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Greek Feast

Entertaining a crowd is easy, breezy, and scrumptious if you think Greek.

BY SERENA BASS



DELICATE FLAN
(RECIPE ON PAGE 51)

THERE'S NOTHING NICER THAN TO CELEBRATE HARVEST season with a big dinner party—so why not get eight friends together for a big gathering on the deck? Once you've decided to host a crowd, it's so much easier to do it well if you choose a country with very recognizable food to guide your inspiration. All the dishes taste married to each other because they have lived together for centuries. Greece is one of the best choices: the food is vibrant, simple, and only the grumpiest sorts don't perk up immediately at the thought of that sun-soaked cradle of civilization. (And let me tell you, if Zeus's wife had made any of the food in this article, he would have spent much less time running around transforming himself into a bull and flirting with the nymphs.) When I was in Greece, I used to love looking into the often wide-open kitchens of seaside cafés and tavernas. There would be sliced, waxy potatoes, studded with garlic and imbued with lemon; meltingly tender stuffed tomatoes, charred on top and bursting at the seams; chickens roasted with whole lemons and olives; and vats of roasted lamb with fistfuls of rosemary and not just garlic cloves but whole heads of garlic, randomly tucked in around the edges of the pan. Then, sitting at a wooden table with a jug of wine, homemade pita bread, and a dish of tzatziki, the predicament of what to order loomed large.

After a few days of wonderful lunches and dinners, I learned one lesson well: No matter what I decided upon, I couldn't go wrong, as you will discover with these recipes.

When I cook Greek food I usually plan for a buffet. So much can be prepared ahead and either served at room temperature or easily warmed up at the last minute. It is all very forgiving. Even a steak or a hamburger (or lamburger!) can become Greek-ish if you scatter it with pungent Kalamata olives and crumble on salty feta.

Since the food is so forgiving, you can devote extra energy to making the table look splendid: An Adriatic blue tablecloth and some little pottery vases, filled with rosemary and thyme, will set the scene. Carafes of red wine and a bucket of ice with buried bottles of white wine are simple and perfect. If you want to tip a pile of lemons into a green glass bowl to set in the middle of the table go right ahead. Greece, here you come.



Spinach Tart with Raisins and Pine Nuts

SERVES 8

A frozen grocery-store tart shell makes this dish come together in minutes, but if you're a homemade pie-crust pro, by all means start with your favorite scratch recipe.

- 2 tablespoons butter
- ½ cup chopped shallots
- 1 teaspoon minced garlic
- 1 pound baby spinach leaves
- ⅓ cup yellow raisins
- 2 extra large eggs
- ½ cup cream
- 2 tablespoons fresh dill, minced
- ¼ cup crumbled feta
- 1 teaspoon kosher salt
- ½ teaspoon freshly ground black pepper
- 1 precooked tart shell
- ¼ cup pine nuts (plus 1 tablespoon for scattering on top before baking. Note: The Italian word for pine nuts is *pignoli*.)

➤ In a sauté pan, melt the butter, add the shallots and garlic, cook over medium heat for 2 minutes.

➤ Add the spinach a handful at a time and keep stirring till the spinach has wilted before adding the next handful. When it's all wilted, turn up the heat and stir to evaporate any liquid. Add the raisins and the ¼ cup of pine nuts and set aside.

➤ In a medium bowl, mix together the eggs, cream, dill, feta, salt, pepper. Add the spinach mixture and stir together. Pour into a precooked tart shell, scatter with 1 tablespoon of extra pine nuts, and bake for 30 to 35 minutes, or until the center is just set.

➤ Serve hot or at room temperature.

Stuffed Tomatoes with Brown Rice, Oregano, and Pine Nuts

SERVES 8

A very useful recipe! Good for vegetarians, good for making in the morning and serving in the evening, good for serving with fish, meat, or chicken—good for surprising your friends with what tomatoes and brown rice can become.

- Vegetable oil for the baking dish
- ¾ cup short-grain brown rice
- 1 tablespoon plus 1 teaspoon kosher salt
- 1 large onion, diced
- ¼ cup Greek or extra-virgin olive oil, plus more for drizzling
- 8 firm ripe tomatoes, cut from the vine leaving a little stalk
- 2 cloves garlic, minced
- 1 tablespoon minced fresh oregano (or 2 teaspoons dried)
- ½ teaspoon freshly ground black pepper
- ⅓ cup pine nuts (sometimes called *pignoli* nuts)

➤ Position a rack in the upper third of the oven and preheat to 350°F. Oil a 13x9-inch heavy metal or ceramic baking dish and set aside.

➤ Put the rice and one tablespoon of salt in a saucepan, cover with cold water by 4 inches and bring to a simmer. Cook approximately 40 minutes, until the rice is still a little chewy. Drain and set aside.

➤ Put the olive oil in a medium, heavy-based saucepan over medium heat and gently sauté the onion until translucent, about 5 to 7 minutes.

➤ Cut a good slice off the tomatoes at the stalk end and

shave a little slice off the base so the tomatoes stand straight; set each top next to its tomato. Using a teaspoon, scoop the pulp out into a small bowl, then chop the pulp and add to the onion along with the salt, garlic, oregano, and pepper. Cook briskly for 5 minutes. Add the rice and cook another 3 minutes or until most of the liquid is absorbed; set aside to cool.

➤ Stir in the pine nuts, and then fill the tomatoes, piling the mixture over the rim (and making sure not to pack down too tightly). Press the tomato lid down on top, and place the stuffed tomatoes 1 inch apart in the baking dish. If there is any extra rice mixture, spoon it around them. (Note: The dish can be made to this point, covered, and refrigerated.)

➤ When you're ready to bake the tomatoes, drizzle with a little extra olive oil and bake for 45 minutes to 1 hour depending on the size of the tomatoes, adding 10 minutes if the stuffed tomatoes are cold from the fridge.

➤ These look most authentic if the tomato skin is slightly blackened on the top. If necessary, turn the oven up to 450°F for the last 5 to 10 minutes. The good news is that these tomatoes are just as *katapliktiko* (unspeakably fabulous) warm or at room temperature so you could bake them earlier in the day if you need space in the oven. Cover with plastic wrap while the tomatoes are still just a little warm. The condensation that forms will keep them from drying out.



Spontaneous Greek Tomato Salad

This is a concept rather than a recipe.

If you're lucky enough to read this during heirloom tomato season and want to dazzle your guests, simply slice perfectly ripe, large heirloom tomatoes horizontally (discarding the top and bottom slice) and arrange them casually overlapping on a platter. Crumble on feta cheese, grind on some black pepper, drizzle with olive oil, and scatter thickly with chopped fresh dill.

And there you go.



Melting Spiced Eggplant

SERVES 8 AS A SIDE DISH

This dish has Turkish roots, but I use it all the time in a Greek-themed meal. It is so luscious and fork friendly that I feel it can jump countries with impunity. If you can't find small eggplant, just cut an inch-thick slab from a large eggplant, and proceed as in the recipe, piling the sauce on each slice before baking. It can also stand as a first course plated upon a handful of salad greens dressed simply with olive oil, lemon juice, salt, and pepper.

- 8 baby eggplants (about 5 inches long)
- 4 medium onions
- ½ cup olive oil
- 1½ tablespoons chopped garlic
- 6 medium plum tomatoes, peeled and chopped (or 2 cups canned tomatoes, chopped)
- ¼ cup minced parsley
- ½ teaspoon ground cumin
- 2 teaspoons coriander seeds, ground in a spice grinder
- 1 cinnamon stick
- salt
- freshly ground black pepper
- 2 tablespoons lemon juice
- pinch of sugar
- ½ cup water

➤ Position a rack in the upper third of the oven and preheat to 350°F.

➤ Peel ½-inch strips from top to bottom of each eggplant to look like stripes. Cut a deep slit in one side stopping short of the stem and base then soak in a bowl of cold, well-salted water for 30 minutes; drain, squeeze dry, and pat with paper towels.

➤ Pour half the oil in a heavy pan and sauté the onion gently until translucent, about 10 minutes. Add the garlic and sauté 1 minute. Add the rest of the ingredients except the water and simmer together for 10 minutes. Transfer to a bowl and set aside. Wipe out the pan.

➤ Put the balance of the oil in the same pan over high heat and fry the eggplant until golden brown but still firm. Arrange the eggplant slit-side up in an oiled, oven-proof dish. Stuff the mixture into the slits and spoon any remaining mixture on top. Add the water, cover, and bake for 45 minutes.

➤ Remove the cinnamon stick and serve warm or at room temperature.

Boneless Leg of Lamb with Rosemary and Ginger

SERVES 10-20, DEPENDING ON REST OF MEAL

The great benefit of this recipe is not having bones to maneuver. It also tastes wonderful with the unorthodox but divine addition of ginger with the rosemary. This looks very elegant served at a dinner party but still packs that intense flavor of a wild night out in Athens.

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SPINACH TART WITH RAISINS & PINE NUTS:
PER SERVING: CALORIES 124 (90 from fat); FAT 10g (sat. 6g); CHOL 88mg; SODIUM 339mg; CARB 5g; FIBER 1g; PROTEIN 5g

STUFFED TOMATOES WITH BROWN RICE:
PER SERVING: CALORIES 213 (118 from fat); FAT 14g (sat. 2g); CHOL 0mg; SODIUM 369mg; CARB 21g; FIBER 4g; PROTEIN 4g

MELTING SPICED EGGPLANT:
PER SERVING: CALORIES 185 (123 from fat); FAT 14g (sat. 2g); CHOL 0mg; SODIUM 8mg; CARB 15g; FIBER 4g; PROTEIN 2g

BONELESS LAMB, PER 7 OZ SERVING:
CALORIES 242 (120 from fat); FAT 14g (sat. 5g); CHOL 97mg; SODIUM 366mg; CARB 1g; FIBER 0g; PROTEIN 27g

GREEK POTATOES WITH ARTICHOKE:
PER SERVING: CALORIES 303 (125 from fat); FAT 14g (sat. 2g); CHOL 0mg; SODIUM 361mg; CARB 42g; FIBER 10g; PROTEIN 6g

DELICATE FLAN:
PER SERVING: CALORIES 201 (77 from fat); FAT 9g (sat. 4g); CHOL 267mg; SODIUM 47mg; CARB 24g; FIBER 0g; PROTEIN 6g

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- 1 7-pound leg of lamb, butterflied into neat sections
- 4 tablespoons (½ stick) unsalted butter
- 2 tablespoons extra-virgin olive oil
- 2 ounces fresh ginger, peeled, sliced, and minced
- 1 tablespoon minced fresh rosemary
- 1 tablespoon minced garlic
- 1 tablespoon kosher salt
- 2 teaspoons freshly ground black pepper
- ¼ cup fresh chopped dill

- Look at the meat and trim off any remaining fat or silver skin, the sheet of opaque skin covering some of the muscle.
- Melt the butter and oil together in a small pan over medium heat, then add the ginger, garlic, salt, and pepper. Sauté for 1 minute; remove from heat; cool, then rub the paste into the lamb. Cover loosely and put in the fridge for at least 4 (and up to 24) hours.
- Take the lamb out of the fridge 2 hours before cooking and set it on a sheet pan. Position a rack in the upper third of the oven and preheat to 400°F.
- Put a large nonstick pan over a high flame and heat for 2 minutes. Sear the lamb on both sides in batches, keeping the heat high and not crowding the pan so the meat caramelizes well. Arrange the lamb on the sheet pan and put in the oven to roast. For medium rare, start checking the smallest pieces after 10 minutes. The largest pieces will take about 20 minutes.
- Allow the lamb to rest for 20 minutes before slicing, then slice thinly and serve warm or at room temperature with a scattering of fresh dill.

Greek Potatoes with Artichokes, Lemon, and Garlic

SERVES 6-8

This is a great recipe but is best made with Yukon Gold or other waxy potatoes. I have tried it with little red potatoes (too sweet), Idaho potatoes (too mealy), and fingerlings (too dry). The fresh mint on these savory potatoes is an unexpected and vibrant touch.

- 3 pounds Yukon Gold potatoes, peeled and cut into thick wedges
- 4 large artichokes
- ½ cup fresh lemon juice
- ½ cup olive oil
- 3 cloves garlic, minced
- 2 teaspoons dried oregano
- 1 teaspoon salt
- ½ teaspoon freshly ground black pepper
- 1 cup chicken stock, preferably homemade
- 8 stalks of fresh mint, picked and roughly chopped

- Position a rack in the middle of the oven and preheat to 400°F. Grease a 9x13-inch baking pan.

- In a large bowl, mix all the ingredients, except for the artichokes, together and set aside.
- Cut off each artichoke's stem, then cut all the leaves off just above the base to reveal the hairy choke. Snap off the surrounding leaves and, using a teaspoon, scrape off the little hairs of the choke revealing the clean artichoke heart. Cut each heart into four quarters and toss with the potato mixture.
- Tip everything into the pan and bake for 1 hour and 30 minutes, turning occasionally.
- Serve in a rustic dish and scatter the top with mint.

Delicate Flan

SERVES 8

Light, silky, mysteriously scented, I just can't tell you how excited I was when this innocent little custard was cooked and I slipped a spoonful in my mouth. (It was still warm and I sneaked some before dinner. But don't do that!) It is so delicate you aren't going to turn it out, just serve it from the cup in which it is cooked.

- 3 cups whole milk
- ¾ cup sugar
- 6 strips of lemon zest
- 9 extra-large egg yolks
- 1½ teaspoons pure anise extract
- 1 teaspoon pure almond extract
- 1 teaspoon pure vanilla extract
- ½ teaspoon cinnamon
- optional: fresh, ripe figs, or orange slices.

- Position a rack in the bottom third of the oven and preheat to 300°F. Gather eight 6-ounce ramekins, or oven-safe teacups.
- Put the milk, sugar, and lemon zest in a small saucepan over moderate heat and warm until there are small bubbles around the edge of the milk. Remove from the heat and set aside for 20 minutes to infuse.
- In a medium bowl, whisk together the yolks, extracts, and cinnamon. Add the warm milk through a strainer and whisk well.
- Using a half-cup measure, pour the custard into the cups.
- Set the cups in an oven-proof pan (I use a 9x13-inch baking pan) and gently pour boiling water around them, ½-inch deep. Cover the pan with foil just crimped lightly around the edges.
- Transfer the pan to the oven and cook for 15 to 20 minutes (longer if water is not boiling). Remove pan from oven, and then remove cups from water and let cool.
- Once cooled, refrigerate for 2 hours or overnight. Serve solo or with freshly cut ripe figs, substitute orange slices in winter.

- Note: These little custards set very quickly if the water is boiling and the ramekins or teacups are thin porcelain. If using normal small soufflé dishes they take a little bit longer to cook. ■