

Maria Benardis  
of Greekalicious



TOP OF THE CLASS

# Greekalicious

A PASSIONATE AMBASSADOR FOR GREEK CULTURE AND HISTORY, MARIA BENARDIS TEACHES SYDNEYSIDERS HOW TO COOK THE DELICIOUS DISHES OF HER HERITAGE WITH LOVE AND INTUITION.

At Maria Benardis's cooking classes, you don't just learn how to cook Greek food, you also learn about Greek history and culture and pick up a few life lessons. Since 2007, Greekalicious has operated from The Intuitive Well holistic centre in Bondi Junction, Sydney. It may seem like a clinical atmosphere initially, but as Maria draws you in with her encyclopaedic knowledge, you forget the chanting emanating from the surrounding rooms, and the space lends itself to her spiritual slant on cooking.

The Greeks, Maria explains, have been eating organically and seasonally throughout history, also depending on food for medicine. "Every ingredient in a recipe is deliberate," she says. "In ancient Greece, Western medicine and naturopathy went hand in hand."

For Australian-born Maria, her interest in Greek cuisine was sparked during her childhood on the remote island of Psara, where she was sent to live with her grandmother at age three when her mother was diagnosed with cancer. In this fishing village renowned for lobster, sea urchin and thyme-infused honey, there was no electricity (and, therefore, no refrigeration), transport was by donkey, and herbs, fruits and vegetables came from her grandmother's garden. Maria recalls helping her grandmother make bread, goat's cheese and yoghurt from scratch.

At age 12, Maria returned to Sydney and was adopted (her mother had passed away) by her aunt, Stavroula, who taught her about the food of her native Kalamata: figs, *pastelli* (sesame and honey sweets), *sfela* (semi-hard goat's cheese) and, of course, olives.

In 2004, Maria decided to trade her accountancy career for cooking, building on her culinary skills by working briefly in the kitchen at Neil Perry's former restaurant, XO, before dedicating herself to teaching people about food from her heritage through

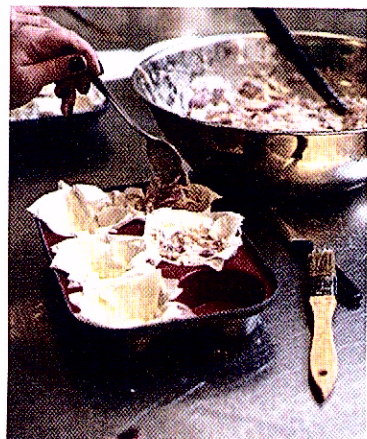
Greekalicious. In 2009, Maria published *My Greek Family Table*, which won Best Mediterranean Cuisine Book in Australia at the Gourmand World Cookbook Awards the same year. She also has a successful cooking program and podcast on SBS Radio. Through these avenues, Maria strives to give people an understanding of the distinct regional variations of Greek cuisine.

"Every island has its own pie, sausage, salad, cured meat and cheese," Maria explains. She tells us that the first pie, created about 4000 years ago in Athens, was essentially cheese and honey wrapped in filo. Today, each island's pie is determined by the produce for which it is renowned: on Mykonos it's red onions; on Santorini, tomatoes; and on Crete, wild greens, pumpkin, cinnamon and honey are key ingredients. It's similar for towns on the mainland: in Kalamata it's olives; in Florina, peppers and chillies; and in Grevena, mushrooms, of which there are more than 500 edible wild varieties.

Of course, there's no such thing as a Greek salad, either, Maria tells us. What most Australians recognise as a Greek salad is really *horiatiki salata* (village salad), a variation of the typical Kalamata salad. Like Greek pies, Greek salads capitalise on the best and most abundant produce specific to the region. On Mykonos, potato salads may include caramelised onions and capers; on Santorini, salads comprise tomatoes, cucumber, anchovies, salty cheese, caperberries and caper leaves.

The diversity of Greek ingredients is also impressive. Maria explains there are hundreds of varieties of filo pastry in Greece, including versions made with goat's butter or yoghurt. Feta also runs the gamut, from sour and peppery versions made in the Mount Taygetos area to sweet ones from Crete. "And there's no such thing as Bulgarian or Australian feta. Feta has to be Greek to be





called feta," she says firmly, referring to its Protected Designation of Origin status, which stipulates that the cheese must be produced from sheep's or goat's milk in specific regions of Greece to bear the name.

Continuing the tradition of her ancestors, Maria uses only organic produce, believing the positive energy of food is transferable. "I even sing to my herbs," she declares, as she talks about her balcony garden. "And for food to have good energy, you must be in a good mood when you cook it." Negative energy, Maria says, is reflected in sharp edges, which is why Greeks prefer everything, from utensils to dining tables, to be round. "You'll never find a square baking dish in Greece," she attests.

Honey and olive oil are "liquid gold" and Maria imports her extra virgin olive oil from a monastery on Crete, where monks have been harvesting and pressing olives since 1632. "That's why Greeks don't go to psychiatrists," she says. "We just turn to cooking and monks when we have problems!"

The cooking class is very relaxed, with students taking turns to try their hand at the stove, and Maria is not at all dogmatic about culinary techniques. "There is no such thing as the right way," she says to two attendees while they chop red onions for the Myconian caramelised onion pies. "No recipe is correct. Everyone has different tastes, moods and needs; we have to consider whether we drink coffee, whether we smoke, or whether we have a hangover!"

"In ancient Greece, they wrote about cooking without including measurements. It taught people how to measure for themselves. My next book is about the 10 spiritual philosophies of cooking, one of which is not to measure. We have to rely on our senses; they are our measuring spoons," she says emphatically.

As we assemble the pies, Maria shares her tips: "If you like, scatter extra cheese between each double layer of filo. You can freeze the

unbaked pies, then when you're too tired to cook, put them in the oven for 45 minutes, and there's dinner. I also like to cook the leftover pie mixture with eggs and turn it into an omelette." The filo cases are great vessels for canapés – perhaps grilled scallops and taramasalata.

As Maria blesses the pies before they go into the oven, we turn our attention to the main course, braised lamb with saffron mashed potatoes. Maria obtains her saffron, or *krokos* in Greek, from an area in Macedonia near the town of Krokos. She takes a few threads of saffron from a small metal container and dabs it on her tongue. "It's full of antioxidants," she says.

There are many myths about the origin of saffron, including the story of Krokos, whose friend, the god Hermes, accidentally struck him dead with a discus. For every three drops of blood that fell to the ground, a saffron flower grew. In ancient Greece, women used saffron as perfume and dye. Today, we're using it to take mash to new heights.

Our cooking done, the room is transformed into a taverna. Greek folk music is played, wine is poured and we feast on Myconian caramelised onion pies and *marousolata* (lettuce salad) for starters, then tuck into meltingly tender lamb shanks in a tomato sauce with undertones of clove and cinnamon – the perfect accompaniment for the mash. We finish with *loukoumades* based on Maria's family recipe. These golden balls are crunchy with a wonderful spongy centre that we use to mop up remnants of cinnamon, honey and walnuts.

"If you turn up to a Greek table and there's not a lot of food, you're not loved," Maria says. If that's the case, we all feel very loved, indeed. Maria Benardis also runs cooking classes for children and food tours to Greece; for information, visit [greekalicious.com.au](http://greekalicious.com.au). Hear Maria's weekly audio story about Greek cuisine, accompanied by recipes, on the SBS Kitchen Conversations program; visit [sbs.com.au/food](http://sbs.com.au/food).



**BRAISED LAMB  
WITH SAFFRON  
MASHED POTATOES**  
ARNI KAPAMA KAI POURE  
ME KROKOS KOZANIS

**SERVES 4**

*Kapama* is the Greek word for stew. You can also make kapama with chicken, goat or rabbit. Maria uses saffron from Kozani, Macedonia, for its superior quality. The saffron gives the mashed potatoes a lovely flavour.

2 tbs extra virgin olive oil  
1kg lamb shanks  
1 large white onion, chopped  
2 large garlic cloves, chopped  
400g can chopped tomatoes  
1 large carrot, chopped  
750ml merlot  
1 cinnamon quill  
2 bay leaves  
2 thyme sprigs  
4 cloves  
Chopped flat-leaf parsley,  
to serve

**Saffron mashed potatoes**

1kg desiree or sebago potatoes,  
peeled, cut into 3cm pieces  
125ml (½ cup) pouring cream  
or milk  
1 tsp saffron threads  
40g butter, at room temperature

**1** Heat oil in a large, heavy-based pan over medium heat. Brown lamb shanks, turning for 5 minutes. Transfer to a bowl.

Add onion and garlic to pan and cook for 5 minutes or until golden brown. Add tomatoes, carrot, merlot, cinnamon, bay leaves, thyme and cloves, season with salt and pepper, and bring to a simmer. Return lamb to the pan, cover and cook for 1 hour or until the meat is almost falling off the bone.

**2** Meanwhile, to make saffron mashed potatoes, place potatoes in a large saucepan and cover with cold, salted water. Bring to the boil and cook for 15 minutes or until tender.

**3** Meanwhile, place cream and saffron in a small saucepan and cook over low heat for 10 minutes to infuse cream.

**4** Drain potatoes, add butter and mash until smooth. Slowly add cream mixture, stirring continuously until combined.

**5** Remove and discard cinnamon, bay leaves, thyme sprigs and cloves from stew. Scatter parsley over lamb and serve with saffron mashed potatoes.



Braised lamb