

A Recipe of

Greece is located in south-eastern Europe, protruding into the Mediterranean Sea east of Italy. About one fifth of the land that makes up Greece is islands. Almost the total population is ethnic Greek.

Although there are cross connections between the food of Greece and other Middle Eastern countries, Greek cuisine has stubbornly survived. It stands alone today as a strong, vibrant cuisine, — a testament to endurance.

Like the people, the cuisine of Greece is unique. Regional gastronomic differences do exist in this country; but experts do not draw culinary delineations throughout the Greek countryside as they do in other Western European countries. The Greeks are proud of their national cuisine as a whole.



Typical food from Greece.

The Greeks are credited with laying the foundation for the culinary arts. The first Greek chefs were highly regarded, developing original cooking techniques and initiating the dining experience. They are also credited with the introduction of the toque -- the chef's hat.

Greek cuisine, whether frugal or bountiful, has molded and developed along with the customs, and traditions of the Greek people. It is characteristic of the Greeks to celebrate their joys, to sweeten their sorrows, and to assuage their struggles by eating and drinking in the company of family and friends.

Customs also are tied closely to the distribution of special edibles, such as Koufeta (Candy Coated Almonds) at baptisms and weddings, or Koliva (Boiled Wheat) at funerals. Each important feast during the year, such as Christmas, the Annunciation, Easter, and the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin, has its own specialty. Orthodox Greeks, as devout people, eat specific foods on fasting days during the year depending on the season (winter, spring, summer, autumn) and depending on what Greek soil has to offer at that particular time of the year.

Before Lent, during Carnival time, preparations begin for the most important period of fasting. Meat is allowed during the first week which is referred to as "Kreatinis". Only milk products are allowed during the second week called "Tirinis". A sweet smell of cheese and milk pites permeates the air of the homes of Greek housewives who prepare the pites according to the tradition of their forefathers.



Typical food from Greece.

Fish and seafood can be eaten during the Annunciation and Palm Sunday, which fall during Lent. Keeping up the tradition, during the feast of the Annunciation, in most Greek homes housewives prepare Bakaliaro Pasto Tiganito ke Skordalia (Fried Salted Cod and Garlic Sauce) for the holiday meal.

On Holy Thursday the custom is to color Easter eggs and bake Tsoureki (Easter Sweet Bread). Out of the kitchens a smell of vinegar fills the air since vinegar is necessary for the color to set on the eggs. Some of the colored eggs are used to decorate the Sweet Easter Bread. The others are placed in glass bowls or in baskets on the living room table, filling the house with the spirit of Easter. Another custom which housewives still observe is to refrain from lighting a fire or cooking on Good Friday. The meal, prepared the day before, is quite simple, usually consisting of lentils boiled in plain water, vinegar, and oregano, and served with olives, scallions, and halva, all considered fasting food.

Nowhere else in the world can the spirit of the Holy Resurrection of Christ be felt as it is expressed in Greece. All the preparations for Easter: the characteristic foods of this important holiday, the Red-Colored Eggs, the Arni sti Souvla (Lamb on the Spit), the Kokoretsi (Lamb Entrails Grilled on the Spit), the Mayeritsa (Easter Soup), together with the cheerful tolling of the bells, the liturgy in church, the pure white candles with their flames dancing in unison, all this and more, make one feel from within the uniqueness and magnificence of this feast. Easter is the feast that, more than any other, makes the migrating Greeks return to their homeland to roast the lamb on the spit and to crack the red Easter eggs with their families.



International Food

On August 6th, Transfiguration Day, today in the village churches, one still can see worshippers carrying baskets overflowing with grapes which they bring to be blessed and which later are distributed among the congregation. Before that day no one yet has tasted the sweet fruit.

In September, when the grapes are crushed and the must starts to ferment, the housewives in every home bake Moustokouloura (Must Biscuits) and Moustalevria (Fresh Wine Must Pudding).

On December 4th, the feast of St. Barbara, many housewives still keep the old custom of distributing among neighbors Varvara, a pudding-like cream made out of wheat, sprinkled with walnuts and cinnamon.

Christmas is the most important feast of Christianity after Easter. Throughout the centuries Christmas also has been linked closely to traditional Greek cooking. All sweet shops decorate their windows with mounds of Kourabiedes (Holiday Butter Cookies) and Melomakarona (New Year Cookies). A delectable aroma fills the air of every home kitchen where women make Kataifi, Baklava, Diples, Christopsomo, the traditional Roast Lamb with Potatoes and the Savory Turkey stuffed with chestnuts and pine nuts.

A few days before the Christmas holidays are over, preparations begin for New Year's Eve. One of the few customs which is kept just as alive today as in the past in all Greek homes is the cutting of the Vasilopita (New Year's Bread). In the past, despite the fact that people were poorer, the coin in the Vasilopita was always a gold one. Today the gold coin has been replaced by a small, common metal coin. However, each one of us believes in the good fortune that the coin will bring if it happens to be in our slice of Vasilopita. On New Year's Eve, after eating, every housewife sets her table with scrumptious foods -"Kaloudia"-, foods such as Greek pastries, fresh and dried fruits, and a variety of nuts. This is done so that St. Basil (the Greek Santa Claus) will pass by, taste, and bless the food. His blessings will help keep an abundance of food all through the year in the home.

These and many more customs, customs such as the sharing of the "Artoklasia", (the five loaves of bread that the worshippers bring to church to be blessed on their name day), the "Fanouropita" kneaded by the unmarried daughter in the family, who takes the pita to church on the feast day of St. Fanourios, with the hope that he in turn will enlighten her as to her fortune, and the formal dinners celebrating the joys of each family, prove how closely Greek tradition is linked to Greek cuisine.

Mousakas

Ingredients:

- 1 1/2 lb. Potatoes
- 1 cup Olive Oil
- 1 1/2 lbs. Ground Beef
- 1 finely chopped Onion
- 1 minced Garlic
- 1 1/2 lb. Aubergines
- 2 tablespoons Butter
- 3 peeled and chopped Tomatoes
- 2 teaspoons Salt
- dash of Pepper
- 2 tablespoons, toasted Breadcrumbs
- 3 Eggs
- Parsley
- Béchamel Sauce
- 1/2 lb. Cottage Cheese
- 1/2 cup Kefalotiri Cheese



Method:

- ◆ Cut aubergines into 1/3 inch slices. Heat oil in a large frying pan and fry aubergine slices a few at a time, until slightly browned. Do the same with the potatoes.
- ◆ Sauté the meat, onion, and garlic in the butter. Add tomatoes, salt and pepper. Cover and cook, over a low heat, for 30 minutes. Remove from heat and add breadcrumbs, 1 beaten egg and chopped parsley.
- ◆ Prepare béchamel sauce; add remaining eggs and cheeses.
- ◆ Butter a baking dish and sprinkle with breadcrumbs. Put one layer of potatoes into the baking dish. Cover with half the meat mixture. Alternate aubergine and meat mixture. Top with béchamel sauce and bake.