

# G R E E C E

## B E A R S G I F T S

VIBRANT, FRESH AND FRAGRANT, GREEK CUISINE FINDS A PERFECT PAIRING WITH DOMESTIC WINES OF THE SAME CHARACTER.

BY KAREN BERMAN

PHOTOS JON VAN GORDER

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hen days grow long, frustrating and stressful, I often retrieve memories of a long-ago holiday. Just thinking about Greece soothes me: Mornings touring crumbling ruins and sharing narrow market streets with little old ladies in black from head to toe, twenty-somethings zipping by on their motorbikes and the occasional donkey; afternoons on the beach, with the Aegean Sea blue and sparkling before me, and the fragrance of shoulder-high bushes of oregano and thyme growing wild on the side of the road.

And the food: Crisp, fresh salads bejeweled with sweet cucumbers, pungent feta cheese and the most explosively luscious tomatoes I've ever tasted. Vine leaves (never called grape leaves on our Greek-English menus) stuffed with rice infused with herbs and the sour essence of sumac. Succulent shrimp and red mullet, simply grilled. Baby octopus in a zesty tomato sauce. Melt-in-your-mouth *moussaka*, the casserole of eggplant and ground lamb napped with béchamel. Oh, and the classic trio of dips: *tzatziki* (yogurt, mint and garlic), *taramousalata* (caviar mousse) and *melitzano salata* (puréed eggplant salad), served with crusty bread—a meal in itself.

Even in my wildest dreams I could not enjoy all this fare in one sitting. But contrary to popular misconception, Greek food, if you do it right, will be light and fresh, and not at all the kind of feast that leaves you in a post-prandial stupor.

"The flavor profile is very fresh, very vibrant," says Jim Botsacos, chef-partner at Molyvos in New York City.

"It's not about doing all sorts of techniques," agrees Andrea Englis, vice president of Hempstead, New York-based Athenee Importers, which specializes in bringing Greek and Cypriot wine to the United States. "It's about pure flavors, clean flavors.

"Greek food," she continues, "is based around olive oil, first and foremost." The olive is an ingredient, snack or a garnish, and olive oil is a cooking fat, an emulsifier in dressings and dips and a flavoring.

Besides olive oil, lemon and garlic complete the "trinity" of key ingredients in Greek cooking, says Bot-

sacos. These three, he notes, are followed closely by fresh herbs.

The food, says Englis, who holds a diploma in wine and spirits from the London-based Wine and Spirits Education Trust, is a reflection of the Greek landscape. "There are miles of coastline, and seafood is important. Vegetables grow everywhere," she says. So do the aforementioned herbs, beginning with oregano and thyme (often used in dried form), but including dill, mint, parsley, rosemary, bay, coriander, fennel and others. Central Greece is known as the country's breadbasket, because of its fertile soils, which produce both food and a significant cotton crop. As for meat, beef is a rarity, largely because of the absence of extensive pastureland. "Lamb, goat, and game—very lean cuts of meat—are grilled or braised," Englis adds. "Greece has dry, rocky, mountainous regions, and the lambs and goats tolerate the heat and graze on the sparse greens." Slow-cooked stews—ideal for tenderizing leaner cuts of meat—are often bathed in sauces based on tomatoes or *avgolemono*, an egg-lemon-broth emulsion that is also used as a soup base. Baked dishes such as *moussaka* and *pastitsio* (a layered pasta dish) are enriched with béchamel sauce. Stews, braises and baked dishes are especially common in the north, where temperatures are slightly cooler and the food is a little heavier, Englis adds.

Many dishes in the Greek kitchen are characterized by an element of astringency. Lemon juice, olive oil, red wine vinegar, yogurt, garlic, onions, and sumac (the sour-tasting spice) all make frequent appearances in Greek recipes, and all have this astringent quality in greater and lesser degrees.

Fans of Greek food find the acidity refreshing and delicious. But what to pour with all these pucker-inducing dishes? And what kind of wines will complement and not overpower the simple, fresh components of a Greek meal?

Pairing Greek food with wine is not as challenging as you might think, says Botsacos. "The things that have acid, you're able to pair with wines that have a crispness or acidity to them," he explains. With some



Jim Botsacos, chef-partner at Molyvos in New York City. Right, a spicy wine with crisp acidity will complement Chef Botsacos' Shrimp Saganaki with Tomato and Feta.

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dishes, he says, “the acid is in the background,” tempered by the other ingredients, like vegetable seasonings, those ubiquitous fresh herbs, and in some cases, spices. He offers as an example rabbit *stifado* (stew). “There are layers of flavor. There’s acid, from the tomatoes,” he says, but it is countered by “the sweetness of the onion and the cinnamon, clove and allspice.” For a dish like this, he likes wines that are marked by acid on the first sips, and fruit and spice at the finish. His favorite match? The wines of the Nemea appellation in the Peloponnese wine region in southern Greece.

For Botsacos and his wine director, Kamal Kouiri, some of the best matches for Greek food are Greek wines; the wine list at their white-tablecloth restaurant boasts more pages of Greek wines than any other nation. This might surprise those who associate Greek wines with retsina, a wine infamous for being fortified with pine resin. Even at its best, it’s an acquired taste for most. But, says Kouiri, Greece’s 300 native grape varieties are food friendly and approachable. And quality is improving all the time.

Englis, who deals almost exclusively in Greek products, agrees. Her parents founded their importing company in 1975, in the belief that Greek wines would find a market in the U.S. The years since then proved them right; particularly after Greece’s entry into the European Union in the early 1980s, modern wine-making technology and outside capital transformed the Greek wine industry from a source of inexpensive bulk wine to a producer of greater and greater quality. EU rules prompted the country to enact its own appellation laws, a move that helped raise standards throughout Greece’s wine regions.

And this is just the beginning. The wine industry in Greece today, says Kouiri, “is just like Spain 30 years ago.” For now, he says, there are plenty of Greek wines that serious enthusiasts can happily pair with its food. Kouiri likes to pair the lean, crisp whites to the foods of the Greek islands, which are lighter and rely more on seafood and vegetables. The reds, with their soft tannins and spice, marry well with the foods of the mainland, particularly the north, where the cooking is heartier and more dependent on meat.

What are some of those wines? Greece has four major regions: Northern, Central, Southern (also known as the Peloponnese) and the Islands. Many styles of wine come from each, owing to the country’s numerous microclimates. The Peloponnese, Greece’s southern peninsula, has seen some of the country’s most dramatic advances in winemaking. The appellation of Nemea, located within the Peloponnese, produces dry, aromatic reds from the Agiorgitiko grape (the name translates as St. George). The results range from light-bodied wines to rich, tannic ones. Mantinea, another Peloponnese appellation,



“IT’S NOT ABOUT DOING ALL SORTS OF TECHNIQUES. IT’S ABOUT PURE FLAVORS, CLEAN FLAVORS.”



Andrea Englis, vice president of Athenee Importers and Kamal Kouiri, wine director of Molyvos.

lies on a plateau. It produces dry, very fragrant whites and rosés made from the Moschofilero grape.

Tiny though some of them are, the Greek islands likewise account for some of Greece’s most noteworthy wines. The volcanic soils of Santorini offer up fresh, acidic whites made from the Assyrtiko grape. Samsos produces a famed dessert wine made from Moschato Sapiro (Muscat) grapes. Rhodes, which makes white wine from the Athiri grape and red from Mandelari, has never been touched by phylloxera, and some of its vines date back 50 or 60 years.

Macedonia is one of two wine regions in Northern Greece (the other being the smaller Epirus, in the Northwest). The climate there fluctuates between cold winds and snow in winter and drought in summer. It is home to several major appellations, notably Naoussa, which produces reds from the Xynomavro grape. Xynomavro translates as “acid black;” not surprisingly, these wines require some aging, but yield rich wines with spicy, fruity aromas.

Greek wines are increasingly available, but if you can’t find the right bottle, there are several more mainstream grapes that will pair well with Greek wines. Some “international” varieties are being grown in Greece today, often for blending with native grapes. Englis also suggests Albariños from Spain, Sauvignon Blanc or unoaked Chardonnay as alternatives to Greek whites and Pinot Noir from Oregon or Washington or Bordeaux blends in place of Greek reds. Kouiri agrees with these picks, adding Viognier to the list of whites and Tempranillo and Southern Rhône grapes to the list of reds. Among the international varieties, he adds, “the reds are easier to work with than the whites. They’re easier to drink with Greek food.”

Englis and Kouiri, who work together as supplier and client, agree on one thing: “Oak and Greek food don’t match,” says Englis. “The oakiness in the whites will soften the wine, it won’t have the high acidity to be able to stand up to the lemon, the olive and the garlic.” In other words, the wine for your Greek dinner should be lean, lithe—and preferably Greek.

#### SHRIMP SAGANAKI WITH TOMATO AND FETA

Botsacos notes that *saganaki* refers to the two-handled metal pan used to serve the classic fried cheese dish of the same name. To peel tomatoes, he suggests coring and scoring the skin with a sharp knife. Lower the tomatoes into boiling water for 30 seconds and immediately transfer them to a bowl of ice water, then

peel. Adapted from *New Greek Cuisine* by Jim Botsacos (Broadway Books, 2006).

- ¼ cup extra-virgin olive oil, plus extra for drizzling
- ½ cup finely diced onion

Coarse salt and freshly ground black pepper  
 3 cloves garlic, minced  
 1 teaspoon dried Greek oregano, plus extra for sprinkling  
 1 cup ripe tomatoes, peeled, seeded and diced  
 ¼ cup dry white wine  
 1 (28-ounce) can chopped tomatoes with juice  
 ¼ cup chopped fresh flat-leaf parsley  
 1½ pounds medium shrimp, peeled and deveined,  
 tails left on  
 ¾ cup diced feta cheese

Preheat the oven to 450°F. Heat ¼ cup oil in a large sauté pan over medium heat. Add the onion and a pinch of salt. Cover and cook, stirring occasionally, for 8 minutes, or until soft and translucent. Add the garlic and sauté for another minute. Stir in the oregano and a pinch of salt. Add the diced tomatoes and the wine and bring to a simmer. Simmer for 3 minutes.

Stir in the canned tomatoes with their juice, raise the heat to medium-high, and again bring to a simmer. Simmer for about 6 minutes, or until the sauce has thickened slightly. Fold in the parsley and season with salt and pepper to taste, noting that feta will add some saltiness.

Spoon just enough tomato sauce into the bottom of a saganaki pan (or a 9x14-inch glass baking dish) to cover. Working from the outside in, make 3 concentric circles of shrimp. (If using the baking pan, begin placing the shrimp, three at a time, tail-to-head, in neat rows across the dish, with the tails all facing the same direction and just barely touching. Add the remaining shrimp in overlapping rows of 3, shingle fashion, until the dish is filled. You should have 3 rows of 13 to 15 shrimp each.) Season the shrimp with salt and pepper to taste and then spoon the remaining tomato sauce over the top. Sprinkle the feta cheese over the top, drizzle with olive oil and sprinkle with oregano.

Bake in the middle of the preheated oven for 20 minutes, or until very hot and bubbling with golden brown cheese. *Makes 6 appetizer servings.*

**Wine recommendations:** Botsacos and Molyvos wine director Kamal Kouiri suggest a Paris Sigalas 2006 Assyrtiko from the island of Santorini. “It has bright acidity that cuts through the prawns, the presence of the minerals works very well with the rich, spiced tomato sauce and finally the touch of lemon zest and honey-suckle on the palate complement the creamy feta and round it,” Kouiri notes. Their second choice is a Gerovassiliou 2006 Malagousia from Epamoni in Halkidiki. “The slightly floral and spice character enhance and bring out the sweetness of the dish, but the wine still has great acidity to work beside the spiced tomato sauce.” For a non Greek selection, he suggests an Alsatian Gewürztraminer reserve by Emile Willm.

#### AGLAIAS MOUSSAKA

For this version of the Greek classic, Botsacos began with a recipe from Aglaia Kremezi, the Greek cookbook author and cooking teacher, which he liked because it was lighter than the typical moussaka. He further lightened it by adding Greek yogurt to the béchamel sauce. Botsacos suggests fully cooking all the components of the dish the day



The acidity of an island rosé will offset the richness of Aglaia's Moussaka.

before you bake and eat the final product. Adapted from *New Greek Cuisine*.

#### For the yogurt béchamel sauce:

1 bay leaf  
 ½ medium onion, peeled  
 2 whole cloves  
 1½ cups whole milk  
 1½ cups heavy cream  
 1½ tablespoons unsalted butter  
 ½ cup all-purpose flour  
 Coarse salt and freshly ground black pepper  
 Freshly grated nutmeg  
 ½ cup Greek yogurt\* (or 1 cup regular plain yogurt that has been drained for 12 hours in a double thickness of cheesecloth set over a bowl)

**For the moussaka:**

- ¼ cup dried currants*
- 1 (28-ounce) can whole plum tomatoes*
- 2¼ cups olive oil*
- 1 pound 90 percent lean ground beef*
- 1 pound lean ground lamb*
- Coarse salt and freshly ground black pepper*
- 2 tablespoons ras el hanout\* (a Moroccan spice blend), or more to taste*
- 1 teaspoon Aleppo pepper\*, or more to taste*
- 1½ teaspoons ground cinnamon, or more to taste*
- 4 cups finely diced onion*
- 6 cloves garlic*
- 2 cups dry red wine, such as Agiorgitiko, Cabernet Sauvignon or Sangiovese*
- 1 pound Idaho potatoes, cut in 18 (¼-inch thick) slices*
- 2 medium yellow or red bell peppers, diced*
- 2 pounds eggplant, cut into 18 (¼-inch thick) slices*
- 3 cups yogurt béchamel sauce*
- 1 cup (about ¼ pound) freshly grated kefalotyri\* or Parmesan cheese*

*\*Can be found in Middle Eastern markets and specialty shops.*

**To prepare the yogurt béchamel sauce:** Attach the bay leaf to the onion half by piercing it with the 2 cloves. Set aside. Combine the milk and cream in a medium heavy saucepan over medium heat. Cook without stirring for 5 minutes, or just until the mixture begins to simmer. Remove from the heat and set aside.

Heat the butter in another medium heavy saucepan over medium heat. When melted and hot, add the flour and cook, stirring constantly, until the mixture is thick and smooth. Cook, stirring constantly, for 10 minutes. Remove from the heat, and whisking constantly to prevent lumps from forming, add the hot milk in a slow, steady stream.

When well blended, return the mixture to medium heat. Add the onion half and bring to a simmer. Simmer for 10 minutes. Season with salt, pepper and nutmeg to taste. Remove from the heat and set aside to cool. When cool, fold in the yogurt and set aside until ready to use. You will have 4 cups. Reserve any leftover for another use.

**To prepare the moussaka:** Place the currants in hot water to cover and set aside to soak for 30 minutes.

Drain the tomatoes, reserving the juice. Using your hands, crush the tomatoes. Measure out 2½ cups and combine them with the juice. (You will probably have about ½ cup tomatoes left over.) Set the tomatoes aside.

Place a large skillet over medium heat. When very hot but not smoking, add 2 tablespoons of the olive oil, swirling to coat the pan. Add about a quarter each of the beef and lamb and cook, stirring to break up the meat, for 5 minutes, or until the meat has browned lightly. Season with a generous pinch of salt and pepper, ¼ teaspoon each of ras el hanout and Aleppo pepper and a pinch of cinnamon. Using a slotted spoon, transfer the mixture to a colander placed in a mixing bowl.

Return the pan to medium heat and repeat three times to brown and season all the meat. Discard the oil.

Return the skillet to medium heat. Add ¼ cup of the remaining olive oil and, when hot, add the onion along with a pinch of salt. Cover and

cook, stirring occasionally, for about 10 minutes, or until the onion is soft and translucent. Add the garlic, stirring to just combine and cook for another minute. Add the wine and cook, stirring occasionally, for about 25 minutes, or until the pan is almost dry. Add the reserved tomatoes along with their juice, stirring to combine. Bring to a simmer. Add the reserved meat mixture, stirring to combine well. (Take care, as the pan will be quite full.) Taste, and if necessary, season with additional ras el hanout, Aleppo pepper and cinnamon. Lower the heat, and cook at a bare simmer for 6 to 8 minutes.

Drain the currants and stir them into the meat mixture. Taste and if necessary, season with salt and pepper to taste. Cook for another 30 minutes. Transfer the meat mixture to a mixing bowl set over an ice bath to cool. When cool, set aside.

Place a large sauté pan over medium heat. When hot, add ½ cup of the remaining olive oil, swirling to coat the pan. When very hot, add the potato slices, 6 at a time, and fry, turning occasionally, for about 15 minutes, or until blond. Transfer to a double layer of paper towel to drain. Repeat the process with the remaining potatoes, adding more oil as needed. When all of the potatoes have been fried, drain half of the oil in the pan.

Return the pan to medium heat. When hot, add ¼ cup of the remaining olive oil, swirling to coat the pan. When very hot, add the peppers and sauté for about 5 minutes, or until just wilted. Season with salt and pepper to taste and remove from the heat. Transfer to a plate to cool.

Preheat the oven to 500°F. Combine ½ cup of the remaining olive oil with salt and pepper to taste in a small bowl. Using a pastry brush, lightly coat both sides of the eggplant slices with the seasoned oil. Then season the slices with additional salt and pepper to taste. Place half of the slices on a baking sheet. Do not crowd the pan. Place in the preheated oven and roast for 6 to 8 minutes, or until lightly charred. Turn and roast for another 8 minutes, or until both sides are equally charred. Transfer to a platter to cool and continue broiling until all the eggplant is well cooked and charred.

If baking immediately, lower the oven temperature to 350°F. Place the potato slices in one even layer over the bottom of a 13x8x2-inch deep rectangular baking dish. Place the eggplant slices, slightly overlapping, in one even layer over the potatoes. Repeat with an even layer of peppers. Spoon the meat mixture over the peppers, spreading it out with a spatula to make an even layer. Top with a thin layer of béchamel and sprinkle with cheese. At this point the moussaka may be covered with plastic wrap and refrigerated for up to 2 days before baking. Place the moussaka on a baking sheet in the preheated oven and bake for 25 minutes, or until bubbling around the edges. Remove from the oven and let stand for about 10 minutes before serving. *Serves 8 to 10.*

**Wine recommendations:** Kouiri suggests Domaine Porto Carras 2006 Cabernet Sauvignon Rosé from Sithonia. “The sharpness of the acidity helps and also gives balance to the richness that comes from the yogurt béchamel sauce.” He also suggests Mitravelas Estate 2006 Red on Black Agiorgitiko from Nemea in the Peloponnese. “It has tremendous flavors of red fruit that add sweetness to the dish; the bright acidity helps cut through the richness, and finally, the freshness of the wine enhances all the flavors on the palate,” Kouiri explains. For a selection other than Greek, he suggests the Pasanau 2005 Ceps Nous (Priorat), a blend of Garnacha, Mazuelo and Syrah. 