



Chopped Champion Proves There's NO LIMITS

A conversation
with
Maria Petridis
on winning
the TV cooking
competition.

BY MARIA BENARDIS

My afternoon lunch date is Maria Petridis, a 2016 winner of the Food Network's *Chopped*.

Her appearance on the show is not the first by a Greek. Nicholas Poulmentis from New York (who won in 2018) and Chef Sophia Manatakis from New Jersey (who also was on in 2018) are among several others who have made it to the speed-cooking competition. What sets Petridis apart from some of the others is that she has had no formal culinary training.

Petridis owns Maria's Mediterranean in Bayside, New York. The restaurant opened in 2011. Petridis, 52, exudes joy when you meet her. We instantly connected and talked openly as if we had known each other for years. My mission was to discover all her secrets to winning *Chopped*.

In keeping with true traditional Greek hospitality, a delicious and colorful spread was laid out. This was no ordinary lunch; it was a banquet of monumental proportions. Dishes included a Greek salad, dips (six dips in fact!) with pita chips, grilled octopus with baby arugula and sun-dried tomatoes, her *Chopped*-winning branzino (it made

all other branzino dishes I've had look like sardines) and wild blueberry baklava with tahini ice cream. Everything was made using top-notch ingredients, seasoned harmoniously, and plated with care, precision, and love.

Petridis, a "farm girl," helped run her family's small farm in the small village of Skoutari, Serres, Greece. She would milk the cows and cook for her hungry family. She was taught to cook by her mother, Chrisoula Tsomaridou, and she honed her skills over the years. "I came to the USA for a better life. I did not know English. I dreamt of leaving Greece and going to greener pastures. I knew there was more to life than just milking cows. It was a very tough environment. I started cooking from the age of 8 to feed my family, who worked in the fields. I would work with what ingredients the farm provided." Perhaps it was this tough environment that prepared her for her *Chopped* win.

Petridis is married to Kyriakos Petridis, and they have three beautiful children, Athanasios, 32, Melpomeni, 29, and Theoharis, 21. (She says her children are her toughest critics.) Her husband's parents lived in New York, so this presented them with an opportunity to settle here. They

moved from Greece to the USA in 1989.

"I owe everything to my supportive husband. It was his idea to open the restaurant. He wanted me to live my passion and what made my soul sing: Greek food and cooking. 'Do whatever you were doing for us all these years in the kitchen,' he said," says Petridis.

She has no culinary degrees or professional kitchen experience. She is self-taught. "I have no clue as to how other chefs or restaurants operate their establishments," she exclaims with laughter. "I find my source of inspiration from within and from the source of all ideas, God. I listen to his guidance, and I act accordingly. I followed the same winning secret to win *Chopped*."

The culmination of all her hard work came when she received that call from the show's producers. "[The Food Network] just called me," Petridis says. "I don't know how they found out about me, but they asked me if I want to compete. And of course, I said yes—why not. I never thought that one day I would cook in a kitchen, never mind be competing on *Chopped*," she says.

The cooking competition consists of four chefs being timed to create three meals—an appetizer in 20 minutes, a main course in 30 minutes, and a dessert in 30 minutes—and they are given specific mystery ingredients for each. The ingredients are often not commonly prepared together. The competitors also have access to a pantry and refrigerator stocked with various other ingredients.

After each meal is prepared, they present it in front of the judges, who determine which chef is going to get "chopped" from the show. In between each dish the contestants get a little time to rest and reflect whilst the set is cleaned and reset. The winner takes home \$10,000 in prize money. Petridis bested some stiff and intense competition for the prize, and she donated all the proceeds to the Make-A-Wish Foundation because "I know wishes come true," she says.

"From the beginning of the show I had decided that baklava was going to be the dessert dish. I was going to make it regardless of the ingredients. I wanted to dedicate my appearance to my husband, who loves baklava," says Petridis.

The judges loved the baklava.

"I could not believe I had won," says Petridis. "There was

great camaraderie amongst the contestants. Genuine professionalism. The judges were polite and right with all their comments. They were constructive and fair. I respected everything they said about my dishes. With time restrictions and immense pressure mistakes will happen. My aim was to please the judges with my food. It is the reason that I love to cook; to please people and to bring joy into their life. From the outset I had decided that I was going to stick to what I knew best—Greek food. I did not have any fixed strategies in mind. I knew if I did, I would be disconnected from God's ideas and I would end up losing myself," she says.

Petridis says that her experience on *Chopped* was "a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity." She feels that anybody who thinks they are not capable of chasing their dreams is wrong.

Since the show aired, the winning branzino and baklava dishes were added to her restaurant's menu and are best sellers. Business was always good, but new customers from other NY boroughs have made it their place to eat. People continue to pop in to meet her. Aside from her cooking skills, Petridis also shared her life story on the show. Her words proved that hard work really does pay off, and many who come to her restaurant thank her for that. "People seem to like the idea that a person who wasn't trained or didn't even speak English [made it]," she said. "They can relate to that." Petridis joked about how often a new face pops in. "I'm so happy that I reached so many people win different ways and to

inspire them. Many come because they wanted some of my winning energy to rub off on them, and I was happy to give it to them."

She has used her success to do lots of charity work. She has a regular culinary stint at the Renaissance Charter High School for Innovation in Harlem, where she teaches and inspires the next generation of chefs to live their dreams.

Petridis's parting advice to me on anyone wanting to win on *Chopped* is that they simply must "trust themselves because they know deep down what they are doing and what they do best; cook and stick to what you know best."

She is proof that the American Dream is possible for everyone. Petridis hopes that she will continue to inspire other immigrants to believe in themselves and to push to reach for their dreams



Petridis on Chopped (top), baklava with blueberry tahini ice cream, and branzino, the winning dishes.