



# GREECE

## dish by dish

Greek food sings of the summer — it's best enjoyed outside, from mainland mountaintops to island beaches. Mezze spreads celebrate punchy purple olives, garlicky dips and herb-sprinkled cheese, while salads of sun-ripened tomatoes, tangy feta and fragrant oregano are perfect with just-landed grilled fish or slow-stewed legumes cooked in outdoor ovens following recipes that date back to antiquity. From Macedonia in the north to Crete in the south, we explore the country via its standout dishes

WORDS: HELEN IATROU & ANASTASIA MIARI

IMAGE: GETTY



# pastitsada, corfu

Fragrant with cloves, cumin and cinnamon, this pasta dish arrived on the Ionian island of Corfu with 14th-century Venetian spice traders and has since become rooted in the local cuisine. On Sundays across the island, the air carries its heady scent. Words: Anastasia Miari

As a child, Sunday mornings were spent in the kitchen of my yiayia. My Greek grandmother — or yiayia — cooked in the whitewashed shack built by my grandfather to keep the scent of frying fish and spices away from the main house. Cloves and cinnamon spiked the air as a rich tomato sauce and beef short ribs simmered away, cooking for hours before the pasta it would be served with — thick bucatini or penne to soak up the richly spiced sauce — went into a separate pot.

Pastitsada or ‘la pastizzada’ as the island’s Venetian colonisers called it, is a dish that’s been representative of Corfu for hundreds of years. Slow-cooked meat — beef, rabbit, rooster or, on occasion, octopus — is stewed in a deep-red tomato sauce for hours, flavoured with the island’s signature spetseriko spice mix. The combination of spices varies from household to household, but invariably contains cinnamon and cloves along with nutmeg, allspice, cumin and several more besides. It’s then served atop a pile of pasta — again we have our Italian neighbours to thank for this — alongside a customary Greek salad topped with a block of feta.

In that dingy kitchen, I’d watch Yiayia’s face, creased like the bark of an olive tree, hovering over a pot of bubbling tomato sauce. Sunday lunch was a spiritual experience; a time to truly appreciate the culinary magic that can be conjured with the simplest of ingredients.

Found in tavernas, restaurants and — more importantly — households across the island, pastitsada has a distinct flavour profile that scents the air as you stroll around Corfu’s mountain villages or the cobbled alleyways of its Venetian old town. Like most of our illustrious ‘native’ dishes, pastitsada is a credit to the Venetians and their trading power across the Mediterranean and the Middle East. They put the island on the spice trail more than 500 years ago when they colonised it, passing through the surrounding aquamarine

waters, forging commercial ties between Corfu and Dubrovnik — another Venetian outpost. With them they brought powdered red pepper — both sweet and hot — and should you travel to Croatia’s Dalmatian coastline, you’ll find the same dish, known locally as pašticada and served with gnocchi instead of pasta.

“My own yiayia followed the seasons with her ingredients and her food was always consistent in taste and generally very good,” says chef Spyros Agious, when I visit The Venetian Well in Corfu Town. Framed by tendrils of bougainvillea, his fine-dining restaurant is set around a centuries-old well in a quiet courtyard near the sea. “What I appreciated over time, and as a professional chef, is the slow cooking,” he says. “The way Yiayia sauteed the onion very slowly until it was perfectly caramelised. The result goes to another level of taste. I also learnt to find beauty in simplicity and in the quality of seasonal produce on my own island.”

While my yiayia is a ‘throw it in a pot and walk away’ kind of cook, Corfu’s most talented chefs spend years perfecting their versions of pastitsada. Chef Agious’s ravioli with cockerel is perhaps the most exquisite variation I’ve encountered. It’s served with a cream of graviera cheese, artichoke chips and hazelnut, each pasta parcel a delectable combination of flavours and textures that sings with a signature Corfu spice mix.

Driving south along the coastal road from Corfu Town, past mountains dense with olive trees and hilltop villages painted in the island’s blushing pastel tones, I arrive at Klimataria — or Bellos as it’s better known by locals — a blink-and-miss-it restaurant in the former fishing village of Benitses. The owner, Nikos Bellos, is the kind of old-school Corfiot who believes in simplicity and sticking with tradition — and will insist that every last scrap of food on your plate is eaten before he whisks it away. But I’m here to cook octopus

Clockwise from top left: A street in the town of Paleokastritsa, west Corfu; beautiful sunsets and sandy beaches are characteristic of Corfu’s southwest coast; Lily Bellos’s pastitsada; Lily at home in Benitses Previous pages: Lunch under olive trees in Crete

IMAGES: GETTY; HARDIE GRANT/MARCO ARGÜELLO





pastitsada with his wife, Lily, to feature in my cookbook. Nikos looms over the kitchen, ready to catch us deviating from the recipe. The dish is both a signature of the island and of Klimataria — and he insists that actually, the only necessary seasoning is spicy paprika.

The other ingredients in the Bellos pastitsada are olive oil (and lots of it), onions, tomato puree and octopus. While it’s rustic, with whole octopus tentacles and the deep red sauce piled atop spaghetti, these humble ingredients are elevated thanks to slow cooking and clever flavour balancing. It results in me — and apparently numerous other diners — gasping and voicing superlatives like “this is the best meal I’ve eaten in Greece.”

Cookbook author and restaurant owner Vasiliki Karounou takes a slightly different approach for the pastitsada she serves at Ambelonas, in the grounds of a 400-year-old Venetian estate. Like the rest of the menu here, her version is the dish is inspired by her mother-in-law, whose handwritten recipe book, filled with forgotten island recipes, provided Vasiliki with all she needed to know about traditional Corfiot cuisine.

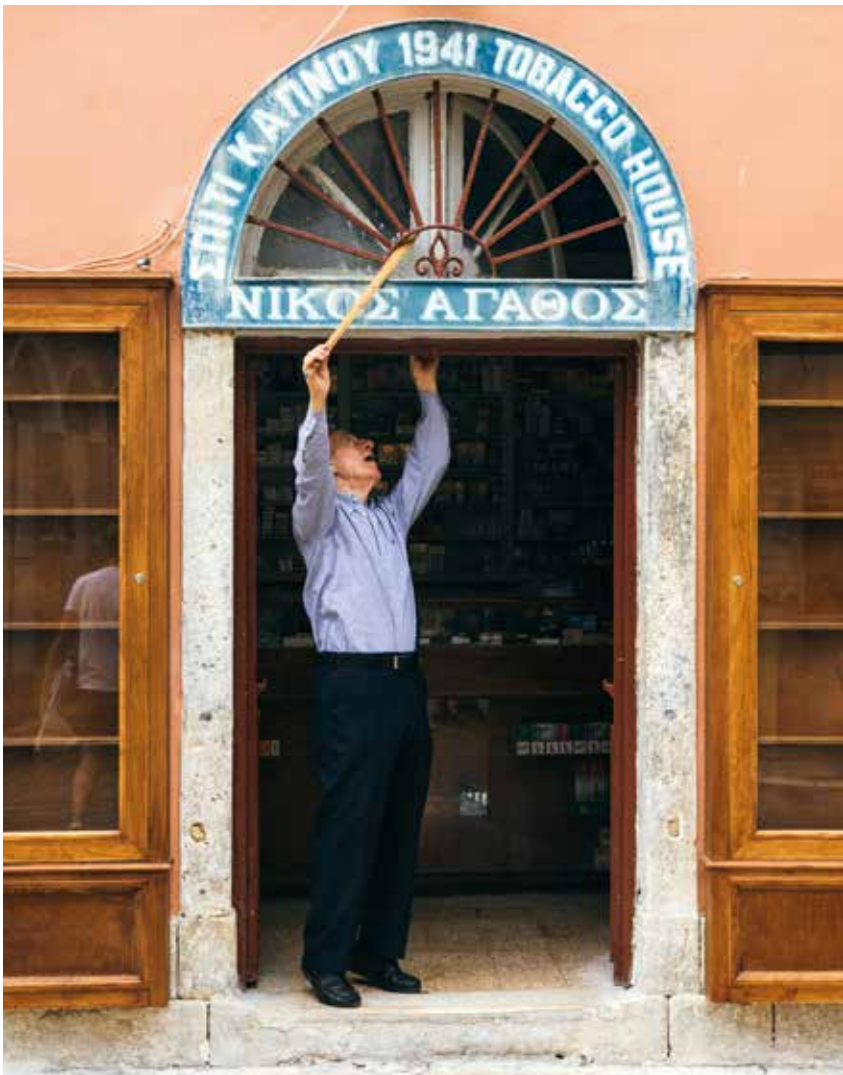
In contrast to Nikos’s simple one-spice pastitsada, Karounou does as my yiayia might and combines seven spices — cinnamon, nutmeg, cumin, allspice, hot red chilli, sweet red chilli and black peppercorns — to marinate a beef rump or shoulder, which cooks for several hours. “The sauce must be very thick, spicy and served very hot,” says Vasiliki, who also insists on using fresh tomato alongside tomato paste.

We Corfiots are snobs when it comes to our gastronomy — an attitude that stems not from cherished recipes, but from our primary ingredients. The most verdant of all the Greek islands, lush with wildflowers where others are sun-scorched, Corfu is blessed with rainfall in winter that sees produce flourish. Tomatoes, sweet and plentiful, taste of sunshine. So, while we have the Venetians to thank for the spices, as my yiayia says, Corfu is blessed with fertile ground — which is what brought the Venetians here in the first place.

**WHERE TO TRY IT:** The Venetian Well, Klimataria and Ambelonas each put their own spin on the dish. [venetianwell.gr](http://venetianwell.gr) [klimataria-restaurant.gr](http://klimataria-restaurant.gr) [ambelonas-corfu.gr](http://ambelonas-corfu.gr)

**WHERE TO STAY:** The Olivar Suites in Messonghi has double rooms from €230 (£193), B&B, and a restaurant, Flya, with a menu of local produce and traditional dishes. [olivarsuites.gr](http://olivarsuites.gr)

Clockwise from top left: Corfu’s olives are a prized Greek crop; The White Tower in Thessaloniki; skordalia, a dip made from bread or potatoes and garlic; a street in Kérkyra (Corfu Town)



# skordalia, macedonia

This potent garlic dip is served throughout Greece, but its most prized version is found in the northern region of Macedonia

## When does the dish date back to?

Ancient Megara, a region of central Greece, on the Corinth Isthmus, was famous for its garlic and onion production in the fifth century BCE. Greece’s first skordalia is believed to have its origins in these ancient times, when it was known as mittotos and comprised garlic, olive oil, boiled leeks, egg and fresh cheese.

Today, skordalia shows a similar reverence for the edible bulb, the recipe combining garlic, olive oil, salt and lemon or vinegar, with either boiled potatoes or stale white crustless bread. The pungent garlic dip is a staple of every Greek home and almost all tavernas throughout the country.

## How is it made?

Every region does it differently. In the Ionian Islands, for example, Venetian rule is evident in the regional creamy, potato-based skordalia known as aliada, taken from aglio, the Italian word for garlic. Dimitris Leloudas, owner of Leloudas, a humble taverna opened by his grandfather in the working-class Athenian neighbourhood of Votanikos in 1928, tends to

serve the classic bread-based rendition. “Our former cook, Anna, described it as the poor man’s skordalia, while she considered the one with potato to be the rich man’s choice,” he says. “Everyone had bread at home, but not everyone could buy potatoes. The bread version has a slightly more intense flavour.”

## What about other regional variations?

In Macedonia, skordalia was traditionally made with walnuts. But the rising cost of nuts has made this variation a rarity. If you do find the dish done this way, it’s most likely to be in the regional capital, Thessaloniki, at the fish tavernas of Kalamaria or the mezedopolia — tapas bar-like venues serving mezze — in Ladadika.

In Athens, walnut skordalia remains a staple on the menu of Konstandina Stavropoulou’s homely fish taverna Thalassinos. “When crushed, walnuts release essential oils that balance out the flavours of the garlic and olive oil,” she says. “It has quite a robust taste.”

Pistachios and almonds have also made appearances as co-stars in versions of this

versatile garlic dip by Athens-born chef Carolina Doriti. You’ll find recipes in *Salt of the Earth: Secrets and Stories from a Greek Kitchen*, where it features as a punchy accompaniment to roasted beetroot.

## What else does the dish go with?

Skordalia is inextricably linked with Greek Independence Day, celebrated on 25 March, when the dip is served with crisp-fried salt-cured Atlantic cod, known as bakaliaro. Coinciding with the Annunciation of the Virgin Mary, this marks one of two occasions during Greek Orthodox Lent when the faithful are permitted to break the 40-day fast, both times with fish. **HI**

**WHERE TO TRY IT:** Sample salt cod fritters with two types of skordalia — walnut and beetroot — at Thessaloniki restaurant Maiami. [maiamirestaurant.gr](http://maiamirestaurant.gr)

**WHERE TO STAY:** Try walnut skordalia with fried cod, mussels or courgettes at Akroyiali, a seaside taverna dating to 1924, which forms part of family-run Hotel Liotopi in northeastern Halkidiki. Doubles from €131 (£110), half board. [hotel-liotopi.gr](http://hotel-liotopi.gr)

IMAGES: ALAMY; MARCO ARGÜELLO; GETTY; STOCKFOOD





# masourakia, chios

These sweet treats are flavoured with thyme honey or mandarin and the distinctive, aromatic resin from local mastic trees

On Greece’s northeastern Aegean island of Chios, mastiha is king. Said since the fifth century BCE to aid digestion, this aromatic resin is gently coaxd by hand from mastic trees that grow in the south of the island. It has myriad uses, from chewing gum to face cream, while studies have found evidence of anti-inflammatory and antioxidative properties. Many know it as a digestif but, in Chios, its bitter-sweet, herbal flavour has long enhanced local desserts and pastries. And masourakia, buttered filo almond pastries, are by far the local favourite.

Anna Moniodi, born in the mastiha-producing village of Tholopotami, says home cooks created masourakia around 1965. And, soon enough, the filo-wrapped tubes of almond and mastiha found their way to patisseries like Moniodis, owned by her family.

“Masourakia are unique to Chios. You can’t find them anywhere else,” Anna says. Due to their shape, they’re believed to have taken their name from the Greek word for spool.

“Traditionally, masourakia were served to guests at weddings and baptisms with a glass of soumada, a local drink made from bitter almond. But it’s really an everyday sweet,” she adds.

Chians widely agree that Moniodis, which opened in 1963, makes the island’s finest version of this dainty delicacy. Any day you visit one of their two shops you’ll encounter trays of neatly stacked masourakia ready to be packed in the patisserie’s characteristic cherry-red boxes adorned with an almond blossom design.

“No one leaves Chios without picking up masourakia to take as a gift to family or friends in Greece or abroad,” says Anna. “You’ll see people carrying boxes on the plane and ferry.”

Like many traditional Greek desserts, the recipe sounds deceptively simple. “You can find recipes for them,” Anna says. “But they’re hard to make at home.”

Chios has long been known for its excellent almonds, so it makes sense that many local

sweets feature this ingredient. Masourakia are no exception. While almond trees are fewer in number today, Anna says the nuts can still be sourced locally, or from elsewhere in Greece.

There are three types of masourakia on offer at Moniodis, all made with almond. Mastiha flavours the original version, its filo exterior dusted liberally with icing sugar. The classic take is dipped in a Chian thyme honey syrup and coated in a thick layer of finely chopped almond. Local mandarin adds zing to a third, equally popular version. **HI**

**WHERE TO TRY IT:** Take your pick from Moniodis’ masourakia, which come individually wrapped, or sample all three flavours. Track them down at one of two locations in Chios town (at 26 Voupalou St and 4 Psychari St). [instagram.com/moniodis\\_patisserie](https://www.instagram.com/moniodis_patisserie)  
**WHERE TO STAY:** Pearl Island Chios Hotel & Spa, often offers sweet masourakia as a welcome at check-in. Doubles from €153 (£128) per night, B&B. [pearl island.gr](https://www.pearl island.gr)

IMAGES: GETTY; MARCO ARGÜELLO



Yiayia Niki in the Mani Peninsula, Peloponnese  
From left: mastic tree in Chios; Yiayia Niki’s dish of bakaliaros plaki

# bakaliaros plaki, peloponnese

Once known as the ‘mountain fish’ recipe, this can also be a plentiful vegan dish with an extra potato and red pepper in place of seafood. This recipe comes from Kalamata native Yiayia Niki, who has been making it this way for decades

SERVES: 4-6 TAKES: 1 HR, PLUS OVERNIGHT SOAKING FOR SALT COD

## INGREDIENTS

- 1kg plain or salt cod fillets
- oregano, for sprinkling
- 500g good-quality tomatoes (if they’re not in season, use 1 heaped tbsp tomato paste)
- 120ml olive oil
- 2 medium red onions, roughly chopped
- 3 large garlic cloves
- 3 medium to large potatoes (around 600g in total)
- 1 cinnamon stick
- ½ tsp whole peppercorns
- 5 allspice seeds
- 5 cloves
- 4 bay leaves
- 100g Greek currants
- 1 red pepper, roughly chopped
- bunch of fresh parsley, chopped with stems

## METHOD

- 1 If using salt cod, desalinate overnight in a bowl of water, rinsing several times. The next day, run each fillet under a cold tap and squeeze the water out. For plain cod, ignore this step.
  - 2 Lay the fish flat in an ovenproof dish or tray, sprinkle with oregano and set aside. Preheat oven to 200C, fan 180C. Chop the tomatoes, if using, into quarters and set aside for later. Add the olive oil, onions, garlic and potatoes to a large nonstick frying pan with a lid.
  - 3 Sizzle on high while you add the cinnamon, peppercorns, allspice seeds, cloves, bay leaves and currants. Add the red pepper, a sprinkle of oregano and 80ml water, then cover and allow to steam, stirring occasionally so the potatoes don’t stick.
  - 4 After 10 mins, add the tomatoes or tomato paste, allow to cook for a further 2 mins with the lid on, then remove from the heat and pour over the cod in the oven dish. Sprinkle half the chopped parsley (with stems) into the dish and add a final top-up of around 50ml of water and bake for 40 mins.
  - 4 Garnish with the remaining chopped parsley and serve with a slice of bread to soak up the juices.
- Taken from Yiayia: Time-perfected Recipes from Greece’s Grandmothers, by Anastasia Miari (£27, Hardie Grant Books).





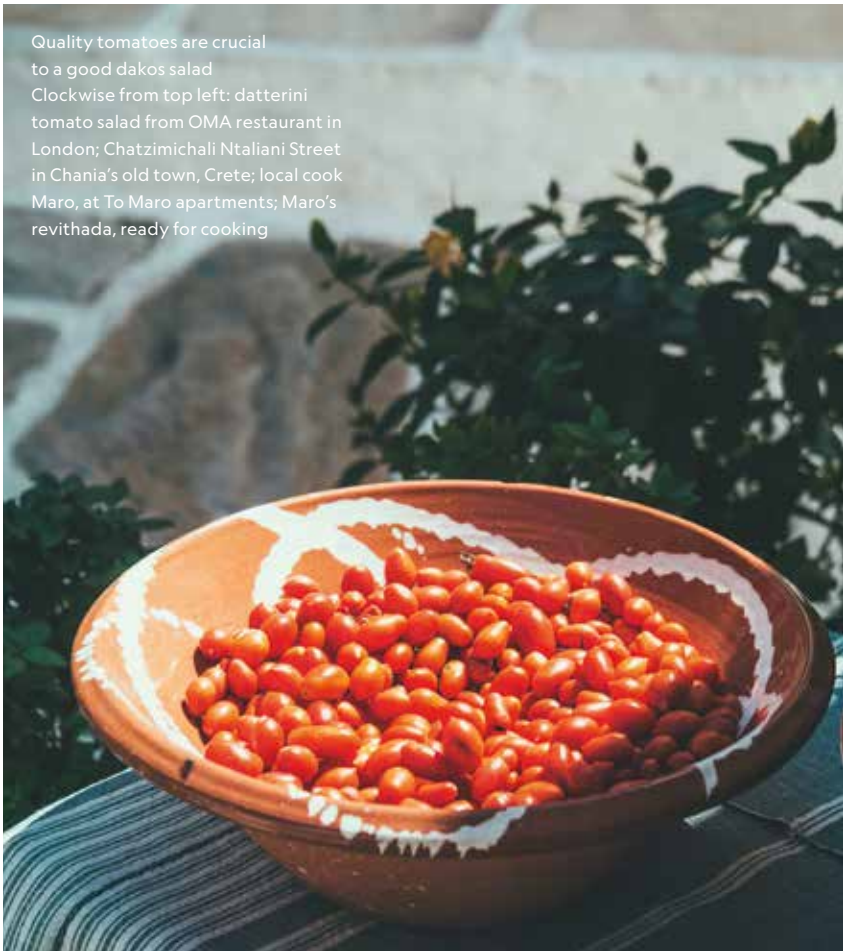
# datterini tomato salad, crete

Popular on Crete, dakos is a Greek salad variant with a barley rusk. This take on the classic recipe — a carob rusk-crowned version with mizithra cheese, tomato and capers — is from the chefs at London’s OMA restaurant. Sourcing quality ingredients, notably sweet tomatoes and proper mizithra rather than feta cheese, will make a big difference to this dish. Carob rusks can be brought online or from shops stocking Greek produce

SERVES: 4 SIDE DISHES TAKES: 20 MINS

INGREDIENTS	FOR THE DRESSING
450g datterini vine tomatoes	80g Greek extra virgin olive oil
30g spring onions, finely sliced	30g good-quality balsamic
20g capers	vinegar
80g carob rusk	½ tsp flaky sea salt
80g mizithra cheese	
½ tsp dried oregano	

- METHOD**
- 1 Slice the datterini vine tomatoes in half lengthways and add to a mixing bowl. Add the spring onions, capers and half the carob rusk broken up into bite-sized pieces.
  - 2 Combine the dressing ingredients in a small jar and shake. Pour over the tomato mixture and lightly toss. Add to a serving bowl and top with the mizithra cheese and the other half of the carob rusks, and sprinkle with the dried oregano.
  - 3 When serving, mix well so the cheese coats everything and emulsifies into the dressing. [oma.london](https://www.oma.london)



Quality tomatoes are crucial to a good dakos salad  
Clockwise from top left: datterini tomato salad from OMA restaurant in London; Chatzimichali Ntaliani Street in Chania’s old town, Crete; local cook Maro, at To Maro apartments; Maro’s revithada, ready for cooking

IMAGES: GILLES DRAPS; GETTY; MARCO ARGÜELLO



# revithada, sifnos

This one-pot chickpea stew is cooked in a wood-burning oven, in a specially designed bowl hewn from the rich clay deposits on this wind-blown Cyclades island

Thanks to its rich clay deposits, Sifnos has become known as an island for ceramicists. Clay pots have been used to cook with for centuries resulting in dishes native to this wind-battered island, unique to the vessel in which they’re slow-baked. None is more Sifnian than revithada — a baked chickpea stew traditionally served on Sundays and made in a skepastaria, the small clay bowl dedicated to its cooking.

Left in a wood-burning oven overnight, the ultra-soft chickpeas are infused with lemon and bay leaves, and these few ingredients achieve a perfectly comforting dish that sings with the zing of local citrus.

What makes revithada so special is the time that goes into cooking it. Local cook Maro, owner of To Maro boutique apartments, stresses the importance of baking on a low

heat for a number of hours. She makes hers, sometimes for guests in the garden outside the holiday rental in Kastro, over an open flame in her specially built outdoor oven.

“When I was growing up, many of the men on the island were potters,” says Maro. “That left the women to farm the land and the children at home to prepare dinner. That’s how I learned to cook revithada myself, from the age of seven. “Even on a Sunday, our parents would leave the house by donkey to go out and work while the revithada baked slowly, until they returned home.”

So, in Sifnos, this is not a dish you might throw together midweek after work. It was born to feed a family when there was more time to prepare food — so, usually on Sundays — and slow-cooked. The flavours of the onion, bay and olive oil suffuse into a hearty meal

that only needs a slice of myzithra or feta cheese, a couple of olives and hunk of bread to create a satisfyingly wholesome lunch. **AM**

**WHERE TO TRY IT:** To Steki, in the bay of Platis Gialos, serves revithada alongside other Sifnian claypot-baked dishes such as beef stewed in a rich red wine sauce. Set almost on the water, this favoured local spot has its own vegetable garden, which provides most of its organic produce. [facebook.com/tostekisifnos](https://facebook.com/tostekisifnos)

**WHERE TO STAY:** To Maro has apartments from €45 (£38), room only. [maro-sifnos.gr](https://maro-sifnos.gr) Verina Hotel Sifnos offers the opportunity to try your hand at the potter’s wheel. The hotel organises classes in one of Sifnos’s oldest clay pottery studios, alongside revithada cooking workshops. Doubles from €253 (£212) per night, B&B. [verinahotelsifnos.com](https://verinahotelsifnos.com)