

# FOOD FOR THOUGHT

THE ATMA'S MARIA BENARDIS IS LIVING THE DREAM – OR MORE APTLY, FOLLOWING HER DREAMS, THANKS TO A LIFE-CHANGING EPIPHANY EIGHT YEARS AGO. SHE ENCOURAGES OTHERS TO FOLLOW THEIR PASSIONS OUTSIDE OF THEIR PROFESSIONAL LIFE.

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Eight years ago, Maria Benardis found herself in a tiny church on the Greek island of Mykonos, crying uncontrollably. She had a good job as a tax specialist, a healthy income, and a lovely house – yet she wasn't happy. "What is my life's purpose?" she asked of Saint Fanourios, the Greek Orthodox patron saint of revealing lost things. The answer came instantly; she was to connect people back to themselves through her passion for Greek food.

Unlike many who question their career path, Benardis, then a tax specialist at the Institute of Chartered Accountants in Australia (ICAA), did something about it. She returned to Sydney and cut her work hours to three days a week. She began writing a cookbook, *My Greek Family Table*, which was published by Penguin in 2009 and won the Gourmand World Cookbook Award for the best Mediterranean cuisine book in Australia. In 2007, she opened *Greekalicious*, a cooking school and catering business in Sydney, and in January her first e-book, *A Greekalicious Feast* was published. Each Wednesday morning, she hosts a segment on SBS radio about Greek food and in June she launched a 'Greekalicious' range of products, including olive oil and vinegars.

But she hasn't turned her back on her tax and accounting career – not yet anyway. Benardis, 43, works part-time as ATMA's Technical Services Manager, answering members' queries, hosting seminars and writing articles. Her professional background is a big help, she says, in applying sound business principles such as expanding slowly, one step at a time,

and diversifying. "Thank God I've got an accounting background," Benardis says, noting that the food industry is high cost and low margin, with big capital expenses to set up. She says *Greekalicious* is now a profitable small to medium business, after a challenging first three to four years.

**WHERE IT ALL BEGAN**  
As for how she has managed her gradual career transition, Benardis says a key inspiration is her early childhood, spent on the Greek island of Psara with her paternal grandmother. Benardis was born in Sydney to Greek parents, but moved to Psara aged two, after her mother died.

"I think it was the best decision my father ever made; I feel blessed," says Benardis, who spent

the next seven years immersed in a community of 400 people, with no electricity or flushing toilets, and a communal oven. "We lived off the land and the sea," recalls Benardis, who learnt to make yoghurt, cheese and bread, grow vegetables and herbs, and barter with neighbours.

"It was all about family and people and sharing; it was all about love," she says.

At age nine, she returned to Sydney, where she lived briefly with her father and step-mother before being adopted by a maternal aunt. Her decision to become an accountant was, she says, typical of a Greek child of that era, whose parents had come to Australia with very little in the aftermath of World War II. "We were all told 'you are not to become anything other than an accountant or a doctor or a lawyer'," she says, adding that the plan was for the children to earn a good income to pay for the families' homes to be rebuilt in Greece.

**FROM LITTLE THINGS...**  
After completing an accounting diploma at Sydney Technical College then a business degree majoring in accounting and a Masters of Taxation Law from the University of Technology Sydney, Benardis threw herself into her career, including stints at Westpac Financial Services, the Australian Institute of Company Directors and law firm Mallesons Stephen Jaques (now King & Wood Mallesons), where she managed the firm's Sydney finance department.

She had a nagging feeling, however, that this wasn't what she wanted to do for the rest of her life. A switch away from accounting to pure tax work at KPMG didn't help, nor did moving to member >

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organisations including the Taxation Institute of Australia and then the ICAA. "I wanted to help people spiritually connect, live simply and to make a real difference in people's lives," she says, adding that she also missed the connection to the land she'd experienced as a child.

It was her trip back to Greece in 2004 – her first since she'd left at age nine – that proved the catalyst. "That little church changed my life," says Benardis, who describes herself as deeply spiritual and religious. The instructions from Saint Fanourios were specific – she was not to open a restaurant, she was to write a book about her awakening, and then teach others how to awaken.

The teaching bit goes well beyond Greek recipes. Benardis's books and cooking classes, peppered with reminiscences, are also about people following their passion and spiritually connecting with what they want from life. "No one taught me how to cook, no one taught me the history of food," says Benardis, who will soon finish her third book, about awakening to ancient wisdoms from ancient Greek philosophers that have been forgotten.

**"I trusted myself, I trusted God. You've got to believe in yourself, come from a place of love and not have any doubts or reservations."** ■

