



Illustrations by Ethel Hammer

A New Greek Cuisine

By Ethel Hammer

Imagine Hestia, the noble virgin deity of hearth and home, in a tizzy of excitement as Greek food and ingredients continue to be re-envisioned and discussed from Athens to New York to Chicago and all across America.

Some traditional Greek dishes are being pulled apart, then reconstructed as lovely works of art. Others (sacrilege of sacrilege) aren't even cooked in an oven or a pot. Imagine *stifado* served over French brioche. Or feta with broccolini—a hybrid green vegetable developed in Japan. Is Hestia imploring Zeus to stop this human fiddling and finagling? Or is she too busy herself, stirring up new versions of nectar and ambrosia?

In today's society, chefs travel the world. And as a result, new mentalities arise. Because of this, many question if the marvels of traditional Greek cooking can survive. Some chefs and self-described culinarians even ponder the different forms that Greek cuisine should take. Somewhere an oracle burbles with Hestia's truths and opinions. Should you find it, let us know.

GREECE, REVISITED

In Athens, diners searching for the most far-out Greek food have found *spanokopita* served in an ice-cream cone and *skordalia* swooshed into a foam. They've feasted on rabbit *stifado*

cooked in a vacuum-packed, plastic *sous vide* bag instead of it being braised in a classic casserole. They've even partaken in grilled *kasseri* sandwiches with savory truffle butter, and sweetbread with *quince souvlaki*. Some people consider these meals thrilling; others outrageous. Some believe the food to be treacherous; others sensational. It may all go back to what you know, what you expect, your age, your background, what you like.

"At **48 The Restaurant**, in Athens, I saw a Greek salad where the tomato came in a sorbet, the cucumber was foamed, they froze the feta into something that resembled popcorn and the olive was part of the dressing," said chef George Kyrtatas. He also saw fettucine sorbet as well as traditional dishes such as rabbit and octopus stews. "I saw tahini infused oils, which were very nice and very simple," he said.

Author of two cookbooks, Kyrtatas has worked with culinary hot shots like Martin Yan and Emeril Lagasse. "I know how to do *sous vide* and foam. I can use calcium chloride and sodium alginate and turn fruit purees and juices into the same texture and look as caviar. Do I agree with them? No. Do I want to know how to do it? Yes. [But] I don't think we should be ingesting more chemicals," he said. Instead, Kyrtatas, the chef and owner of **Hathaway's**, a Greek restaurant in



Bacon-Wrapped Figs

Appetizer for four

Ingredients

- 12 slices bacon
- 24 figs
- extra virgin olive oil, for frying

Preparation Method

Cut each bacon slice in half crosswise. Roll up each fig in a piece of bacon. Saute bacon wrapped figs in extra virgin olive oil until bacon is crisp. Serve hot.

Fennel, Feta and Kalamata Olive Salad

Serves 4

Ingredients

- ½ lb fennel bulbs (about 1 bulb)
- ¼ cup lemon juice
- 1 Tbsp olive oil
- ¼ tsp sugar
- ⅛ tsp salt
- ⅛ tsp pepper
- 4 oz feta cheese, crumbled
- ¼ cup Kalamata olives, pitted and chopped

Preparation Method

Clean fennel well and remove outer layers and top stocks. On a mandoline, slice fennel into the thinnest shreds possible. Then soak fennel in ice water for 30 minutes. Drain the fennel. In a bowl, mix sugar, olive oil, salt, pepper and lemon juice. Toss in the shredded fennel. Top with chopped olives and crumbled feta cheese.

NOTE: Fennel has a very strong licorice flavor, but when you shred the bulb and add the other components to this recipe, the fennel is a sweet background flavor to an incredible salad.



Photo courtesy of George Kyrtatas

George Kyrtatas is the author of My Big Fat Greek Feast, and has provided the recipes on these two pages for GreekCircle readers to enjoy. More information about him is available at littlegreekchef.com.

Cinnaminson, a New Jersey suburb of Philadelphia, loves tradition. “The freshness and flavor of Greek food should speak for itself. It’s great to know what’s going on in Athens, but it’s wonderful to go to the islands where they keep things traditional.”

Meanwhile, in his quest to keep Greek food simple and accessible to novice cooks, Kyrtatas conjures up new inventions such as pita pizza with goat cheese; bacon-wrapped figs; and fennel, feta and Kalamata olive salad.

AMERICA'S GREEK FOOD

It’s great news that **Anthos**, one of three restaurants co-owned by Greek-American chef Michael Psilakis, was nominated for Best New Restaurant in 2008 by New York’s James Beard Foundation. It’s also a boon to Greek culinarians that Psilakis, who is self-taught, was named as one of the Best New Chefs for 2008 by *Food & Wine* magazine, making the list “because he has ingeniously redefined Greek cooking in America.” (*Food & Wine*, July 2008)

Diners for their part may experience the fun of eating a Greek scallop sandwich in which the scallop substitutes for bread. In Psilakis’s *hilopita*, a traditional pasta dish is deconstructed and laid out on a long slender plate in a new way: the egg noodles are topped with snails, braised rabbit and manouri cheese—with a tip of the toque to contemporary taste in the form of the addition of black truffle—all to give more focus and respect to Greek food. “Revisited dishes are traditional ones I’ve recreated by capturing the essence of their soul, a feeling, a memory...” he said.

Known for pulling traditional dishes apart and re-envisioning them, as well as updating traditional dishes with nods to contemporary tastes, Psilakis, for all his inventiveness, doesn’t fool around with traditional Greek ingredients. “I grew up eating traditional food every day at home. It is my mother’s food that has shaped my palette and moved me towards trying to recapture the essence of Greek food in a more sophisticated and



Photo courtesy of Michael Psilakis

Michael Psilakis's re-envisioned hilopita is deconstructed and laid out on a long slender plate in a new way: the egg noodles are topped with snails, braised rabbit and manouri cheese. He was named one of Food & Wine magazine's Best New Chefs for 2008.

intellectualized manner," he said. His gift is to deconstruct classic recipes, redefine their look and upscale the plate. In fact, he's even blindfolded his Greek mother to see if she can identify a dish, internalizing this approach as he seeks out, creates and interprets new dishes for his restaurant.

In Yountville, Calif., the inventive chef Thomas Keller, one of America's culinary Olympians, has featured Mt. Vikos feta at his restaurant **Ad Hoc**, in an appetizer with broccolini, Kalamata olives and sherry caper dressing. In San Francisco, feta has added its zest to a salad of pomegranates, endive and frisée at Wolfgang Puck's **Postrio**. Iron Chef Michael Symon offers a new take on Halumi in his restaurant **Lola** in Cleveland, serving it in an appetizer with watermelon, mint, almonds and scallions.

Meanwhile, in Chicago, Greek restaurateur Toni Di Meola, who was born in Athens, is staying true to her classical Greek roots by using 80-year-old recipes from her family and homeland at her restaurant **Mythos**. "It's fine to encourage change in the country of origin of the cuisine. I can understand it as a way to reach the youth of the country," she said.

But is what's fine in Greece necessary in Chicago? Not at all, Di Meola said. "We have so many ethnic foods here in Chicago we can afford to stay traditional. We don't need the competitiveness of the

new, like *spanokopita* in an ice-cream cone, which, to me, sounds ridiculous," she said.

The sister duo of Di Meola and Vicky Zervas, **Mythos'** co-owner and chef, stay true to tradition and serve *avgolemano* soup, grilled octopus, *loukaniko* perfumed with anise and orange rind, braised lamb, and their beloved family's *pastichio*. As Pericles, the ancient Greek general and statesman said, "Memory speaks!"

Whether inventing new dishes with Greek ingredients, reconfiguring traditional recipes in unexpected ways, or staying true to old recipes, authentic tastes and aromas shine through. An enduring, evolving culinary classic, Greek cooking moves on, staying steadfast in some quarters, while changing in others. The tried and true abides beside the new.

Let's hope Hestia is happy. ©



Baked Prawns and Three Cheeses

Serves 4

Ingredients

- 16 large prawns, peeled & deveined
- 1 white onion, chopped fine
- 2 garlic cloves
- 1 cup diced tomatoes
- 2 tsp fresh dill, chopped fine
- ½ cup white wine
- 2 Tbsp lemon juice
- ¼ cup asiago cheese
- ¼ cup parmesan cheese
- ¼ cup feta cheese, crumbled
- pepper to taste
- ¼ cup parsley, chopped

Preparation Method

Preheat oven to 350 degrees. In a sauce pot, saute onions and garlic until soft. Then add tomatoes, dill, white wine and lemon juice. Simmer for three minutes. In a baking dish, lay prawns down all in the same direction. Then top with the sauce and with the cheeses. Bake in oven for approximately ten minutes or until prawns are cooked. Garnish with chopped parsley.

Goat Cheese Stuffed Zucchini

Serves 6

Ingredients

- 6 baby zucchini
- 6 slices of goat cheese, cut in strips
- salt and pepper
- 1 Tbsp oregano, finely chopped
- 1 Tbsp extra virgin olive oil
- 2 garlic cloves, minced

Preparation Method

Cut a slit into the center of the zucchini. Sprinkle the inside of the slit with oregano, salt and pepper, then stuff with goat cheese. Brush the zucchini with oil and top with garlic. Place into a roasting pan and bake at 350° covered for 20 minutes, then bake uncovered for 20 minutes or until zucchini is fork tender.