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Maria Benardis shares the forgotten Greek wisdom that saved her life

An Emissary From Ancient Greece

Maria Benardis, chef and author

“G
o 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 undeferred, 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 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.”
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 chemi - cals,” 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.

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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 energies 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 how it’s grown, how it’s treated, and where it was produced. “Every decision we make in the kitchen has an impact on our environment,” she says. “When you put kindness into your cooking, you will return kindness back to you and the environment.”

Use Fresh, Clean Ingredients

“Modern chefs were trained to recognize them. Needs varied by the individual. Rather than one ancient principle. Take her barley pomodoro sauce. Sweet honey and herbs, salty feta, and aromatic pomodoro make each note of the Greek flavor trifecta, dancing together in perfect harmony.”

Trust Your Intuition

With the kitchen, Benardis never measures; intuition is her trusty guide. “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 governed by what recipes dictate the measurements to be.”

Benardis wants to empower people to connect with themselves and create their own diets, quipping Hippocrates: “Everyone has a physician inside him or her; we just have to listen to your inner voice. The broader philosophy: Always think like the ancient Greeks knew well the ancient principles. Take her barley pomodoro sauce. Together, the flavors excite the palate.”

Benardis’ turn to her own body for guidance, dubbing herself an intuitive chef, 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 age and seasons, and chefs were trained to recognize them.

For more on healing food ingredients and a turn to C4.

孟德斯鸠 (L) with her grandmother while living in Patsa, Greece.
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.

**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.

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

**Marathia:** Marathia is the aromatic resin of the marjoram 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 stomach disorders, diarrhea, 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 antitonic for poisons—and other ingredients to cleanse pores, and draw out fluids from ulcers.

**Cinnamon:** Cinnamon was one of the most prized and expensive spices in an cient 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 digestive problems. 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.

**Herbs:** Herbs were a Greek staple, embraced for both their aromatic flavors and healing functions. They were 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.

**Mastiha:** Mastiha is the 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 stomach disorders, diarrhea, and dental hygiene. It was also crushed with walnuts—used as an antitonic for poisons—and other ingredients to cleanse pores, and draw out fluids from ulcers.

**Honey:** The extra-virgin olive oil and red wine vine- get 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.

**Saffron:** Saffron’s origins are touted for their magical, cure-all abilities. But the ancient Greeks recognized 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 digestive problems. 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.

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In the Kitchen

With

Maria

The same ingredients the ancient Greeks used still fill our markets today: we’ve 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 not take on a healing carrot soup created by Hippocrates, meant to be fed to anyone feeling ant fishiness. peru to taste

BARLEY AND POMEGRANATE SALAD

- 1 to 2 cloves garlic, minced
- 1 cup plain yogurt
- 1/2 cup extra-virgin olive oil
- Sea salt and cracked pepper

1. Heat the olive oil in a large saucepan
2. Add the leek, carrot, celery and cook uncovered, stirring
3. Reduce to a simmer. Rinse the pearl barley
4. Bring 3 cups of salted water to a boil,
5. Drain, then place in a bowl and cool to
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7. Bring 3 cups of salted water to a boil,
8. Drain, then place in a bowl and cool to
9. Reduce to a simmer. Rinse the pearl barley
10. Bring 3 cups of salted water to a boil,

HIPPOCRATES’S CARROT SOUP

- 1 to 2 cloves garlic, minced
- 1 cup plain yogurt
- 1/2 cup extra-virgin olive oil
- Sea salt and cracked pepper

1. Heat the olive oil in a large saucepan
2. Add the leek, carrot, celery and cook uncovered, stirring
3. Reduce to a simmer. Rinse the pearl barley
4. Bring 3 cups of salted water to a boil,
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AEGINA-STYLE SALMON WITH PISTACHIO CRUST

- 1 cup unsalted raw shelled pistachios
- 1/2 cup extra-virgin olive oil
- Sea salt and cracked pepper

1. Place the pistachios in a mortar and grind with the pestle until they are coarsely broken up. Add the lemon zest, dill, pepper, and mix well. Cover and let sit for an hour or two, until the carrots are very tender.

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