as a preservative, allowing it to last longer.

Preparation time: 30 mins

Cooking time: 45-60 mins

Servings: 8-10

Ingredients

250g kataifi dough

75g butter

120g pistachios (or walnuts or almonds), chopped

For the syrup:

200g sugar

200ml water

lemon zest from 1/2 lemon

1 cinnamon stick

Method

Chop the pistachios (or walnuts or almonds) and pulse in a blender to become coarsely grounded.

Line an oven tray with parchment paper. Melt the butter in a small saucepan and using a brush, lightly grease the lined tray on which the kataifi will be baked.

Lay the kataifi dough on your working surface and divide it in 8 – 10 pieces by gently spreading the strands and fluffing it. Each piece will be used to create an individual kataifi roll. Brush one piece with melted butter. Place a tablespoon with chopped pistachios at one end of the strip and roll up into a cylinder, tucking in any stray pieces of dough. Take care to roll the pastry tightly so that the filling is securely enclosed. Place it on

your baking tin and continue with the next piece.

The unused dough is better to be kept between damp towels (not soaked) to maintain its moisture.

Place the rolls seam-side down on the lined baking tray, close together but not squashed, and brush well with remaining butter. Bake for 45 to 60 minutes, until golden brown and crispy looking.

In the meantime prepare the syrup. Put all the ingredients in a saucepan and bring to boil. Let simmer for 2 minutes, until the sugar is dissolved. Allow to cool at room temperature.

Remove from the oven and, while still hot, pour the syrup with a spoon, slowly, to let the kataifi absorb it. Let rest for at least 3 hours before serving. This dessert can be stored at room temperature, covered, for several days.

Portokalopita – orange phyllo cake

In Greek mythology, a golden apple was the gift that Gaia, the personification of the Earth, offered at the wedding of the father of the Gods Zeus with Hera. This divine gift that was kept in the Gardens of the Esperides, away from the humans, might have actually been oranges, a fruit unknown to Europe and the Mediterranean before the Middle Ages. Today, orange trees grow extensively in the plain areas all over Crete but mainly around Chania. This famous orange phyllo cake is very easy to prepare, delicious and extremely aromatic. With a crispy texture and soaked in sweet and sour syrup, it is loved by children and adults alike and in summer months is often served with a scoop of vanilla ice-cream on top.

Preparation time: 15 mins

Cooking time: 60 mins

Servings: 4-6

Ingredients

250g phyllo dough

2 eggs

100g sugar

zest from 1 orange

150g Greek yogurt

1 tsp. vanilla extract

1 tsp. baking powder

100ml sunflower oil

For the syrup:

200ml water

200g sugar

juice from 1 orange

1 cinnamon stick

Method

If using frozen phyllo dough, make sure it is well thawed - see [How to handle phyllo pastry](#) at the beginning of this book.

With a sharp knife, cut the phyllo in stripes of about 2 cm.

In a bowl, mix the eggs with sugar until it dissolves and become pale and

frothy. Add the orange zest, yoghurt, vanilla extract and baking powder. Mix on medium speed until well combined.

Add the sunflower oil in small doses and continue to mix until smooth. Using a wooden spatula, stir in the phyllo stripes, few at a time, so they won't stick.

Preheat the oven to 180C. In a greased baking pan, pour the mixture and bake for 1 hour, until golden brown and compact.

In the meantime prepare the syrup. Add the ingredients in a saucepan and bring to boil over medium heat for 5 minutes. Let cool to room temperature.

When the portokalopita is ready, immediately after taking it out from the oven, pour on top the cool syrup in small doses, using a spoon to distribute evenly. Let cool for at least one hour before serving.

Lemon and lime cheese cake

With the abundance of lemon and lime trees in Crete, the famous cheese cake had to be adapted to the local ingredients, resulting in a flavourful refreshing dessert, excellent for a hot summer day. The cream cheese combined with Greek yoghurt makes this cake much lighter and the strong citrus aroma makes it an excellent dessert after a heavy meal.

Preparation time: 30 mins plus 4 hours chill

Cooking time: 5 mins

Servings: 8-10

Ingredients

200g biscuits

100g butter, melted

250g cream cheese

250g Greek yoghurt

250g whipping cream

150g sugar

zest from 1 lemon and 1 lime

1 tbsp. lemon juice

1 tbsp. lime juice

For the topping:

1 egg

75g sugar

juice from 1/2 lemon

juice from 1/2 lime

50g butter

Method

Start with the topping: in a small saucepan whisk together the egg, sugar, lemon and lime juice and butter (which needs to be at room temperature).

Over low heat stir continuously until the mixture starts to thicken, making marks of whisk and first bubbles appear on the surface.

Remove from heat and transfer into a bowl. Cover the surface with plastic wrap so it doesn't form a skin. Set aside to cool.

For the cheese cake, start with pulsing the biscuits in a food processor, in

batches, until they are finely crushed.

Pour the biscuits in a bowl, add the melted butter and mix until absorbed.

Lightly grease a round (28 cm) spring form and add the biscuits on the bottom. Press with your fingers until it becomes an even base.

Put the form in the fridge until the cheese cream is ready.

Using an electric mixer, combine the cream cheese with sugar; add the zest and juice and the Greek yoghurt. In a separate bowl, mix the whipping cream until stiff.

Using a spatula, fold in the whipping cream into the cream cheese mixture, slowly mixing with circular movements.

Tip the cheesecake mixture over the biscuits base and spread to make an even layer. Chill in the fridge for at least 4 hours.

Add the topping by pouring from a tablespoon intersecting lines all over the surface.

Serve with thin slices of lime as decoration.

Ravani – coconut cake

Like most of the Greek sweets, ravani (or sometimes spelled revani) is a syrupy dessert, popular throughout the eastern Mediterranean countries in slight different versions. Some sources trace the name back to the time when the Ottoman Empire conquered Armenia's capital city, the actual Yerevan which was called at the time Revan or Erivan and imported the recipe from there; other sources attribute the recipe to a 16th century Turkish poet called Ravani.

This mouth-watering dessert has a delicate cooling flavour given by the coconut flakes and a fluffy, moist texture. It is usually made when the weather gets warmer because it smells like summer and can be served next to a scoop of vanilla ice-cream on a hot summer day.

Preparation time: 15 mins

Cooking time: 60 mins

Servings: 8

Ingredients

250g all-purpose flour

150g butter

250g sugar

4 eggs (yolks separated from whites)

1 tsp. baking powder

1 tsp. vanilla extract

80g flaked coconut

120g semolina flour

Zest from 1 orange

For the syrup:

200ml water

200g sugar

Juice from ½ lemon

Method

In a bowl, mix the butter (at room temperature) with sugar until creamy and soft. Add the yolks one by one, mixing continuously to absorb. Add the baking powder, vanilla extract, orange zest, coconut flakes and semolina flour. Gradually fold in the flour, mixing continuously.

In a separate bowl, whisk the egg whites until stiff and shiny.

Preheat the oven to 175C. Grease a baking pan and dust with flour, shaking off the excess.

Using a wooden spatula, fold the whisked egg whites into the batter, with slow, circular movements. Transfer the mixture into the greased pan and bake for 50-60 minutes. Do not open the oven door for the first 30 minutes. Test with a toothpick by poking in the center of the cake, if it comes clean, the cake is ready.

Remove from the oven and let cool completely.

Add the syrup ingredients in a saucepan and bring to boil. Lower the heat and let simmer for 3 minutes. Using a spoon, pour slowly hot syrup all over the cold cake and sprinkle with coconut flakes.

Let cool completely before cutting in squares to serve.

Loukoumades - donuts with honey and nuts

Archestratus, a Greek poet from Sicily, is the first to mention the dough-balls fried in olive oil and seasoned with honey as a dessert in Ancient Greece while, later on, Aristotle and other ancient writers refer to these “cakes” being offered to the victorious athletes who competed in Olympic Games. More recent history brings us to the Ottoman Empire where they are described as part of the Turkish cuisine since the 9th century. “Lokma” in Turkish or “Loukoumades” in Greek, refer both to bite size deep fried dough soaked in syrup and sprinkled with cinnamon and sesame or grated nuts. They appear in different variations in the Mediterranean, Middle East and South Asian cuisines, spreading from Italy to India and Pakistan.

It is important to prepare them at the right temperature (to allow the dough to grow) and to fry them in batches, so the oil doesn't decrease in temperature when needed to form their crust.

Preparation time: 20 mins plus 1 hour rest

Cooking time: 10 mins

Servings: 4-6

Ingredients

200ml lukewarm water

200ml lukewarm milk

10g fresh or dry yeast

400g all-purpose flour

1 tbsp. sugar

pinch of salt

25ml olive oil

vegetable oil for frying

For serving:

100ml honey

cinnamon powder

chopped walnuts

Method

Combine the lukewarm water with the yeast and stir with a teaspoon to dissolve completely. Pour into a bowl and add the flour, milk, sugar, olive oil and a pinch of salt.

With a hand mixer, whisk on high speed for a few minutes, until it becomes a smooth batter. Cover with a kitchen towel and place the bowl in a warm place, with no air currents, for one hour. It has to double in volume.

In a frying pan, on medium to high heat, pour enough vegetable oil to deep fry the bite size donuts. Check if the oil is hot enough by placing a little piece of dough into the pan. It is ready if the dough sizzles immediately.

With a tablespoon dipped in water, take small pieces of dough, to fill about half of the spoon. Add the dough into the oil and repeat until the surface is comfortably filled with donuts, without being too crowded. Watering the tablespoon each time helps dividing the portions of dough without sticking.

Use a slotted spoon to turn the donuts into the oil and to take them out immediately after they get a golden color. Lay them on a plate lined with kitchen towels to absorb the excess oil.

Serve the loukoumades on a large dish, in a single layer, drizzled with honey and sprinkled with cinnamon and walnuts.

Kormos – chocolate trunk (mosaic)

“Kormos” in Greek means tree log and this dessert is named after its shape. In some parts it is also called “mosaiko” – mosaic, because of the patterns made by biscuits when sliced. Really fashionable in the 80s, this dessert has remained in the memory of today’s adults as the treat of their childhood. It is practically a no bake biscuit cake with chocolate cream, extremely easy to make that, indeed, even a child can do. In fact, most of the Greek children are learning basic kitchen skills by making this dessert together with their mothers or grandmothers.

Preparation time: 15 mins plus 2 hours chilling

Servings: 8

Ingredients

250g unsalted butter

200g icing sugar

4 tbsp. cognac

6 tbsp. cocoa

300g biscuits

For coating (optional):

100g butter

100g white chocolate

100g coconut flakes

Method

In a bowl, mix the butter with icing sugar until soft and creamy. Add the cognac and the cocoa and mix. Crush the biscuits into small pieces and fold into the cream until well coated.

Layer a rectangular baking cake tin with plastic wrap and transfer the mixture. Bring one margin of the plastic wrap on top and, with your fingers, press the mixture to take the shape of the baking tin. Close the plastic wrap on top and place the tin in the fridge for 1½ hours.

When the time is up, remove the plastic wrap on top and turn the tin upside down on a long platter. Remove the remaining plastic wrap.

If you want to add the coating, melt the white chocolate on bain-marie and mix with the butter which needs to be at room temperature. Add the coconut flakes and mix. Coat the cake and place again in the fridge for ½

hour.

This cake can be stored in the fridge for several days. Cut in slices of about 1½ cm for serving.

Galaktobureko

Tracing back to Anatolian origins the galaktobureko means “milk börek”, a baked filled pastry made of thin flaky dough and filled with semolina custard. It resembles the French mille-feuille with the only difference that the custard is baked together with the pastry, not added afterwards.

Variations of “börek” can be found everywhere in Balkans, Levant, Mediterranean and other countries in Eastern Europe and Western Asia. The Cretan boureki (which originated in Chania) is a variation of “börek” with zucchini, sliced potatoes and mizithra cheese.

Making a good galaktobureko is a matter of pride among the Cretan women and because it is such a simple recipe, they have tips and techniques which help enhance the feel and taste of the final result. First of all, use very good quality semolina and fresh eggs. For the dough to remain crisp for a long time, the galactobureko needs to be placed in the refrigerator for 2 hours before baking in the oven, to freeze the butter and help the crust become crispier.

Preparation time: 30 mins plus 2 hours chill

Cooking time: 50 mins

Servings: 10

Ingredients

For the cream:

1L full fat milk

100g sugar (or 75g honey)

4 eggs

120g fine semolina

orange zest from 1 orange

1 tsp. vanilla extract

For the phyllo base:

8 phyllo pastry sheets

70g butter

For the syrup:

200g sugar (or 150g honey)

200ml water

1 cinnamon stick

zest and juice from 1 lemon

Method

Start by preparing the syrup to have time to cool down to room temperature. In a small saucepan add the water, sugar (or honey), the cinnamon stick and lemon zest and juice and bring to boil. Lower the heat and simmer for 5 minutes.

For the custard, mix half of the milk with half of the sugar in a medium saucepan and warm up over medium-high heat, whisking constantly.

In a separate bowl, whisk the eggs with the remaining sugar and start pouring the remaining milk slowly to dilute them. Add the orange zest and the vanilla extract.

Pour the semolina slowly while whisking, so it doesn't get lumpy. Add the warm milk in small doses until it gets evenly distributed. These steps are necessary to obtain a creamy, homogenous texture.

Pour the whole mixture back into the saucepan on medium heat and whisk continuously until the cream will start to thicken. Continue stirring for another 2-3 minutes until thick enough, remove from heat and set aside to cool.

Melt the butter and grease a medium baking pan then add one phyllo sheet on the bottom, making sure the margins are covering the sides. Brush with butter on top and add 3 more phyllo sheets, repeating the butter brushing for each.

Add the cream and spread it evenly with a spoon. Remove the excess phyllo that hangs out of the pan. Add another 4 phyllo sheets on top, making sure they are each well brushed with butter.

Put the pan in the fridge for 2 hours. Preheat the oven to 170C and bake the Galaktoboureko for 50 minutes, until the phyllo gets a nice golden colour and the cream thickens.

Pour the cold syrup immediately after taking it out from the oven and let it cool down for several hours before serving.

Walnut cake – karydopita

“Karydia” in Greek means walnuts and this traditional dessert loaded with dense, aromatic flavors is mostly enjoyed during cold winter months and especially around Christmas. The walnut appears in Greek mythology in the story of Carys, with whom the god Dionysus fell in love and was transformed into a walnut tree when she died. The walnut was the most important nut from a health standpoint in the ancient Mediterranean world and its medicinal virtues were detailed in many ancient Greek writings. This fluffy walnut cake lifts the traditional taste thanks to the particular flavour of spices combined with cognac to result in a delicious, decadent dessert.

Preparation time: 20 mins

Cooking time: 40 mins

Servings: 8

Ingredients

120g butter

120g sugar

5 eggs (separated yolks from whites)

10g baking powder

300g chopped walnut

120g breadcrumbs

1 tsp. cinnamon

Pinch of powdered nutmeg

Pinch ground clove

Zest from 1 orange

30ml cognac

For the syrup:

200g sugar

200ml water

1 cinnamon stick

30ml cognac

Method

Mix the butter (which needs to be at room temperature) with the sugar until smooth and creamy. Add the egg yolks one by one, mixing continuously until they are absorbed. Add gradually the baking powder,

cinnamon, nutmeg, clove, orange juice and the cognac and set aside.

In a separate bowl, mix the breadcrumbs with the chopped walnuts and then fold them into the butter mix, using a spatula.

Preheat the oven at 175C and grease a baking pan with a bit of butter.

With an electric mixer, whisk the egg whites with a pinch of salt, until they become stiff and shiny. Using a spatula, slowly fold the whisked egg whites into the butter mixture.

Bake for 40 minutes, until golden brown at the surface and thoroughly cooked inside. Test with a toothpick by poking in the center of the cake, if it comes out clean, the cake is ready.

Let the cake cool completely.

For the syrup, add the ingredients in a saucepan and bring to boil. Let simmer at low heat for 3-4 minutes.

Poke holes into the cake and slowly pour the hot syrup all over the cold cake, allowing time for each ladle to be absorbed.

Keep in the refrigerator and serve cold.

Almond cookies – amygdalota

In Greek mythology, Phyllis the Queen of Thrace commits suicide in despair that her lover would never return from war, believing he has found another romantic interest. Seeing her sacrifice, the Gods turn Phyllis into an almond tree. When her lover returns, he embraces the tree and it blossoms beautifully, becoming a symbol for constancy in love and eternal hope.

Since ancient time, Greeks considered this nut a symbol of happiness, prosperity and good luck. Sugared (Jordan almonds) and honeyed almonds have always been present in wedding traditions, baptisms and special moments of a family life.

These almond cookies – amygdalota are traditional sweets that symbolize new beginnings. They are fabulous little cookies similar with the Italian amaretti in the strong almond taste, or French macaroons in the fluffy and smooth texture. They are easy to make and can be stored for weeks in air-tight containers.

Preparation time: 20 mins plus 45 mins chill

Cooking time: 20 mins

Servings: 16

Ingredients

125g finely ground almond powder

125g coarsely ground almonds

75g flaked almonds (for coating)

30g wheat semolina

125g icing sugar

3 egg whites

1 tsp. vanilla extract

1 tsp. almond extract

pinch of salt

Method

Combine the finely ground almonds with the coarsely ground ones, add the wheat semolina and a pinch of salt, and stir to mix well. Set aside.

With a hand mixer, beat the egg whites until frothy and stiff enough to not move when shaking the bowl.

Add slowly the icing sugar and continue to mix until it becomes thick and shiny like a meringue. Add the vanilla and almond extract.

Add the almonds and mix slowly, by pouring a little quantity at a time and folding in with a wooden spatula (do not use the mixer now).

Cover and let the dough to chill in the fridge for 30 minutes.

Using a tablespoon, take a heap full from the dough and form between wet palms into a cookie. Roll it in almond flakes and place on a baking tray lined with parchment paper.

When the dough is finished you must have circa 16 cookies. Put them again in the fridge to rest for another 15 minutes.

In the meantime preheat the oven to 170C. Bake for 20 minutes or until golden and soft but do not let the almond flakes to darken. Let cool completely before storing in an air-tight container.

Lychnarakia – Cretan sweet cheese pies

Another authentic Cretan dish, the lychnarakia (which means “little lights” because their shape resembles a light spot) is a type of kalitsounia but sweet (not like the salted kalitsounia filled with spinach). Traditionally they are prepared only for Easter but they can be found any time of the year in every pastry shop throughout the island. These “little lights” are made with mizithra cheese, sweetened with sugar or honey, but, unlike their counterparts kalitsounia with goat cheese and honey which are made with phyllo pastry and fried, these ones have soft dough and are baked, more like a cookie.

Preparation time: 30 mins

Cooking time: 30 mins

Servings: 30

Ingredients

For the dough:

75g butter, at room temperature

125g sugar

1 egg

75ml of milk

10g baking powder

375g all-purpose flour

1 egg, whipped

a little cinnamon, for garnish

For the filling:

500g sweet mizithra cheese (or ricotta)

3 tbs. sugar or honey

1 egg, whipped

1 tsp. vanilla extract

Method

The cheese has to be very well drained and needs to crumble easily.

Prepare the filling: in a bowl add the cheese with sugar, then the whipped egg and vanilla extract and mix well until soft and creamy. Set aside.

For the dough, make sure the butter is at room temperature. Mix it with sugar until it dissolves and becomes creamy. Add the egg and milk and

continue to whisk.

In a separate bowl mix the flour with the baking powder.

Combine the wet and dry ingredients and knead gently with your hands until it becomes dough. The butter should not melt from the temperature of your hands, use a floured surface and knead rapidly until it no longer stick to your fingers.

Take a portion of the dough and, using a roller pin, flatten to a thickness of about 2 mm. Use a rice bowl or a large cup with a diameter of 8-9 cm and cut circles into the flatten dough.

Holding the circle in your hand, add in the centre one tablespoon of cheese filling and form it like a pyramid.

Using the tip of a spreading knife, turn the margins of the dough upwards toward centre, to cover the base of the cheese pyramid.

You will have 7-8 points where the dough sticks to sides, forming a star shaped base ("little light"). Continue until the dough and filling is finished, you must have around 30 pieces.

Preheat the oven at 180C and line a baking tray with parchment paper. Line the pies leaving enough space between them as they tend to inflate while baking.

Brush them with whisked egg and sprinkle with cinnamon before putting in the oven. Bake for 30 minutes, until they become light golden and the dough is well baked. Let cool completely before storing in an air-tight container.

Sfakiani pita – pie from Sfakia

A mountainous area with its southern margins washed by the Lybian sea, Sfakia region in South of Crete is one of the few places in Greece that have never been fully occupied by foreign powers.

Together with the kaltsounia, these pies from Sfakia are emblematic of the traditional Cretan cuisine and famous all over Greece. They are thin pies, something between a crepe and a pancake, filled with delicious, soft mizithra cheese which is mingled throughout the dough, creating a fabulous texture. In older times they were cooked on hot stones as they do not need oil to fry them. The sfakiani pita is the traditional breakfast (or dessert) in the south of Crete and is usually served hot and generously drizzled with honey.

Preparation time: 10 mins

Cooking time: 20 mins

Servings: 6

Ingredients

250g mizithra cheese (or ricotta)

250g all-purpose flour

50ml raki (or vodka)

120ml water

2 tbsp. olive oil

pinch of salt

Method

In a bowl, mix the water, raki, olive oil, salt and gradually add the flour until it becomes a soft dough. Divide the dough into 6 equal parts.

The mizithra cheese must be very well drained for this recipe. Make sure you strain it in a colander several hours before, if the texture feels watery. Divide the cheese into 6 balls.

On your working surface, drizzle a little flour and, with a rolling pin, flatten one ball of dough to a thickness of 2mm. Add one cheese ball in the center and wrap dough around it, carefully closing the margins on top.

Flatten with the rolling pin until it gets to a thickness of about 5-6 mm. Transfer the pie on a tray lined with parchment paper. Repeat with the

remaining dough and cheese until you will have 6 pies.

Cook the pies on both sides, in a lightly greased pan on medium heat.
Serve immediately.

Pasteli - Greek sesame honey candy

Popular from the Middle East through Asia, the sesame seeds with sugar or honey pressed into a bar are called in Greece “pasteli”. They are generally flat, oblong bars made with honey and can have, besides the sesame seeds, pistachios, walnuts, hazelnuts, almonds or raisins.

Somehow the ancient Greek version of a power bar (Herodotus mentions “sweet cakes of sesame and honey”), pasteli has been made with the same two ingredients for thousands of years: honey and sesame seeds. The pasteli most commonly sold in the markets is very hard, because of the addition of sugar that makes it easily breakable. The original pasteli is chewy because of the exclusive use of honey and the quality and taste of it will have an effect on the final product. Therefore it is important to choose a type of honey that you like most and also fresh sesame seeds.

Preparation time: 5 mins + 30 min chill

Cooking time: 5 mins

Servings: 12

Ingredients

250g sesame seeds

50g mixed nuts (optional)

125ml honey

lemon peel from ½ lemon

1 tsp. lemon juice

Method

In a pan, roast over low to medium heat the sesame seeds until golden. Pour them in a bowl immediately after they achieve the desired golden color (being very small, they keep roasting in the hot pan even after removing it from the heat).

In a medium pot, pour the honey, add the lemon peel and juice. Heat until simmering, reduce the temperature and stir continuously for 2-3 minutes.

Remove from the heat and pour the sesame seeds and mixed nuts (if using). Mix well.

Transfer on a tray lined with parchment paper and, using a wooden spatula, flatten to the desired thickness. Grease the spatula with a drop of

oil to avoid the mixture sticking on it.

Allow to cool for 30 minutes and then cut into individual bars. Store in an air-tight container or wrapped in parchment paper in the fridge.

Bougatsa

This breakfast pastry consisting of layers of phyllo filled with semolina custard or cheese or minced meat originates in the city of Serres, close to Thessaloniki, being brought by immigrants from Constantinople sometimes in the 15th century.

The name has roots in the Byzantine Greek (“pogatsa”), ancient Rome (“panis focacius”, the today’s focaccia) and Turkish (“poğaç”).

Bougatsa is also popular in Veria and Halkidiki (also in northern Greece) but also in Chania and Iraklion, in Crete. In Chania, it is called “bougatsa Chanion” and is made by special pastry shops usually open from early morning until noon. The most common filling is a sweet semolina custard but also mizithra cheese. After it is baked, it is cut into small pieces and served hot. If the filling is semolina custard, then the pastry may be lightly dusted with icing sugar and/or cinnamon.

Preparation time: 30 mins

Cooking time: 30 mins

Servings: 4-5

Ingredients

225g phyllo dough

100g butter

500ml milk

100g sugar

60g all-purpose flour

2 eggs

1 tsp. vanilla extract

ground cinnamon and icing sugar for serving

Method

Start with preparing the filling. In a large bowl add the sugar, eggs, vanilla extract and flour and whisk vigorously until creamy and smooth.

Warm up the milk into a saucepan and pour it slowly over the flour mixture, whisking continuously so it doesn’t form lumps.

Return the mixture into the saucepan and bring to boil mixing it continuously. As it reaches the boiling point it will start to thicken, wait until it makes few bubbles and remove from the heat.

Let rest and stir occasionally so it doesn't form a skin on top.

Melt the butter and grease the bottom of a round baking pan, of approx. 28 cm. Lay one phyllo sheet on the bottom, leaving the margins over the edges of the pan.

Brush with butter and add a second phyllo sheet, rotating it slightly so the exceeding phyllo falls next to the first.

Repeat until you have 6-7 phyllo sheets as the bottom, each individually buttered.

Add the custard in the middle and, using a spatula, distribute evenly.

Fold the outside phyllo sheets back, toward the centre, so they completely cover the top. If needed, add more buttered phyllo sheets and trim the excess, using a sharp knife. The Bougatsa must have the same number of sheets on top as well as on the bottom.

Preheat the oven at 170C.

Brush the top with the remaining melted butter and scar it to form the slices. Bake for 45 minutes until the phyllo becomes crisp and golden.

Let cool for 10 minutes before cutting. Serve sprinkled with icing sugar and / or cinnamon.

Vasilopita

Vasilopita is the traditional cake that is baked for New Year's Day and it is associated with Saint Basil's day. Throughout the Balkans this New Year's Day cake contains a hidden coin or trinket which is slipped into the dough before baking and whoever gets it into their slice will be blessed with good luck for the year to come. In Greece, families cut the vasilopita at the midnight of New Year's Eve and slices are distributed among the present people by order of age. The recipient of the coin usually gets also a pre-arranged gift, money or a gold piece of jewellery.

Vasilopita is tracing back to the legend of St. Basil, the Bishop of Caesarea who called on the Roman citizens to raise a ransom payment to stop the siege of the city. Each member of the city gave whatever they had in gold and jewellery. When the ransom was raised, the enemy was so embarrassed by the act of collective giving that he called off the siege without collecting payment. Basil was then tasked with returning the unpaid ransom, but because he didn't know which items belonged to which family, he baked all of the jewellery into loaves of bread and distributed the loaves to the city, and by a miracle each citizen received their exact share. Traditionally, while kids expect St. Nicholas to deliver them presents on Christmas, in Greece, St. Basil grants his gifts on the first day of each New Year.

Preparation time: 30 mins

Cooking time: 60 mins

Servings: 6-8

Ingredients

200g butter

175g sugar

3 eggs (separated yolks from whites)

pinch of salt

zest from 1 orange

125ml orange juice

100g Greek yogurt

1 tsp. vanilla extract

375g self-rising flour, sifted

For the icing:

300g icing sugar

2 tbsp. milk
1 tsp. vanilla extract

Method

Separate the egg yolks from the whites. With an electric mixer whisk the eggs with a pinch of salt until fluffy and stiff.

In a separate bowl mix the butter (which needs to be at room temperature) with the icing sugar, until creamy. Add the egg yolks, one at a time and continue to mix until well blended. Pour the orange juice in small doses, the yoghurt and the vanilla extract. At the end, add the flour and mix until becomes a compact cream.

Pre-heat the oven to 180C.

With a plastic spatula start folding in the fluffed egg whites. Use slow circular movement so the cream remains frothy and stiff. Transfer into a round non-stick baking tin and place it in the oven. Bake for 50-60 minutes, until nicely colored and cooked through. To check if it is ready, poke in the middle of the cake a toothpick. If it comes out clean, the cake is ready.

Let the vasilopita cool for 10 minutes and invert the pan on a plate.

Wrap a coin with aluminum foil and stick it in the cake but not in the middle. Invert the cake on the serving platter so the trace where the coin was slipped is not visible.

For the icing, add the ingredients and mix with a spoon until the sugar dissolves and it becomes creamy and glossy.

Pour it on top of the vasilopita and spread it even with a knife. Store it in a cool dry place until serving.

Easter koulourakia

These are traditional butter-based pastries, typically made around Easter. Light and fluffy, with a sweet delicate flavour, they are very similar in texture with lady fingers; only they are hand-shaped and have an egg glaze on top. The name “koulourakia” means “little rings” although they can be found in various shapes such as braided circles, twists, snakes or Greek letters.

They are commonly eaten for breakfast, with morning coffee or afternoon tea in the days following Easter and they are present in every household in Crete during this major holy celebration.

Preparation time: 10 mins plus 20 mins rest

Cooking time: 40 mins

Servings: 20

Ingredients

500g all-purpose flour

125g butter

125g sugar

1 tsp. powdered baking ammonia

50ml lukewarm milk

2 medium eggs

1 tsp. vanilla extract

zest from 1 orange

1 egg whisked, for glazing

Method

In a teacup, add the baking ammonia and pour the lukewarm milk. Blend until it dissolves and set aside.

Make sure the butter is at room temperature. In a bowl, mix the butter with sugar until creamy and smooth. Add the eggs, one by one, whisking continuously and when they are well absorbed, add the vanilla extract, orange zest and the dissolved baking ammonia.

Follow with the flour, adding one tablespoon at a time and mixing continuously until becomes soft dough. Cover with plastic wrap and let rest for 20 minutes at room temperature.

Preheat the oven at 200C and line a large baking tray with parchment

paper.

Take small pieces from the dough and, rolling between palms, form long cords of about 1 cm diameter. Braid two cords into spirals and cut at about 9 cm length. Lay each spiral on the baking tray, with a lot of distance between each other as they tend to expand a lot while baking.

Brush each spiral generously with whisked egg. Bake in the oven for 15-20 minutes, until they get a nice golden brown colour.

When ready, let them cool completely before storing in an air-tight container.

Almond cookies – kourabiedes

Together with [melomakarona](#), these almond cookies represent the absolute Christmas sweet that every Greek family must have on the table during winter holidays. “qurabiya” in Azeri, “kurabiye” in Turkish and “kourabiedes” in Greek come from the word “kuru” which literally means dry, and “biye” which translates to biscuit, so essentially “kourabies” (or “kourabiedes” in its plural form) is a type of dry biscuit.

They are shortbread cookies made with butter and toasted almonds and buried under a flurry of icing sugar that resembles the snow. Legend has it that these buttery shortbreads were crescent-shaped during the Turkish occupation of Greece, in deference to the Turkish flag. However, while crescent-shaped kourabiedes can still be found, after Greece regained independence from Turkey, people in many parts of the country resumed making them in thick slabs, balls or shaped like little pears.

Preparation time: 30 mins

Cooking time: 25 mins

Servings: 30-40

Ingredients

250g butter

100g icing sugar

200g almonds

1 tsp vanilla extract

1 tbsp. rose water

300g all-purpose flour, sifted

1 tbsp. baking powder

250g icing sugar for dusting

Method

Divide the almonds in two equal parts and put one half on a baking tray, sprinkle with some water and put them in the preheated oven, at 200C for 5 minutes. Set aside to cool.

Pulse the other half using a blender, until they become powder.

Using a hand mixer, combine the butter (which needs to be at room temperature) with the icing sugar, until creamy and soft. Add the crushed almonds, a pinch of salt, vanilla extract and the rosewater and mix well to

combine. At the end add the baking powder and flour and mix again for 20 seconds.

Chop or pulse the roasted almonds into small pieces. Add them to the mixture and knead fast with your hands; it is important that the butter remains soft but doesn't melt.

Preheat the oven to 200C and line your baking tray with parchment paper.

Using a teaspoon, take a piece of dough and shape it with your hands to form a ball, place it on the baking tray and press it slightly. Continue with the rest of the dough being careful not to place the cookies too close to each other as they tend to inflate.

Bake for 20 minutes until they get a faint golden tint and are thoroughly cooked (check by poking the dough with a toothpick, if it comes out clean, they are ready)

Let the kourabiedes to cool completely and then roll them in icing sugar. Drizzle with more icing sugar on top. They can be stored in an air-tight container for 2 weeks.

Melomakarona – Christmas cookies

Tracing back to Ancient Greece, this traditional Christmas cookie originates from “makaria”, a piece of bread in the shape of an egg, which was offered to people who attended a funeral. Honey (“meli” in Greek) was considered to be a symbol of fertility and longevity therefore, by adding it to this ancient shortbread, it has become melomakarona.

Along with [kourabiedes](#), these cookies are the traditional Christmas sweets of Greece, being present in every household during the holiday season. Another traditional sweet is the vasilopita, served only on 1st of January, as a charmer of luck and symbol of new beginnings.

Preparation time: 30 mins

Cooking time: 25 mins

Servings: 30-40

Ingredients

150g semolina

500g all-purpose flour

1 tbsp. baking powder

100ml orange juice

3 tbsp. cognac

100g sugar

1 tsp. cinnamon

½ tsp. nutmeg

½ tsp. clove

1 tsp. vanilla extract

100ml water

75ml olive oil

125ml vegetable oil

50g honey

zest from 2 oranges

200g finely chopped walnuts – to garnish

For the syrup:

250ml water

250g sugar

50ml honey

1 cinnamon stick

3 whole cloves

peel from one orange

Method

Start with the syrup so it cools down until is needed. In a medium pot add all the ingredients but the honey and heat on medium to high heat.

After it starts boiling, let simmer for 5 minutes and the sugar has dissolved completely. Remove, let cool and stir in the honey. Set aside.

In one bowl combine the semolina with flour and baking powder.

In another larger bowl add the orange juice, the cognac, the sugar and the spices (cinnamon, nutmeg, clove in powder form) and vanilla extract. Whisking continuously, add the water, oil, orange zest and honey.

When creamy and compact, start adding the dry ingredients (semolina with flour) and mix until becomes dough.

Knead lightly with your hands; the dough must be soft, do not add extra flour.

Preheat the oven at 180C.

To shape the melomakarona, take a piece of dough using a teaspoon and shape it in your palms into an oblong shape, like an egg.

Place the cookies on a baking tray lined with parchment paper and leave enough space between them as they tend to inflate while baking.

Bake in the oven for 20 minutes, until they become lightly brown.

Remove from the oven and, while still hot, sink them in the cold syrup using a slotted spoon and let them absorb 10-15 seconds, depending how moist you like them.

Place them on a serving platter and sprinkle chopped walnuts on top.

Store in air-tight containers or covered serving trays at room temperature for up to 2 weeks.