

FEATURES

Maria Benardis consulted the ancient Greeks to heal mind, body and spirit



Maria Benardis passes on the wisdom from ancient Greek practices to help others Photo: Supplied

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2 June 2020 2:16pm



Greek-Australian Maria Benardis is a chef, author and motivational speaker.

Five years ago she moved to New York City's neighbourhood of Hell's Kitchen to further her culinary career.

“Would you believe it if I told you I picked this area just because it has the word ‘kitchen’ in it,” she said laughing.

Food was always at the epicentre of what Ms Benardis held close to her heart from a very young age, dating back to her time in Greece living with her grandmother.

“They were some of the best years of my life growing up on the Greek island...We grew everything. Some of my duties were to gather the eggs and milk the goats and help grandma make yoghurt and bread,” Ms Benardis explained, reminiscing.

Those beautiful years Ms Benardis spent on the island of Psara with her grandmother were just a fraction of time in comparison to what she had endured during her childhood.

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Maria Benardis wanted to show the world there was more to Greek cooking than a souvlaki
Photo: Supplied

“At the age of two my mother died of cancer and unfortunately my father didn’t know how to look after two girls. What was he going to do with a six month old and a two year old?”

Ms Benardis and her sister were placed in an orphanage, where they spent a few years.

Her father then removed the sisters out of the orphanage and sent them to Greece to live with their grandmother, until he decided to bring them back to Australia again some time later.

It was then that the real troubles began.

“What I didn’t realise, because I was so young when I went to Greece, is I didn’t realise my mother had died. So my father had remarried and I assumed my stepmother was my mother and no one told me the truth. But what I couldn’t understand was why she was so violent towards us.”

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Ms Benardis’ world was turned upside down and could and was left confused why her stepsister, who she thought was also born of her mother, was treated so differently.

“She used to try and make me steal, and I would not steal because I knew it was wrong. And because I wouldn’t steal, she would lock me up in the basement and not feed me for days, and then they would both just hit me.”

It had reached a point where police removed the sisters from their care, prompting their father to flee the country to avoid prosecution.

In time, Ms Benardis was left to deal with the trauma that has come as a result of the events.

“I had a lot of rejection issues, because I didn’t know what love was, I didn’t trust anybody because anybody I trusted abused me. I had a lot of anger issues towards my father...There was a lot of other stuff in my 20s, I had an abusive husband, that didn’t help.”

Maria's passage to ancient Greek practices for food and well being began when she was seeking alternative answers to severe health issues Photo: Supplied

Emotional issues and the stresses of a high pressure job would manifest and exasperate physical ailments.

“I was in tax law, it was a very stressful job because I dealt with a lot of criminals, as a consequence of having these sorts of jobs I became very ill for years...I had respiratory issues... my lung would collapse, I was in and out of hospital for years. Then they started to find pre-cancerous lumps all over my body. I was having surgery, they removed one from my breast, and then they removed three quarters of my left lung,” Ms Benardis said.

Doctors came to the conclusion that it was purely hereditary and that because Ms Benardis' parents died from cancer, that that would be her fate too.

Ms Benardis' passage to ancient Greek practices for food and well being began when she was seeking alternative answers to severe health issues she was facing.

“Well I was not going to accept that, I wasn't going to accept that I was going to be a cancer statistic. So I meditated on it and prayed and said 'God there's got to be something I can do'. So I was actually guided to go back to Ancient Greece and study. I came across all these people not just Hippocrates, but also Theochristos and Dioscorides.”

Maria had opened up a whole new world of ancient Greek practices for a holistic mind, body and spirit approach.

She overhauled her eating to a diet that included certified organic ingredients, practised meditation along with other therapies used to help heal her from her trauma and found a stronger connection with God.

This led her to author three books surrounding ancient Greek cooking and wellness titled *My Greek Family Table*, *Cooking and Eating Wisdom for Better Health* and *A Greekalicious Feast*.

“I was sick and tired of people thinking that Greek cuisine was souvlaki, tzatziki, moussaka and pastitsio. So I was very big on sharing the ancient Greek recipes and sharing the stories behind them was important as well.

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There’s so many beautiful stories on the ingredients and their healing benefits...I love the traditional recipes, don’t get me wrong but I get more excited by cooking the recipes that no one’s cooking.”

The next frontier of Ms Benardis’ career is firmly set in sharing her passion in the United States of America.

One of the biggest challenges one may face when packing up and moving to another country is not having family and friends to lean on when the going gets tough.

“I have had a lot of doors slammed in my face. At times like that you want to have some support network and I just did not have it, so there was some testing times, going home, being upset and crying. I’m only human...I

did not know anybody in New York, I just turned up with a couple of suitcases,” she said.

One door may slam, yet another opens to other opportunities.

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During her time in the United States, Maria has made appearances on television sharing her recipes and is now in the midst of putting together a television pilot.

For more information on Maria’s recipes and online courses visit www.greekalicious.nyc

