

A Feast for Body and Soul

A Greek chef brings her culinary traditions to the table in a bountiful meal.

BY MARIA LOI

TO ME, GREEK CUISINE IS ONE OF THE VERY BEST CUISINES IN THE WORLD. I say this, of course, because I'm Greek, but also because this food truly celebrates local, sustainable, seasonal ingredients. In America, this is a fairly new approach to food, but in Greece, it's old news. We've always eaten this way. Greek food is inherently healthy, featuring plenty of plant-based dishes. And the simple way that Greek cooks prepare ingredients allows their natural, vibrant flavors to shine.

Meals in Greece are meant to nourish the body as much as the soul. The table is a place of abundance and conviviality; families gather around the table to eat, talk, and linger for hours. The mood is celebratory, and the spread is varied. There's something delicious for everyone.

In my own cooking, I honor traditional recipes passed down from grandparents, great-grandparents, and so on, all the way back to the ancient Greeks. I also incorporate what I've learned in my nutritional studies, making little tweaks here and there so that every dish I create is as healthful as possible.

I don't believe that it takes a lot of effort to eat well and healthfully, even on a budget. The menu I share here embodies the spirit of Greek cooking: It's all about creating authentically simple, tasty, and wholesome dishes meant for savoring with family and friends. *Kali orexi!*

Maria Loi, the chef-owner of Loi Estiatorio in Manhattan, has written 34 books. Her latest, The Greek Diet, explores eating the Mediterranean way.

GREEK FEAST

FOR 8 TO 10

Dolmades Kasiotiki
(Stuffed Grape Leaves with
Minced Meat)

Fakosalata
(Lentil Salad with Oranges)

Moussaka Nistisimo
(Vegan Moussaka)

Souvlaki
(Skewered Grilled Lamb
with Tzatziki)

Kounoupidi
(Braised Cauliflower)

Fresh Greek Yogurt with
Mixed Berries

Serve with Pinot Noir

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Timeline

4 DAYS AHEAD

- Make the yogurt.

3 DAYS AHEAD

- Strain the yogurt if making the Greek version.
- Make the bottom layer and filling for the Moussaka Nistisimo. Store each separately in airtight containers in the refrigerator.

2 DAYS AHEAD

- Make the Dolmades Kasiotiki. Store covered and refrigerated.
- Make the Kounoupidi. Store in an airtight container in the refrigerator.

1 DAY AHEAD

- Make the Tzatziki.
- Assemble the Moussaka Nistisimo. Store in an airtight container in the refrigerator.

- Make the lentils for the Fakosalata. Store in an airtight container in the refrigerator.

DAY OF GATHERING

- **Up to 2 to 2½ hours ahead:** Assemble the Fakosalata.
- **Up to 2 hours ahead:** Bake the Moussaka Nistisimo, then tent with foil.
- **Up to 1 to 1½ hours ahead:** Bring the Dolmades Kasiotiki to room temperature. Rewarm in the microwave (about 30 seconds) or in a 200°F oven

for 5 minutes just before serving, if you like.

- **Up to 45 minutes ahead:** Grill the Souvlaki. Tent lightly with foil.
- **Up to 30 minutes ahead:** Rewarm the Kounoupidi over low heat. Leave on the stovetop, lid ajar.
- **10 minutes ahead:** Assemble the Fresh Greek Yogurt with Mixed Berries.





dolmades kasiotiki (stuffed grape leaves with minced meat)

If you have leftover filling, use it to stuff bell peppers or tomatoes. **Serves 8 to 10**

- 1 lb. ground beef, preferably 85 percent lean**
- ¾ cup uncooked rice, preferably Carolina**
- 1 medium yellow onion, finely chopped**
- 1 small tomato, seeded and finely chopped**
- 5 Tbs. extra-virgin olive oil**
- 2 Tbs. tomato paste**
- Kosher salt and freshly ground black pepper**
- 16 oz. jarred grape leaves**
- 2 Tbs. fresh lemon juice**
- Flaky sea salt, for garnish**
- Lemon wedges, for serving**

In a large bowl, combine the beef, rice, onion, tomato, 3 Tbs. of the oil, the tomato paste, 2½ tsp. kosher salt, and ½ tsp. pepper. Refrigerate, covered, until ready to use.

Add 6 cups of water to a medium Dutch oven or other heavy-duty pot. Bring the water to a boil over high heat, then reduce the heat to low. Gently unfold and loosen the grape-leaf bunches (don't worry if you can't unfold each bunch completely), add to the water, and simmer until they soften, 10 to 12 minutes.

Drain the grape leaves, and carefully run under cold water to cool. Transfer the damp leaves to a plate, then cover lightly with a damp kitchen towel to keep moist, reserving any torn leaves. Working with one leaf at a time, slice away any remaining hard stem.

Put a grape leaf on a work surface smooth side down. Depending on the size of the leaf, the amount of filling can vary from 1 tsp. to 1 Tbs. Put the filling at the stem end of the grape leaf, and roll up from the stem to enclose; it should be plump but not over-stuffed. Fold the two sides of the leaf over the filling, and continue rolling from the stem end. Transfer to a baking sheet seam side down,

and repeat until you have used all the filling and/or whole grape leaves (see p. 93).

Line the bottom of a large Dutch oven or other heavy-duty pot with a circle of parchment. Arrange a bed of the reserved torn leaves to cover the parchment (don't worry if you don't have enough leaves). Put the dolmades on top of the torn leaves in a circle, placing them as close together as possible and stacking them in two layers, if necessary.

Gently pour 1 cup of hot water, the remaining 2 Tbs. oil, and the lemon juice over the dolmades. Cover with another circle of parchment, then cover with a heavy plate to prevent the dolmades from floating while cooking.

Cover the pot with the lid ajar, and cook over low heat until the rice is cooked through, 45 to 50 minutes.

Gently remove the dolmades from the pot, and drain on paper towels. Transfer to a platter, and sprinkle with flaky sea salt. Serve warm or at room temperature with the lemon wedges.

fakosalata (lentil salad with oranges)

This gorgeous dish is a feast for the eyes as well as the mouth—light, refreshing, colorful, and delicious. Serves 8 to 10

- 2 cups brown lentils (about 14 oz.)
- 2 large oranges
- 1 large red bell pepper, cut into medium dice
- 1 large unpeeled red apple, cut into medium dice
- 1 large cucumber, peeled in strips, seeded, and cut into medium dice
- 1 small red onion, coarsely chopped
- ½ cup coarsely chopped fresh flat-leaf parsley; more leaves for garnish

- 4 small scallions, white and light-green parts only, thinly sliced (about ½ cup)

¼ cup olive oil

- 3 Tbs. white wine vinegar; more to taste

Kosher salt and freshly ground black pepper

Edible cucumber flowers, for garnish (optional)

Cook the lentils according to package directions, drain, and set aside until cool.

Meanwhile, working with one orange at a time, slice off both ends. Put the orange on a cutting board cut side down. With a sharp knife, cut away the peel and pith by slicing

from top to bottom, following the contour of the orange. Working over a large bowl to collect any juice, release the orange segments by carefully cutting them away from the membrane. Remove any seeds, cut each segment into 3 crosswise pieces, and add to the bowl. Squeeze the juice from the membrane and the peels into the bowl. (If you like, slice one of the oranges into rounds.) Add the bell pepper, apple, cucumber, onion, parsley, scallions, oil, vinegar, 1 tsp. salt, and ½ tsp. pepper. Gently stir in the lentils until well combined. Set aside for 10 to 15 minutes for the flavors to meld. Season to taste with salt and pepper, transfer to a platter, garnish with the parsley leaves and cucumber flowers, if using, and serve.





moussaka nistisimo (vegan moussaka)

This meatless, dairy-free version of the Greek mainstay tastes as rich as the classic version, and it holds together well when sliced and served. Serves 8 to 10

FOR THE BOTTOM LAYER

- 3½ lb. eggplant, cut crosswise into ½-inch-thick rounds**
- Kosher salt**
- Olive oil, as needed (about ½ cup)**
- 10 medium plum tomatoes, quartered and seeded**
- ½ cup balsamic vinegar**
- 1 Tbs. dried oregano**
- Freshly ground black pepper**

FOR THE FILLING

- ¼ cup olive oil**
- 4 cups medium-dice zucchini (about 1 lb.)**
- Kosher salt and freshly ground black pepper**
- 2 Tbs. tomato paste**
- ½ cup red wine**
- 2 bay leaves**
- 1 cinnamon stick**
- 6 cups medium-dice onion (from 3 medium onions)**
- 6 cups medium-dice button mushrooms (about 1 lb.)**

FOR THE TOP LAYER

- Kosher salt**
- 6 medium russet potatoes, cut into 1-inch pieces (about 2½ lb.)**
- 3 medium carrots, peeled and cut into ½-inch pieces (about 2 cups)**
- 4 large cloves garlic, finely grated**
- ½ cup light-color vegetable broth**
- ¼ cup coarsely sliced fresh chives; more for garnish**
- ¼ cup olive oil**

MAKE THE BOTTOM LAYER

Position racks in the upper and lower parts of the oven, and heat the oven to 425°F. Line two large rimmed baking sheets with paper towels. Sprinkle both sides of the eggplant lightly with salt, transfer to the lined baking sheets, and let sit for 30 minutes. Line two rimmed baking sheets with parchment. Pat the eggplant slices dry with paper towels, brush both sides generously with oil, and place on the prepared baking sheets in a single layer. Bake the eggplant for 15 minutes on the lower rack. Flip the eggplant, brush generously with more oil, and continue roasting until the eggplant is soft and lightly brown in spots, 15 to 20 minutes more. Remove from the oven, and set aside to cool.

Reduce the oven temperature to 400°F. Line a large rimmed baking sheet with parchment. Toss the tomatoes in a large bowl with the vinegar, oregano, 1 tsp. salt, and ½ tsp. pepper. Put the

tomatoes skin side down and close to each other on the baking sheet, transfer to the upper rack of the oven, and roast until soft and dark brown in places, 38 to 40 minutes. When slightly cool, transfer to a blender and purée until smooth, scraping down the bowl as necessary, 1 to 2 minutes. Season to taste with salt and pepper, and set aside.

MAKE THE FILLING

Heat 1 Tbs. of the oil in a large skillet over medium heat until shimmering. Add the zucchini, ½ tsp. salt, and ½ tsp. pepper, and cook, stirring occasionally, until the zucchini softens and browns in spots, 5 to 6 minutes. Reduce the heat to low, add the tomato paste, and cook, stirring constantly, about 1 minute. Add the wine, bay leaves, and cinnamon, and cook, stirring frequently, until the wine mostly evaporates and the mixture thickens, 1½ to 2 minutes. Transfer to a large bowl; discard the cinnamon stick and bay leaves.


Put the onions and mushrooms in two separate bowls, and toss each with 1½ Tbs. oil, 1 tsp. salt, and ½ tsp. pepper. Spread on two separate large rimmed baking sheets in a single layer. Transfer to the oven and roast, stirring occasionally, until the onion is soft and lightly brown in spots, and the mushrooms are mostly dry, about 1 hour (caution: a lot of steam will escape from the oven when you open the door). Remove from the oven to cool completely. When cool, transfer to the bowl with the zucchini mixture, and toss to combine. Set aside. Reduce the oven temperature to 375°F.


MAKE THE TOPPING, AND ASSEMBLE THE MOUSSAKA

Bring a large pot of well-salted water to a boil. Add the potatoes and cook until fork-tender, about 15 minutes. Remove from the pot with a slotted spoon, and set aside. Add the carrots to the same pot, and cook until very tender, about 15 minutes. Drain the carrots. Put the potatoes and carrots through a ricer over a large bowl, or alternatively, mash with a potato masher until smooth. Add the garlic, broth, chives, and 2 Tbs. of the oil. Stir with a silicone spatula to combine.

Position a rack in the center of the oven. Brush a 9x13-inch (3-quart) glass or ceramic dish with 1 Tbs. of the oil. Spread enough of the tomato sauce to coat the bottom of the pan (you may have some left over). Cover the sauce with the eggplant slices, overlapping slightly. Make a second layer with any remaining eggplant. Press down lightly. Spread the filling evenly over the eggplant, pressing down lightly.

Top with the mashed potato-carrot mixture, spreading evenly over the filling. Brush with the remaining 1 Tbs. oil. Put the dish on a rimmed baking sheet, and bake until the top is lightly golden and the filling is bubbling, 40 to 45 minutes. Remove the moussaka from the oven, and let rest for at least 20 minutes. Serve sprinkled with more chopped chives.

 **Pair With:** PINOT NOIR If this meal was only the Souvlaki, a bigger red might be better. But lighter elements like cauliflower and lentil salad mean a wine with less weight—but still plenty of earthiness and character—is ideal overall. (A Greek Limniona might be better still, but it can be hard to find.)

A top-down photograph of a meal. On the left, a white bowl with a blue rim is filled with a thick, white tzatziki dip, garnished with fresh green dill and a sprinkle of brown spices. On the right, a large, shallow blue platter holds several skewers of grilled meat, likely lamb or chicken, interspersed with grilled vegetables like onions and green peppers. The platter is garnished with fresh green herbs. The dishes are set on a light-colored surface with a blue and white striped cloth underneath.

tzatziki (cucumber- fennel dip)

Fennel's hint of anise flavor imparts a beguiling note to this delicious dip.

Serves 8

- 1 medium cucumber, peeled, halved lengthwise, seeded, and coarsely chopped (about 1 cup)**
- 1 tsp. granulated sugar**
- Kosher salt**
- 1 small bulb fennel, tough outer layer discarded, cored, and coarsely chopped (about $\frac{3}{4}$ cup)**
- 12 oz. full-fat Greek yogurt, preferably organic**
- 3 Tbs. coarsely chopped fresh dill; more to taste**
- 2 Tbs. fresh lemon juice; more for garnish**
- 1 Tbs. white wine vinegar**
- 2 medium cloves garlic, finely grated**
- Freshly ground black pepper**

Put the cucumber in a fine-mesh strainer over a small bowl; sprinkle with the sugar and 1 tsp. salt. Set aside to drain, 12 to 15 minutes. Transfer the cucumber to a bowl, add the fennel, and toss. Let sit for 10 minutes.

In a separate medium bowl, mix the yogurt, dill, lemon juice, vinegar, and garlic. Season to taste with salt and pepper.

Add the cucumber-fennel mixture to the yogurt, and mix well. Season to taste with salt and pepper. Cover with plastic wrap and refrigerate. Let sit at room temperature for 10 to 15 minutes before serving, sprinkled with more dill.



souvlaki (skewered grilled lamb)

A simple Greek-style marinade with just a few delicious ingredients tenderizes and enhances the flavor of the lamb and vegetables. You can substitute chicken or beef, if you like. Add a dollop of tzatziki for a creamy-cool-tangy topping. **Serves 8 to 10**

- ½ cup extra-virgin olive oil; more for drizzling**
- 1 tsp. dried oregano**
Kosher salt and freshly ground black pepper
- 3½ lb. boneless leg of lamb, trimmed and cut into 1½-inch cubes**
- 2 large green bell peppers, cut into 1½-inch pieces**
- 1 large red onion, cut into 1½-inch pieces, layers separated**
Fresh oregano, for serving (optional)
Tzatziki, for serving (recipe facing page)
Lemon wedges, for serving
- 4 whole-grain pita breads (optional)**

In a medium bowl, whisk the oil, oregano, 2½ tsp. salt, and 1 tsp. pepper. Put the lamb and vegetables in two separate medium bowls. Divide the marinade between the bowls, toss, and let sit at room temperature for 1 hour. (Alternatively, cover with plastic wrap, and refrigerate for 3 hours or up to overnight.)

Prepare a medium-high (400°F to 475°F) gas- or charcoal-grill fire.

Thread the lamb onto metal skewers, alternating with pieces of onion and bell pepper. Leave enough space between each piece to ensure even cooking. If there are leftover vegetables, thread them onto a separate skewer. Generously season the skewers with salt and pepper. Grill the skewers for about 3 minutes per side for medium-rare lamb or to your desired doneness. Let the souvlaki rest for a few minutes before serving.

Transfer the skewers to a large serving platter. Sprinkle with fresh oregano. Serve with the tzatziki and lemon wedges. If serving with pitas, grill the pitas lightly or warm them in a 325°F oven for 5 to 7 minutes.

kounoupidi (braised cauliflower)

This robust yet light vegan side is a great accompaniment to any meal. For a thicker sauce, remove the cauliflower with a slotted spoon once it's tender, and reduce the braising liquid before adding the cauliflower back in.

Serves 8 to 10

- 3 Tbs. olive oil; more for drizzling**
- 1 large white onion, finely chopped**
- 4 large cloves garlic, thinly sliced**
- 2 large ribs celery, thinly sliced**
- 1 large carrot, peeled and cut crosswise into ¼-inch rounds**

- 3 Tbs. tomato paste**
- 3 cups canned crushed tomatoes**
- Kosher salt and freshly ground black pepper**
- 2 medium heads cauliflower, cut into bite-size florets (about 10 cups)**

Put a large Dutch oven or other heavy-duty pot over medium heat, and heat the oil until shimmering. Add the onion and cook, stirring occasionally, until beginning to soften and turn golden-brown in places, 6 to 7 minutes. Add the garlic, and cook just until fragrant, about 30 seconds. Add the celery and carrot, and continue to cook, stirring occasionally, until beginning to soften and turn golden-brown in places, about 5 minutes. Add the tomato paste,

stirring constantly to combine and scraping the bottom of the pot to prevent sticking, about 1 minute. Add the tomatoes, 1 tsp. salt, and ½ tsp. pepper, and continue to cook, stirring often, until the tomatoes thicken slightly, 4 to 5 minutes. Add 4 cups water and the cauliflower, raise the heat to high, and bring to a boil. Reduce the heat to low, and simmer with the cover ajar, stirring occasionally, until the cauliflower is tender, 25 to 30 minutes. Season to taste with salt and pepper, transfer to a large bowl or platter, drizzle with oil, and serve.





fresh greek yogurt with mixed berries

A creamy, thick, tangy homemade yogurt served with fresh berries and honey makes a delicious dessert after a healthful meal. Serves 8

- 1 quart whole milk, preferably organic**
- 1 cup full-fat plain yogurt, preferably organic**
- Mixed berries, such as raspberries, blueberries, blackberries, and red currants**
- ½ cup honey; more as needed**

Affix a thermometer to the side of a medium Dutch oven or other heavy-duty pot. Heat the milk over medium-low heat

to 195°F, stirring occasionally. Remove the pot from the heat and wait until the temperature drops to 110°F, stirring frequently to help the temperature drop quickly and to prevent a skin from forming on top. Remove the thermometer, then whisk the yogurt into the milk until well combined. Position a rack in the center of the oven. Cover the pot, drape a kitchen towel over the pot, and transfer to the oven. Turn the oven light on, and let sit undisturbed for 8 hours or up to overnight.

Remove the pot from the oven, and transfer to the refrigerator. Leave the yogurt in the refrigerator for 5 hours or up to overnight. You can eat the yogurt

like this (it will be good refrigerated for up to 10 days) or make Greek-style yogurt. For Greek style, place a cheesecloth-lined mesh strainer over a bowl. Without scraping the bottom of the pan, transfer the yogurt to the strainer, and let it drain, refrigerated, for 2½ to 3 hours. Discard or reserve the whey for another use. Store the yogurt in the refrigerator in a large resealable container for up to 5 days. Whisk before serving.

To assemble the dessert, set out 8 shallow bowls, and dollop ½ cup of the yogurt into each. Divide the berries among the bowls, and top with a drizzle of honey.