greek classics

While the food traditons of Greece have never received quite the same attention as those of France, Italy or Spain, Maria Benardis is having a civilising influence at her cooking school in Sydney

RECIPES **Maria Benardis** PHOTOGRAPHY **Petrina Tinslay**
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Cyclades prawn and lobster saganaki (recipe p 94)

EZEDES CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT
icy feta dip; Santorinian tomato filo pies;
astic-infused prawns wrapped in kataifi
astry; ouzo-spiked oysters

Maria Benardis is a living Greek culinary dictionary, barely pausing for breath to explain the etymology, philosophy and cultural significance of each dish in her impressive repertoire. And now, the founder of Greekalicious cooking school in Sydney is on a mission to teach authentic Greek cuisine and its traditions.

"Most of my students don't know real Greek food," she says. "They may have heard of spanakopita, but this is only one pie of many. Each island has its unique pie, sausage, cured beef and salad."

Born in Sydney, Benardis moved to the Greek island of Psara at the age of four. It was here that she was first exposed to organic farming, fishing, hunting and bartering. "They were the happiest years of my life; everything revolved around food, wine and celebration.

"Cooking for us is such a binding ritual," she continues. "Greeks never cook or eat alone. Even today, I'll go to my aunt's house and there'll always be three or four women in the kitchen making dolmades and talking. Everything we make is blessed and handled with care. There are even songs for individual dishes."

Benardis is also turning her hand to culinary tours (see page 97). "I want to give people the whole cultural experience – the customs, the dancing, the way of life." Next is a cookbook, to be released in November, and she's also planning a one-stop shop for Greek delicacies. The gods must be smiling. **Selma Nadarajah**

KALAMATA SALAD

SERVES 4

We often have a Kalamata (or Greek) salad before the mezedes. It's made with only these ingredients, unlike many 'Greek salads' you find in restaurants. When other ingredients like purslane, pigweed or capsicum are included, the salad is called *horiatiki salata* or 'villagers' salad'.

4 large vine-ripened tomatoes, cut into wedges
1 Lebanese cucumber, cut diagonally into 2cm-thick slices
1 large Spanish onion, cut into thin rounds
150g (about 20) Kalamata olives
150g thin slice Greek feta
Dried wild oregano+, to taste
Extra virgin olive oil, to drizzle
Red wine vinegar (optional), to taste

Place tomatoes, cucumber, onion and olives in a large bowl and top with feta. Sprinkle with sea salt and wild oregano to taste, then drizzle with olive oil and red wine vinegar, if using.

+ Dried wild oregano is available as loose leaves or in bunches from delicatessens. If using bunches, rub the leaves from the stalks.

SPICY FETA DIP

Tirokafteri

SERVES 4

250g Greek feta, crumbled
70g (¼ cup) Greek-style yoghurt
1 tablespoon extra virgin olive oil
1 clove garlic, crushed
½ teaspoon dried wild oregano (see note above)
1 bird's-eye chilli, finely chopped with seeds
½ cup basil leaves
2 green onions, chopped
Pita bread, to serve

Process all the ingredients in a food processor until smooth, then refrigerate the dip for at least 2 hours. Makes 1½ cups. Serve with pita bread.

OUZO-SPIKED OYSTERS

This recipe adopts the ancient Greek principle of finding harmony between sweet, salty and sour flavours. I like to use *garos* (fish sauce) for the salty element. Although associated with Asian cuisine, fish sauce is widely used in Greek cooking, too. Made by the ancient Greeks, garos was then passed on to the Romans. Sadly, it isn't often used in Greek food today.

60ml (¼ cup) ouzo+
80ml (⅓ cup) lemon juice
2 tablespoons fish sauce
Rock salt and chopped dill (optional), to serve
24 freshly shucked Sydney rock or Pacific oysters
1 tablespoon finely chopped dill
1 tablespoon finely chopped green onion

Combine ouzo, lemon juice and fish sauce in a small bowl. Taste the dressing for balance; it should taste equally of the sweetness of the ouzo, the tanginess of the lemon juice and the saltiness of the fish sauce. Adjust to suit your palate.

Scatter rock salt and chopped dill, if using, over a platter. Place oysters on top, drizzle each with a little dressing and top with a little finely chopped dill and green onion. Serve immediately.

+ Ouzo is a Greek anise-flavoured spirit available from bottle shops.

MASTIC-INFUSED PRAWNS WRAPPED IN KATAIFI PASTRY

SERVES 4

Mastic or *masticha* is a clear, edible resin, which is produced from a type of gum tree that only grows on the Greek island of Chios. It's valued for both its therapeutic and culinary purposes. Here, its subtle flavour highlights the sweet prawns, while the pastry provides a lovely crunch.

250g (1 cup) extra virgin olive oil, plus extra, to shallow-fry
1 large crystal of mastic gum+
12 large green prawns, peeled, cleaned
100g kataifi pastry+

Place enough olive oil to cover the base of a small non-stick frying pan, then place over low heat. Add mastic and, using a metal spoon, stir until dissolved. Immediately pour into a glass jar or bowl. Add remaining oil and cool.

Toss prawns in a bowl with 125ml (½ cup) mastic oil, then refrigerate for at least 2–3 hours or overnight for the mastic flavour to infuse the prawns.

Separate kataifi pastry into long strips 6cm wide and the length of the prawns. Place a prawn widthwise at the end of each strip and roll up to encase in pastry. Squeeze lightly in your hand to ensure the pastry sticks together.

Heat 2cm olive oil in a non-stick frying pan over medium heat. Add the wrapped prawns and shallow-fry for 2 minutes each side or until golden and cooked through, then drain on paper towel. Serve immediately.

+ Mastic gum and kataifi pastry (also known as shredded or bird's nest pastry) are available from delicatessens and Middle Eastern food stores. In place of the mastic, you could infuse the olive oil with a cinnamon quill, 4 cloves and 1 teaspoon honey.

Maria Benardis

Kalamata salad

"Cooking for us is such a binding ritual. Greeks never cook or eat alone. Everything we make is blessed and handled with care. There are even songs for individual dishes"

SANTORINIAN TOMATO FILO PIES

MAKES 12

There are hundreds of Greek savoury pies and this one from Santorini features the island's famous tomatoes. Grown in rich volcanic soil with the intense Cycladic sunshine, the tomatoes are wonderfully earthy and sweet. In Australia, the closest in taste are small grape or cherry varieties.

500g mixed grape and cherry tomatoes
6 green onions, finely chopped
250g Greek feta, crumbled
4 eggs, lightly beaten
¼ cup each chopped mint, basil and flat-leaf parsley
1 teaspoon dried wild oregano (see note page 92)
8 sheets filo pastry
Extra virgin olive oil, to brush

Preheat oven to 180°C. Place tomatoes in a bowl, one at a time, pinching each so the pulp squirts out. Add onions, feta, eggs and fresh and dried herbs, season with sea salt and freshly ground black pepper and combine well.

Take 8 sheets of filo and, keeping them stacked together, roll them up and cut the roll of pastry widthwise into 3 equal pieces. Unroll each piece so you have 3 stacks of long strips. Cut each strip into 4, then place filo rectangles between two clean, damp tea towels to prevent the filo from drying out.

Brush a 12-hole, 80ml (⅓ cup) muffin pan with oil. Working with 2 rectangular pieces of filo at a time, place them in one of the holes of the muffin pan and brush with oil. Repeat 3 times, placing each filo stack at a right angle to the previous layer, to create a pastry case with 8 layers. Repeat with remaining filo to create 12 pastry cases.

Spoon the tomato mixture among pastry cases and bake for 30–35 minutes or until firm to the touch. Serve.

CYCLADES PRAWN AND LOBSTER SAGANAKI

SERVES 4

Saganaki involves sautéing, flambéing with ouzo or tsipouro (a spirit), and drizzling with lemon juice. Cheese such as haloumi, kefalotyri and kefalograviera are often cooked this way. I add lobster to this seafood version when I'm feeling decadent, but you can just use prawns by doubling the quantity.

2 tablespoons extra virgin olive oil
6 green onions, finely chopped
1 clove garlic, finely chopped
700g raw lobster tail, cleaned, cut into 5cm-thick slices with the shell+
8 large, unpeeled green prawns
Generous dash of ouzo (see note page 92)
4 vine-ripened tomatoes, coarsely grated to extract pulp only
½ teaspoon dried wild oregano (see page 92)
1 tablespoon finely chopped dill
1 tablespoon finely chopped flat-leaf parsley
100g Greek feta, crumbled

Heat oil in a frying pan over medium heat, add onions and garlic, and cook for 1 minute until softened. Add lobster and cook, turning, for 2–3 minutes, then add prawns and cook for 1 minute each side. Add ouzo, then carefully ignite with a match. When the flames have died down, add tomatoes and oregano, and bring to a simmer, then season with sea salt and freshly ground black pepper. Cover and cook for 3–5 minutes or until tomatoes are slightly cooked and seafood is cooked through.

Remove from the heat, sprinkle with fresh herbs and feta, and serve.

+ You can use a frozen lobster tail or buy a whole 1.5kg live lobster and ask your fishmonger to prepare it for you.

SWORDFISH SOUVLAKIA WITH FENNEL AND PARSLEY SALAD

SERVES 4

'Souvlakia' stems from the word 'souvla' which means both skewer and sword. The name of this dish derives from the ancient Greek ritual of sacrificing an animal to the gods with a sword. The meat was then cooked on the same sword and would be eaten from it, too.

1¼ tablespoons fennel seeds
Finely grated zest of 1 lemon
2 teaspoons fish sauce
60ml (¼ cup) extra virgin olive oil
1kg swordfish or other firm white fish, skinned, cut into 3cm cubes
8 metal or soaked bamboo skewers
Lemon wedges, to serve

FENNEL AND PARSLEY SALAD

1 baby fennel bulb, thinly shaved
¼ cup flat-leaf parsley
Juice and zest of ½ lemon
2 tablespoons extra virgin olive oil

Place fennel seeds in a small frying pan and stir over low heat for 1 minute or until fragrant. Cool, then grind coarsely, using a mortar and pestle.

Combine ground fennel seeds in a bowl with lemon zest, fish sauce, olive oil, a little freshly ground black pepper and swordfish, then refrigerate for 2–3 hours.

Thread 5 swordfish cubes onto each skewer. Preheat an oiled chargrill pan over medium–high heat and cook the souvlakia, in 2 batches, for 2 minutes each side or until just cooked through.

Meanwhile, for salad, combine fennel and parsley in a bowl. Add lemon juice, zest and olive oil, season with sea salt and toss to combine. Place salad on a platter and top with the souvlakia. Serve with lemon wedges.

BARBECUED GREEK-STYLE LAMB WITH BASIL-YOGHURT SAUCE

SERVES 4–6

The sauce that accompanies the lamb contains one of my favourite herbs – basil. The Greek word for basil, *vasilikos*, means 'royal', which is only appropriate, as basil is the crowning herb in Greek cuisine. It's also used to bless homes.

¼ cup chopped fresh oregano
1½ teaspoons dried wild oregano (see note page 92)
2 teaspoons fresh thyme
1½ teaspoons dried thyme
1 tablespoon chopped fresh rosemary, plus extra sprigs, to serve
6 cloves garlic, crushed
Juice and zest of 1 lemon, plus extra lemon wedges, to serve
80ml (⅓ cup) extra virgin olive oil
1.5kg boned and butterflied leg of lamb

BASIL-YOGHURT SAUCE

4 green onions, finely chopped
2 cloves garlic, sliced
1 cup flat-leaf parsley leaves
1 cup dill sprigs
¼ cup mint leaves
½ cup basil leaves
2 tablespoons lemon juice
60ml (¼ cup) olive oil
500g Greek-style yoghurt

Swordfish souvlakia with fennel and parsley salad

and to drink...

In Greece, you'd probably start with a white wine made with the savatiano grape variety. It's the grape that was traditionally used to make the Greek wine, retsina, but when made using modern techniques and technology, it produces subtle, fragrant white wine. The closest local equivalent would be pinot grigio. A light, minerally grigio would match nicely with the salads, dips and seafood. With the swordfish, a dry rosé would be a good choice. Barbecued lamb with herb and lemon flavours is perfect with young cabernet without too much wood influence. Serve Greek coffee with the baklava.

Greg Duncan Powell

Barbecued Greek-style lamb with basil-yoghurt sauce

For basil-yoghurt sauce, process onions, garlic and herbs in a food processor for 1 minute or until finely chopped. Add lemon juice and olive oil, and process for 30 seconds until smooth. Place yoghurt in a bowl, then stir in the herb mixture until combined. Refrigerate for 2 hours for flavours to develop. Makes 2 cups.

Combine fresh and dried herbs, garlic, lemon zest and olive oil in a bowl and season with sea salt and freshly ground black pepper. Place lamb on a tray and rub all over with herb mixture, then refrigerate for at least 2 hours or overnight for flavours to be absorbed.

Remove the lamb from the fridge and pour over the lemon juice.

Preheat a barbecue to low–medium heat and cook the lamb for 12 minutes each side for medium–rare or until cooked to your liking.

Remove lamb from barbecue and rest, loosely covered with foil, for 10 minutes before carving.

Carve the lamb into slices, divide among plates, then serve immediately with basil-yoghurt sauce, lemon wedges and extra sprigs of rosemary.

BAKLAVA

MAKES 12

Baklava can be sweetened with either sugar syrup or honey; I prefer honey. In ancient Greece, it was made without filo, with just nuts or sesame seeds combined with honey. You can vary the nuts and, in summer, serve baklava with ice-cream or Greek-style honeyed yoghurt.

300g blanched whole almonds, roughly chopped
50g (½ cup) walnuts, roughly chopped
2 tablespoons caster sugar
2½ teaspoons ground cinnamon
¾ teaspoon ground cloves
2 tablespoons dried breadcrumbs
12 sheets filo pastry
125g unsalted butter, melted
115g (⅓ cup) honey
Grape and almond spoon sweet (recipe follows) and Greek-style yoghurt, to serve

Preheat oven to 180°C. Combine nuts, sugar, spices and breadcrumbs in a bowl.

Take 12 sheets of filo and, keeping them stacked together, roll them up and cut the roll of pastry widthwise into 3 equal pieces. Unroll each piece so you have 3 stacks of long strips. Cut each strip into 4, then place the filo rectangles between two clean, damp tea towels to prevent the filo from drying out.

Brush a 12-hole, 80ml (⅓ cup) muffin pan with butter. Working wit 2 rectangular pieces of filo at a time place them in one of the holes of the pan and brush with butter. Repeat twice, placing each stack at a right angle to the previous layer to create a pastry case with 6 layers. Repeat with remaining filo to create 12 cas

Half-fill each pastry case with the r mixture, then top with 2 rectangular sheets of filo, trimming to fit. Brush butter, then fill with the remaining n mixture. Trim remaining filo rectan to 8cm squares and top each baklava with 4 pieces of filo, brushing with butter between every second layer.

With a sharp knife, cut a cross in top of each. Brush with butter and b for 25 minutes or until golden.

As soon as baklava is cooked, brin honey to a simmer in a small pan, th immediately drizzle over the top of t baklava, allowing honey to be absor through the holes in the top.

Serve warm or at room temperatu with grape spoon sweet and yoghur

GRAPE AND ALMOND SPOON SWEET

In Greek homes, spoon sweets are offered to guests on spoons as a form of hospitality. They're made from a wic range of fruits, nuts and vegetables. D use red grapes, as their skins will separ Serve this as a jam or simply with yogh

1kg white seedless grapes, washed
660g (3 cups) caster sugar
1 cinnamon quill
4 cloves
Juice of 1 lemon
100g slivered almonds, roasted

Place grapes, sugar, spices and 60ml (¼ cup) water in a heavy-based saucep Bring to the boil over high heat. Redu to medium and simmer for 45 minute skimming scum from the top.

Add lemon juice and cook, stirring occasionally, for a further 15 minutes or until mixture begins to turn pale golden and caramelise. Remove from heat, stir in almonds and immediately spoon into a 750ml (3-cup) sterilised* glass jar and seal while hot. This will keep, stored in a cool, dark place, for to 2 months. Refrigerate once opened.

* To sterilise jars, preheat oven to 150°C. Wash jars and lids in hot, soap water and rinse well, then place upri on an oven tray and heat in the oven for 10 minutes. Alternatively, run lid and jars through your dishwasher without detergent. VE+T

GREEKALICIOUS

Maria Benardis conducts corporate and children's cooking classes from her school based in Bondi Junction, NSW. She also offers private lessons in homes. For more information, phone (02) 9331 0734 or 0432 954 187, or visit greekalicious.com.au. Maria's first Culinary Travel Adventure for a group of up to 20 people will run 11–29 May 2009. For bookings, call 1800 770 599.

Baklava with grape and almond spoon sweet