

FOOD

Don't call it a comeback

Healthy living, and eating locally and sustainably, is what people are looking for at the moment. The Cretan diet fits this bill. Neos Kosmos looks at why a regional cuisine is making a comeback.

The Lyrarakis winery.

PENNI PAPPAS

Cretan eating is a cuisine currently enjoying a moment in the limelight. Touted as a region that manufactures spectacular olive oil, gorgeous wines and simple honest fare, foodies are sourcing out Cretan produce and ideas. Agnes Weninger, along with her business partner Krisztina Csedrik, created the *Meet and Eat in Crete: Dine and Wine Guide*, now in its tenth year of publication. Neos Kosmos asks a Canadian by birth (with a Hungarian background) residing in Crete: why the big deal over Cretan food? There's been a sudden surge and interest in Cretan food, can you explain why?

There are many current trends conducive to elevating Cretan cuisine to its rightful place on the international stage amongst other great cuisines. I believe that many are tiring of the established mainstream cuisines of say France and Italy, but most importantly, Cretan cuisine fits perfectly into the new movements of eating healthy, eating local, eating seasonal, eating organic and eating sustainably.

Everyone has heard of the so-called Mediterranean diet and the seven countries study undertaken by Dr Keys in the late 1950's which pretty much put Crete and the Cretan diet on the map, confirming the benefits of a diet rich in copious amounts of olive oil, carbohydrates, fresh fruit and vegetables and low in animal fat. This nutritional standard promoted health and prevented the onset of diseases.

Up until about the late 1960's, Cretans lived by the seasons and by what they could get their hands on locally. What was in season around them was what was eaten. It was the easiest to obtain, the cheapest and the freshest. They didn't know anything about being a locavore or about carbon footprints or food miles. This is still the way many on the



Agnes Weninger sitting back in Crete.

island live today and in these trying economic times, many are turning back to the land to help them sustain themselves.

What are some of the fundamentals of Cretan cuisine?

The first two would be prodigious amounts of olive oil and fresh vegetables, most of which are greens, wild and cultivated. There are purported to be about 80 different varieties, depending on the season. I would also consider snails, pulses, particularly broad beans; rusks and breads; cheeses, famous since antiquity, honey; herbs, especially mint, thyme and wild fennel. And wine and raki to accompany the foods.

What is the main eating style in Crete?

Before the crisis, Cretans loved to eat out and almost always in large groups. They would get together with friends or family to eat, drink and talk for hours at a time, revelling in the companionship. They would order lots and lots of *mezedes* to share with each other. Sunday lunch is the big family time out. Most families would take an excursion outside of the city to a tavern to relax and enjoy the foods and each other away from their usual place.

What are some popular exports of Crete?

Extra virgin olive oil, grapes, raisins, wine, oranges and to a lesser extent: honey, herbs (particularly dittany, sage and



Baby calamari makes the perfect meze for a crisp Cretan white wine.

other wild mountain herbs for teas), rusks and snails.

Tell me a little bit about Cretan wine.

Crete today produces a fifth of Greece's total output, so it is an important wine region for the country as a whole. Of course you will still find the old style of wines that every family invariably has barrels of. These wines are likely to be amber-coloured and very strong in both taste and alcohol content. Most of Crete's bottled wines come from the Iraklio prefecture - the largest producer - Chania-Kissamos and a smaller area in Siteia. The whites are mostly cool,

crisp, lively and refreshing wines that greatly improve any Cretan meal. Even the most obscure indigenous varieties are making a comeback like *vilana*, *dafni*, *plyto*, *vidiano*, muscat of spina, malvazia di candia and *thrapsothiri* to name a few of the whites. Sometimes these are made into varieties and often they are blended surprisingly well with world cultivars like Chardonnay and Sauvignon Blanc. The red Cretan varieties are mostly *kotsifali*, *mandilari* and *liatiko*. The latter is most often made into a delightful dessert wine, while the first two are great for blending with old favourites like Cabernet Sauvignon, Syrah or to a lesser extent, Merlot.



Lamb with maratha, a typical Cretan main.

If someone wanted to recreate a Cretan dinner at home, what would you suggest?

Starters:

Dakos - Cretan rusk doused with oil, then topped with finely chopped tomato and liberally crumbled with myzithra or substitute feta and oregano. This dish is often referred to as the Cretan Bruschetta.

Anthous - Zucchini flowers stuffed with a rice-herb mixture and steamed.

Boureki from Chania - zucchini, potato and myzithra cheese casserole.

A Salad - try to recreate the wild greens found here by using chicory, endive, baby spinach or rucola. You

can add cherry tomatoes, sun-dried tomatoes, raisins, pomegranate seeds. Make a vinaigrette with olive oil, balsamic vinegar and some honey.

Broad bean puree with olive oil

Mains:

Lamb or goat braised with artichokes in *avgolemono* (egg-lemon sauce).

Cuttlefish with greens, string beans and olives or with fennel and spinach.

Pork *tsitsiristo* with wine and coriander and cumin.

Desserts:

Fresh seasonal fruit.

Petimezopita - spice cake with grape juice syrup.

Tiganites - Cretan pancakes doused with honey.



Dora's Recipe

The Cretans have their own names for some dishes that are very similar to other parts of Greece. *Mamoulia*, I have seen and read about in homes and in recipe books that are not connected with Crete under a different name. Each part of Greece has their own identity in many things and food is one of them.

The Cretans are very proud people and are very proud of their cuisine and they have every right to be. Today Crete has become the organic food bowl of Greece

and one of the organic food bowls of Europe. There is a great push officially to promote Crete not just for its weather, beaches and luxury hotels but also to emphasise its food culture.

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Cretan Mamoulia from Rethymno

Ingredients

Pastry

350 grams unsalted butter, melted
 1/2 cup sugar
 1/2 cup milk
 5 cups plain flour
 2 eggs
 1 small glass of raki
 1/2 teaspoon baking powder

Filling

1/2 kilo mixture of walnuts and almonds, chopped
 5 tablespoons sugar
 1 teaspoon cinnamon

Sprinkle

Rose water
 Icing sugar

Method

1. Preheat oven to 180°C.
2. In a large saucepan, heat the milk and add the sugar to dissolve.
3. Add melted butter to milk mixture.
4. Sieve flour with baking powder and add to milk mixture and stir until this becomes a firm dough. Allow to cool.
5. Add the eggs and raki and work with hands until it is pliable dough.
6. Mix all the filling ingredients.
7. Cut a small piece of dough and flatten out with the palm of the hand.
8. Put in a heaped teaspoon of the filling in the middle of the flattened pastry and close.
9. Put mamoulia in a buttered baking dish and bake for about half an hour.
10. When ready, remove and sprinkle with rose water and icing sugar.

Kali Orexii