

Cooking 'Greekalicious with Maria Benardis

By Rayne Wolfe/Food & Drink writer *TheReporter.Com*

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It helps when speaking with Maria Benardis, author of two Greek cuisine cookbooks and proponent of a healthy Mediterranean style diet, if you know what "agapi" means. Agapi is Greek for joy. And it is the main ingredient in everything Benardis cooks. For her, agapi refers to self-love, mutual love, and even love for recipe ingredients. She believes that when one cooks with love and joy that food becomes a healing power.

"I want to encourage people to explore and rediscover how to use nature for personal healing instead of relying on medicine and pharmacies," said Benardis.

Her book, "Cooking and Eating Wisdom for Better Health" relies heavily on the wisdom of Greek philosophers on the topic of food. She is on a mission to share the wisdom of ancient Greece and how eating right can lead to a longer and healthier life.

"It is important to always be positive and have good loving thoughts. There are many wisdoms, philosophies, affirmations and tools in the book to assist people in achieving this," she said.

What I found startling about her large format cookbook, which includes 50 wonderful recipes, is that nearly the first half of the book is a chapter by chapter history of Greek cooking, relying heavily on the wisdom of ancient philosophers whose ideas still ring true today. For example, she allows Hippocrates to remind us "Everything in excess is opposed to nature." Plato rises from her pages to explain, "The part can never be well unless the whole is well." And Aristotle declares, "Love is the cause of unity in all things."

Each chapter ends with cooking affirmations - something I've never seen before and really enjoyed. Her affirmations for the home cook include:

"I release the need to judge myself, my cooking and my ingredients."

"I am in harmony with nature's elements. They nourish and protect me."

"I make choices that respect who I am and the environment I live in."

Maria Benardis is a Gourmand Award winning author, health coach, teacher, chef and founder of Greekalicious.com. Her book "My Greek Family Table," was winner of a Gourmand World Cook Book Award for Best Mediterranean cuisine book.

There's a lot of inspiration in her latest book. And while scientists and nutritionists have long recommended Mediterranean cuisine for its healthy properties, a new study published in the *Annals of Internal Medicine* found that a Mediterranean diet could decrease the likelihood of developing chronic diseases and memory or physical problems.

What's the first step? Switching from butter to olive oil.

The next step? Getting familiar with fresh food in season and preparing it without cooking

the life out of it. Benardis adds an important sensory step: Don't be afraid to touch your food.

"When we limit the use of our senses and rely solely on measurements and utensils to do this for us we are limiting our cooking experience and not connecting fully with the spiritual ritual of cooking," said Benardis. "Using our senses when we cook also allows us to connect to nature, ourselves and our souls."

Maria takes it even further.

"Our hands absorb the energy and consciousness from the ingredients. By using our hands we are attaching our joyous energy to the dish and transferring it to the people that will consume it," she said. She tells home cooks to "Gently touch each ingredient to understand its texture and structure. By doing so we let your energy vibrate into the ingredients and you receive the wonderful energy back from the ingredients also."

This is a cookbook that could change your life.

"Cooking and eating will become a time to celebrate, a joyful experience, and a time to awaken to healing," she said.