



Healing Greek Ingredients

From olive oil to oregano, how to “let food be thy medicine,” according to the ancient Greeks.

Food | See **C4**

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EPOCH

Life

C1 April 6–12, 2018 THE EPOCH TIMES

► Maria Benardis shares the forgotten Greek wisdom that saved her life

An Emissary From Ancient Greece

Maria Benardis channels the wisdom of ancient Greek philosophers and physicians, from her New York apartment.

CRYSTAL SHI

“Go back to ancient Greece.” The words came to Maria Benardis in answer to a prayer. Deeply ill, her body plagued with precancerous cysts and mind burdened with anger from childhood physical and emotional abuse, she turned to God for help when modern medicine failed her.

“You’re just going to be sick all your life,” the doctors had shrugged, citing her family history of cancer.

Frustrated but undeterred, Benardis pushed forward—by turning to the wisdom of her Greek ancestors.

“What were they doing in ancient Greece, and why were they so healthy and living beyond 100?” she asked herself. “Why can’t I live beyond 100 and be healthy?”

Taking matters into her own hands, she combed through piles of books and ancient texts for answers, acquainting herself with the likes of Hippocrates and Aristotle, Archestratus, and even Pythagoras. She found them in what the ancients knew to be the cornerstones of health: how we eat and how we think. Adopting ancient ways of doing so, she sought to repair both diet and mind.

Today, over a decade after the start of her self-healing journey, she’s completely cured—and thriving. At 49, she’s rosy-cheeked and bubbling with energy. She exudes a light and youthful charm, a kind of unabashed

“**What were they doing in ancient Greece, and why were they so healthy and living beyond 100?**”

Maria Benardis, chef and author

(Right) Traditional Greek cooking emphasizes freshness, simplicity, and harmony.

openness that can disarm any heart.

A chef, author, and founder of cooking school Greekalicious in Sydney, Australia, Benardis has dedicated herself to reviving and sharing the ancient Greek wisdom—in the kitchen and in daily life—she credits for her recovery.

Lost and Found

There’s a lot to be learned from the ancients. Even without modern technology, Benardis says, the ancient Greeks “had the intuition to work out things we’re just finding out today.”

Though much of their knowledge has been lost, Benardis wants to bring it back.

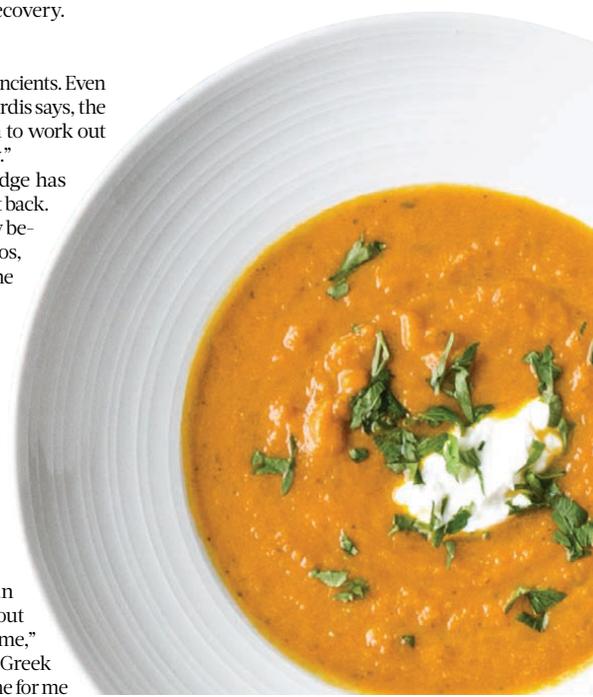
It’s fitting, then, that her journey began at the church of Saint Fanourios, the patron saint of lost things in the Greek Orthodox religion.

Deeply unhappy and strapped with illness, Benardis traveled from her home in Australia to Greece in 2004 for the first time since her childhood, hoping to reconnect with her family and the place where she’d grown up. On the island of Mykonos, she happened upon the tiny, white-washed church. There, she prayed to God for guidance.

“Suddenly, I experienced an epiphany and saw all that was about to happen in my life pass before me,” Benardis writes in her book “My Greek Family Table.” “I realized it was time for me

to reinvent my life, and in that church I saw a new path set out for me to follow.”

See *Greek Wisdom* on **C2**



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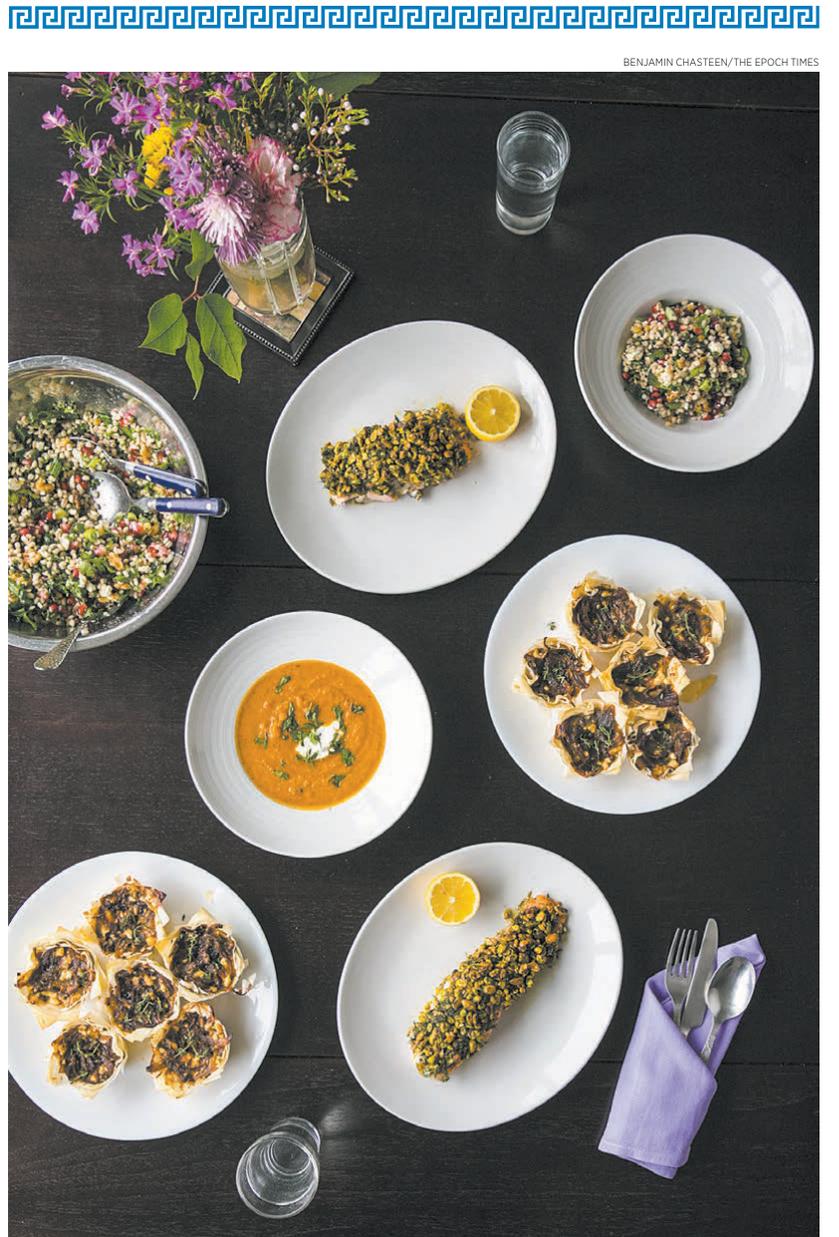
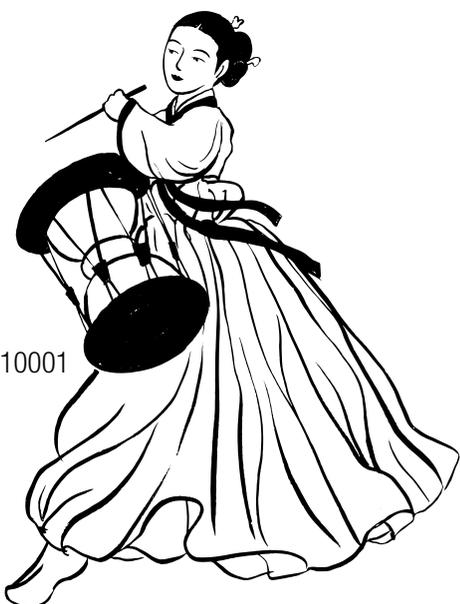
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Benardis's Greek cooking is a feast for the soul—fresh, flavorful, and, most importantly, made with love.

An Emissary From Ancient Greece

GREEK WISDOM CONTINUED FROM C1

That new path was laid in food, and it led her to her roots—to rediscovering how the ancient Greeks ate, thought, and lived.

'Let Food Be Thy Medicine'

To the ancient Greeks, food was healing. Hippocrates, the father of medicine, famously proclaimed, "Let food be thy medicine and medicine thy food." For the sick, food was prescribed first; medicines were a last resort.

"Those were their chemicals," Benardis says, "but healthy chemicals."

Today, however, many of the healing properties of food have gone overlooked. We jump to conventional medication for quick solutions, and modern medicine seems to have forgotten its ancient foundations. "When does a doctor ever prescribe food?" Benardis asks. It's ironic, she says, that all doctors are required to take the Hippocratic Oath before being allowed to practice.

Into the trash went her bottles of pills, as she resolved to return to the ancients' ways of eating. Choosing simple, clean, and harmonious ingredients, and opening herself up to their healing powers, she saw her body responding in kind. Now, she guides those like herself, who are searching for help, to their diets.

"I want people to go back into the kitchen, because that's where all the healing is," she says.

Feeding the Mind

But health goes beyond the surface—the ancients knew that, too. "The natural force within each of us is the greatest healer of disease," Hippocrates counseled.

Benardis insists that all illness starts in the mind. "If you don't get the mind right, forget about the diet. You're wasting your time," she says. She learned that the hard way.

"That was my problem," she says. "Even though I was eating right, my mind was always angry and upset and unforgiving—that's what caused my illness." Only when she turned her focus inward did her health truly make a full recovery.

In the kitchen, that meant always cooking

with positivity and "agapi," the Greek word for unconditional love. In ancient Greece, chefs were kicked out of the kitchen if their energy wasn't good and happy—cooking with negative energy was almost akin to breaking the law, Benardis says.

"When I touch your food, if I'm angry or I'm upset, I'm putting that energy in your food," she says. "Only food cooked with good energy and love and laughter can truly nourish and heal our bodies and souls."

And in daily life, that meant always thinking good thoughts, forgiving those who had wronged her, and adopting a number of ancient Greek therapies—prayer, meditation, and affirmation therapy among them—to heal her mind. "Whenever something unpleasant enters my mind, I go into affirmation mode," she says. "I start reversing what my mind is thinking into something positive."

Supplementing healthy eating with a healthy mind, Benardis made a recovery that seemed nothing short of miraculous.

But she refuses to take credit for any of it. That, she says, belongs to God and the ancient Greeks.

"I'm merely the vehicle," she says.

From her new home in New York, she's working on culinary tours and cooking classes, speaking at events, offering personal health and wellness coaching, and writing a fourth book. Exciting collaborations with Maria Loi, an accomplished Greek chef and author, are also up ahead.

As the philosopher-mathematician Pythagoras said, "everything comes round again, so nothing is completely new." And the ancient wisdom Benardis imparts is perhaps more relevant than ever today.

"[The ancient Greeks] have downloaded this information for me," Benardis says. "They're saying, 'Bring this alive. Let the people know this information so that they can heal themselves.'"

"It's almost like God is saying to me, 'It's forgotten. Bring it back.'"

For more information on Maria Benardis's upcoming book and events, see MariaBenardis.com and Greekalicious.nyc



Hippocrates, an ancient Greek physician, is widely regarded as the father of medicine.

How to Eat, Cook, and Think Like the Ancient Greeks

Use Fresh, Clean Ingredients

In her cooking, Maria Benardis uses only fresh, organic ingredients. The healing foods so cherished by the ancient Greeks were always clean, wholesome, and treated with respect—only then were they able to truly heal and nourish the body.

The Greeks held that everything contained energy, including food. When eating, we absorb the energy of the foods we choose to put into our bodies.

“Where is that chicken [you’re eating] coming from?” Benardis asks. If it was raised in a cramped factory and pumped with unnatural chemicals, “what kind of energy will that carry?”

Benardis urges people to make conscious, responsible choices in the kitchen, and respect their food, how it’s grown, and where it comes from. The ancients believed in a connection between all things, and a constant flow of energy between people and their environments, through the universe as a whole.

“Every decision we make in the kitchen has an impact on our environment,” she says. “When you put kindness into your cooking by using wholesome ingredients, your dishes will return kindness back to you and the environment.”

Embrace Simplicity and Harmony

Quality ingredients in hand, Benardis favors simple dishes that highlight their flavors. Like the ancient Greeks, she steers away from complicated recipes—“It’s almost like they’re trying to mask something,” she says.

But simple is by no means boring. Archestratus, the father of gastronomy, emphasized a balance of sweet, salty, and sour in ancient Greek cuisine, evident in popular combina-

tions of honey, vinegar, and garos (Greek fish sauce). Together, the flavors excite the palate and awaken the senses, ensuring there’s never a bland bite.

“The unexamined life is not worth living.”

Socrates

Benardis grounds her cooking in the same ancient principles. Take her barley pomegranate salad, for instance, a colorful medley of grains, greens, and bright pops of pomegranate—based on an original ancient Greek recipe. Sweet honey and herbs, salty feta, and tart pomegranate hit each note of the Greek flavor trifecta, dancing together in perfect harmony.

Trust Your Intuition

In the kitchen, Benardis never measures; intuition is her trusty guide.

For the salad dressing, she crushes garlic into a bowl and tops it with a generous free-pour of olive oil, followed by honey, glugs of red wine vinegar, and cumin. “Is it balanced enough? Do I need to put more?” she asks aloud, tasting as she goes. To adjust, a splash here, a pinch there—it’s the old way of cooking, guided by taste and trust and years of experience.

“Allow your senses to do the cooking and decide how much of an ingredient you wish to use in a dish,” she says. “Don’t be gov-

erned by what recipes dictate the measurements to be.”

Her approach reflects a broader philosophy: Always listen to your inner voice. The ancient Greeks knew well the importance of introspection—Benardis points to the famous Greek aphorism, “Know thyself,” inscribed in the Temple of Apollo at Delphi, and Socrates’ claim that “the unexamined life is not worth living.”

“Just be your true, authentic self,” Benardis says.

That means trusting yourself in your cooking, too. Dubbing herself an intuitive chef, Benardis turns to her own body for guidance, asking it each day, “What would you have me eat today?” Some days she’s led to grab the greens; others, to reach for reds.

The ancient Greeks recognized that nutrition was highly personal. Rather than one single, universal diet, as modern fast-fixes may purport, there were as many diets as there were people. Needs varied by the individual, as well as by ages and seasons, and chefs were trained to recognize them.

Benardis wants to empower people to connect with themselves and create their own diets, quoting Hippocrates: “Everyone has a physician inside him or her; we just have to help it in its work.”

“Talk to your soul and ask what it requires for nourishment, energy, peace, and comfort,” she writes in her book, “Cooking and Eating Wisdom for Better Health.” “When you connect with yourself and trust yourself, you have the potential to create and receive your own wisdom and to be guided to cook dishes full of love.”



BENJAMIN CHASTEEN/THE EPOCH TIMES

← Maria Benardis prepares Aegina-style salmon with a pistachio crust, a nod to the Greek island’s famous seafood and pistachios.

For more on healing Greek ingredients and recipes, turn to C4.

THE SECRET GARDEN

As a child, Benardis had a secret hideaway: a magical fruit and vegetable garden in the mountains, overlooking the sea.

The garden was hidden in the mountains of Psara, Greece, a small, remote island to the northeast of Athens—about five hours by ferry—where Benardis and her sister were sent to live with their grandmother when Benardis was 3 1/2 years old. On a solo walk one day, she stumbled upon a small, enclosed area and decided to make it her own.

She made the deserted space bloom with color: small tomatoes and zucchini, wild greens, chamomile leaves, flowers and herbs. She often brought her harvested treasures to her grandmother, claiming they were from the family garden so she could keep her own a secret.

“There were times when she could not understand how the zucchinis had grown so big, given that the day before they had been half the size,” Benardis recalls in her book, “My Greek Family Table.” “I would tell her that I had sung the songs she had taught me and I had given them a kiss to let them know that I loved them. They had responded by growing quicker.”

On Psara, Benardis remembers, her grandmother and the other women were obsessed with using the freshest organic produce in their cooking. Ingredients were always handled with love and respect, food was blessed before being eaten, and cooking was a shared celebration complete with song and dance—which made for tastier and more nourishing dishes. During those formative childhood years on the island, Benardis saw the start of her passion for doing the same.

COURTESY OF MARIA BENARDIS

▶ Benardis (L) with her grandmother and sister Katina, while living in Psara, Greece.



STUFFED RED BELL PEPPERS

Makes 6 servings

Stuffing:

- 1 small eggplant, about 1 pound, cut into 1/2-inch cubes
- 1/2 cup extra-virgin olive oil, plus more for greasing
- 1 garlic clove, minced
- 1 cup canned crushed tomatoes
- 1/4 cup coarsely chopped pitted kalamata olives
- 2 tablespoons drained nonpareil capers, rinsed
- 1 anchovy fillet in oil, finely chopped
- 1/4 cup chopped fresh basil
- Pinch of sugar
- Salt and freshly ground black pepper, to taste
- 3 large red bell peppers, cut in halves vertically, and cored
- 1/2 cup plain dry bread crumbs
- 1/4 cup freshly grated Parmigiano-Reggiano cheese
- Chopped fresh flat-leafed parsley, for garnish

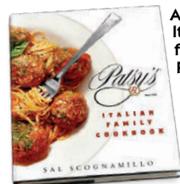
1. Preheat the oven to 425°F. Lightly oil a large rimmed baking sheet.

2. To make the stuffing: Toss the eggplant with 2 tablespoons of the oil on the baking sheet. Roast, stirring occasionally, until tender, about 12 minutes. Remove from the oven.

3. Meanwhile, heat the remaining 1/4 cup oil and the garlic together in a medium skillet over medium heat, stirring occasionally, until golden, about 2 minutes. Stir in the tomatoes, olives, capers, and anchovy and bring to a simmer. Reduce the heat to medium-low and cook for 2 minutes. Stir in the eggplant, basil, and sugar and cook to blend the flavors, about 2 minutes. Season to taste with salt and pepper. Remove from the heat and cool slightly.

4. Lightly oil a large flameproof baking dish. Fill each red pepper half with the eggplant mixture and place in the dish, stuffing side up. Pour 1/3 cup water around the pepper halves. Bake until peppers are tender, about 20 minutes. Remove from the oven.

5. Position a broiler rack about 6 inches from the source of heat and preheat on High. Mix the bread crumbs and Parmigiano cheese together in a small bowl and sprinkle over the peppers. Drizzle with the remaining 2 tablespoons oil. Broil until the crumb topping has browned, 1 to 2 minutes. Sprinkle with the parsley and serve hot from the baking dish.



A big, warm, beautiful Italian cookbook with full color throughout, Patsy's Italian Family Cookbook is a great book for those who know the restaurant and love classic Italian dishes.



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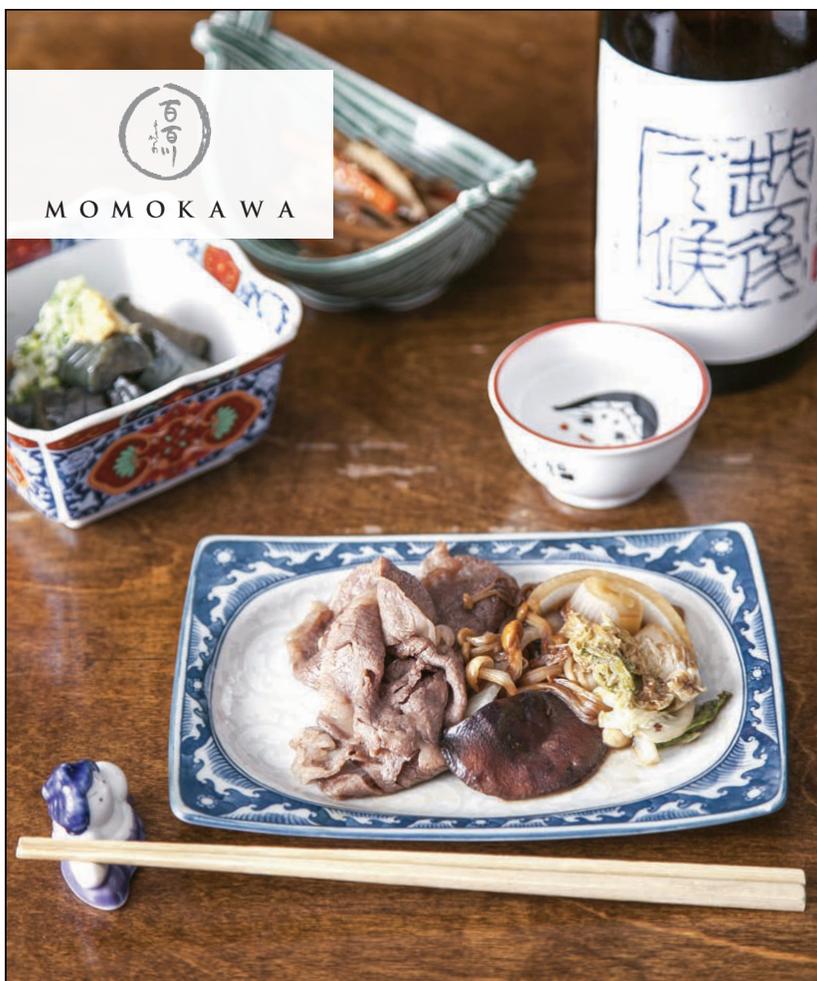


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Healing Greek Ingredients

From olive oil to oregano, all food was medicine to the ancient Greeks

To the ancient Greeks, “everything had a purpose,” Maria Benardis says. These days, trendy superfoods bearing exotic names and origins are touted for their magical, cure-all abilities. But the ancient Greeks recognized the super in the everyday. All food was used for both sustenance and healing, and the ancients wrote extensively on the properties of each ingredient. Benardis documents much of their knowledge in her books.

Cinnamon: The ancient Greeks considered cinnamon warming and softening, and a great digestive and diuretic. They used it as a cure for kidney diseases and an antidote against deadly poisons.



Olive oil: Described by Hippocrates as the “great therapeutic,” olive oil boasted wide-ranging roles: a digestive aid; a cure for headaches, hair loss, and dandruff; and a softener in harsher medicinal mixtures.

Herbs: Herbs were a Greek staple, embraced for both their aromatic flavors and healing functions. Thyme was used to treat asthma; dill for gastrointestinal disorders; oregano for coughs and tonsillitis; rosemary for jaundice, stomach pains, or fatigue; and basil for constipation, vomiting, and other digestive problems.



Honey: Honey was prescribed for sexual vigor, as well as to heal inflammation around the throat, cure coughs, cleanse pores, and draw out fluids from ulcers.



Mastiha: Mastiha is the aromatic resin of the mastic tree, traditionally cultivated on the island of Chios, Greece. Long revered by the Greeks, it was used by Hippocrates for stomach aches, colds, and digestive problems, as well by Dioscorides, another Greek physician, for womb disorders, dysentery, and dental hygiene.



Pomegranate: As a juice, pomegranate was prescribed for stomach ailments and mouth ulcers, and as an aphrodisiac. Considered anti-cancerous, it was also crushed with walnuts—used as an antidote for poisons—and other ingredients to be applied topically to visible cancer.



Saffron: As it is today, saffron was one of the most prized and expensive spices in ancient Greece. Perhaps its scarcity was for good reason—the ancients believed excessive doses would cause uncontrollable laughter, or lead women to be unable to resist a lover. Hippocrates used it as a painkiller as well as for healing wounds, stomach complaints, and eye conditions.



Cumin: This “pepper of the Old World,” as Benardis calls it, was found on every table in ancient Greece, on par with our ubiquitous salt and pepper shakers. It was used liberally on everything because it aided in digestion.



Where to Get Greek Ingredients

In Greece, each region is renowned for its own specialty—the best onions come from Mykonos, olive oil and wild greens from Crete, pistachios from Aegina, and tomatoes from Santorini with its rich volcanic soil.

While that kind of direct sourcing isn't always possible in New York, Benardis does what she can. Ninth Avenue International Foods (543 Ninth Ave., Manhattan) and Titan Food Astoria (2556 31st St., Queens) are favorite stops for imported Greek goods, along with specialty grocers like Whole Foods Market for fresh, organic foods.

The extra-virgin olive oil and red wine vinegar she uses at home are from her own Greek-licious brand, which she hopes to introduce to the public in the near future. They're sourced from a historic monastery in the mountains of Crete, where monks have been making the products—pressing olives between stone slabs, as the ancients did—since 1632.



PREPARING FOR BATTLE

Applications weren't limited to health. Aristotle advised Alexander the Great to forbid his soldiers from drinking mint tea before war, as the heady herb was considered an aphrodisiac. Instead, soldiers were fed onions and garlic, thought to incite courage and lighten the balance of the blood. (Their pungent smell, released through the soldiers' sweat, also made for an excellent first line of attack.) After battle, a concoction of cumin oil and dill provided relief for sore muscles.



In the Kitchen With Maria

The same ingredients the ancient Greeks used still fill our markets today—we've just lost much of what the ancients knew about them. But in her kitchen, Maria Benardis draws upon that forgotten knowledge to craft her own healing recipes.

She prepares her take on a healing carrot soup created by Hippocrates, meant to be fed to anyone feeling unwell. Carrots (a key ingredient for curing fevers), celery (beneficial for bone strength), leeks (an aphrodisiac), and parsley (a great digestive) come together into a vibrant

soup, warmed by an invigorating punch of cumin. It's simple, but deeply nourishing.

Oven-baked salmon with a fragrant dill and pistachio crust pays tribute to Aegina, home to an abundance of fresh seafood and the best pistachios in Greece. Use the freshest wild-caught salmon you can find—Benardis always does, and it makes for a sweet and buttery—tender dish with no trace of unpleasant fishiness.

**Kitchen essentials:
fresh, organic
ingredients and a
heart full of agapi.**

BARLEY AND POMEGRANATE SALAD

This recipe was inspired by a dish eaten in ancient times made with crushed wheat, cheese, honey, pomegranate, and nuts. Before serving, I often spoon the salad into molds and turn them onto serving plates. You can eat this on its own or as a side dish.

- SERVES 4**
- 1 1/4 cups pearl barley
 - 7 ounces Greek feta
 - 1/2 cup pomegranate seeds, plus extra to garnish
 - 1/2 cup (2 ounces) walnuts, toasted and roughly chopped
 - 3 tablespoons finely chopped mint, plus extra leaves to garnish
 - 2 tablespoons finely chopped flatleaf parsley, plus extra leaves to garnish
 - 3 tablespoons finely chopped scallion
- For the Dressing**
- 2 teaspoons ground cumin
 - 1/4 cup olive oil
 - 2 tablespoons red wine vinegar
 - 1 tablespoon honey

1 to 2 cloves garlic, minced
Sea salt and cracked pepper

Bring 3 cups of salted water to a boil, then reduce to a simmer. Rinse the pearl barley and add to the pan. Cook for 20 to 25 minutes, or until the barley has softened. Drain, then place in a bowl and cool to room temperature. Cut the feta into cubes and add to the barley with the remaining salad ingredients. Mix together well. Combine the dressing ingredients in a small bowl and pour over the barley salad. Toss gently. Sprinkle the extra mint and parsley leaves as well as pomegranate seeds on the salad.

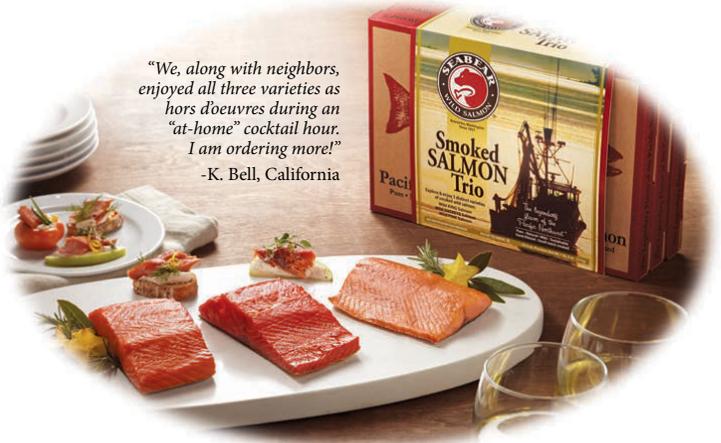


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HIPPOCRATES'S CARROT SOUP

This is my interpretation of Hippocrates's healing carrot soup. After consuming a bowl of this soup, you will feel cleansed and healed. It warms the body and settles the tummy. It's a great alternative to the soulful chicken soup.

- SERVES 6**
- 4 tablespoons extra-virgin olive oil
 - 2 leeks, white part only, thinly sliced
 - 2 pounds carrots, peeled and chopped
 - 3 stalks celery, thinly chopped
 - 4 cups vegetable or chicken stock
 - 1 cup flat-leaf (Italian) parsley, plus 2 tablespoons extra, to garnish
 - 2 teaspoons chopped thyme leaves
 - 1 to 2 teaspoons ground cumin
 - Sea salt and cracked black pepper, to taste
 - 6 tablespoons plain Greek-style yogurt, to garnish
- Heat the olive oil in a large saucepan over medium heat. Add the leek, carrot, and celery and cook uncovered, stirring occasionally, for 5 to 8 minutes or until

the vegetables start to soften. Add the stock, parsley, thyme, cumin, salt, and pepper and mix well. Cover and bring to a low simmer and cook for 20 to 25 minutes or until the carrots are very tender.

Remove from the heat and set aside to cool slightly. Place the cooked vegetables into a food processor or blender and process until smooth. Return the soup to the saucepan and heat over medium-high until hot. Ladle the soup into serving bowls and season with a tablespoon of yogurt and the extra parsley. Serve while still hot.



Recipe reprinted with permission from "Cooking & Eating Wisdom for Better Health: Ancient Greek Wisdoms for Cooking, Eating and Living Better," published by Balboa Press, and "My Greek Family Table," published by Countryman Press, by Maria Benardis.

AEGINA-STYLE SALMON WITH PISTACHIO CRUST

Located in the Saronic Gulf, the island of Aegina not only has an abundance of fresh seafood but is also where the best pistachios in Greece are grown.

- SERVES 4**
- Four 7- to 8-ounce fresh salmon fillets, skin on, bones removed
 - Sea salt and cracked pepper
 - 1/2 cup extra-virgin olive oil
 - 1 cup unsalted raw shelled pistachios
 - 2 tablespoons grated lemon zest
 - 4 tablespoons chopped dill
- Preheat the oven to 350 degrees F and line a baking tray with parchment paper. Place the salmon pieces on the tray and season with salt, pepper, and about 1 tablespoon of the olive oil.

Place the pistachios in a mortar and grind with the pestle until they are coarsely broken up. Add the lemon zest, dill, pepper, salt, and the remaining olive oil, mix well, and grind a little more. Spoon the mixture onto the salmon pieces and spread so it forms an even crust. Bake for 20 to 25 minutes, or until the fish is cooked.

Serve with zesty pomegranate and pastourma salad.

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