



OPPOSITE: EGGPLANT STACKS DRIZZLED WITH MINT SAUCE MAKE A MEATY ENTRÉE. (RECIPE ON PAGE 55). THIS PAGE FROM LEFT: PANORAMIC VIEW OF GREECE'S ANCIENT CITY; HOLLY AND VEFA (ON RIGHT) IN THESSALONIKI.



# Viva Vefa!

THE FIRST LADY OF GREEK CUISINE DISHES ON HER COUNTRY'S CULINARY WONDERS

by Holly Rudin-Braschi and John C. Braschi

Greek culinary superstar Vefa Alexiadou sets her seaside supper table with elegant simplicity. “*Ella, ella! Come, come! The food is ready!*” she calls. We sit under large umbrellas, shielded from the late afternoon Aegean sun reflecting off her white marble terrace. On a hand-embroidered white linen tablecloth, Vefa artistically arranges numerous porcelain platters brimming with her colorful recipes. “This is traditional Greek cuisine,” she says, “Fresh, flavorful, and uncomplicated, cooked with love, and enjoyed leisurely with family and friends.”

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Sharing a meal at Vefa's table makes it easy to understand why the citizenry love the dynamic first lady of Greek Cuisine. Though she's a professional chemist with a degree from the University of Thessaloniki, Greece, Vefa has always found time to entertain friends, family, and business associates. In 1980, at the urging of these friends, Vefa published *Invitation to Dinner*, her first book of recipes. The book, like her food, received rave reviews and established Vefa Alexiadou Editions as a competitive publishing house. It also sparked a revival of pride and interest in Greek culture and cuisine.

The worldwide impact of *Invitation to Dinner* and Vefa's 11 successive titles cemented her reputation as a world-class chef. This year, Vefa was honored by the International Association of Culinary Professionals as one of three nominees for its prestigious Lifetime Achievement Award of Excellence. At the 2000 World Cookbook Awards in the “Salon International Livre Gourmand of Perigueux,” she won awards for the “Best Mediterranean Cookbook in Greek” and also the special prize for “Best Culinary Business Professional.”

Top: Macduff Everton; bottom: John Braschi





CLOCKWISE: EVENING DINING AT THE STROFI RESTAURANT IN ATHENS; MIXING IT UP ON THE TALK SHOW *MORNING COFFEE*; THE ACROPOLIS WAS THE CULTURAL HUB OF ANCIENT GREECE.

Since 1990, Vefa has appeared daily on Greece's top-rated talk show, *Morning Coffee*, where she continues to share the richness of Greek culinary traditions with hundreds of thousands of households. In 1994, she opened the first of 20 Vefa's House cookware stores, which are now the Williams-Sonomas of Greece. Currently completing the official cookbook for the 2004 Olympics in Athens, Vefa shared with us some of her delicious recipes, as well as her thoughts on what has made the Greek diet the epitome of a healthy cuisine.

## What influence did the ancient Greeks have on the Mediterranean diet?

Starting in about the 10th century B.C., Greek mariners settled throughout the Mediterranean region that is now Spain, Libya, France, Sicily, Southern Italy, Asia Minor, and the Black Sea. Wherever these sailors went, they wanted to reproduce the food of their homeland, so they planted vineyards to make wine, olive orchards to make olive oil, and cereals to make bread. Together, these three foods are what we Greeks call the "holy

triad," or the diet of civilized man. This triad of staples is still the basis of all traditional Mediterranean cuisines.

## When did Greek cooking become a cuisine?

If you define *cuisine* as how food is cooked, served, and savored, we Greeks trace our cuisine to ancient times. We were one of the first peoples to cook our food in olive oil, to season it with fresh herbs, and then serve it with bread and wine for the enjoyment and delight of our family and friends.

If you visit the national archaeological museum in Athens, you will find an ancient bronze frying pan about nine inches in diameter and an inch deep. Its handle is sculpted to resemble the god Apollo holding the sun [the pan] above his head with outstretched hands. This one simple frying pan sums up 3,500 years of Greek cuisine...[it is] useful, uncomplicated, yet beautiful, a vessel worthy of both a feast for the gods and a simple supper for a humble man.

A frying pan of the same shape and size is still one of the

most important utensils in Greek kitchens today. We use it to fry, sauté, and braise dishes much as our ancestors did, using ingredients they would have used. We continue to cook most, if not all, of our food in olive oil. Our main dishes still focus on grains, vegetables, wild greens, legumes, cheese, and eggs, with small amounts of meat, poultry, or fish; olives, yeast breads, and feta are still served with all of our meals. Our main seasonings are still salt, parsley, oregano, dill, and mint. We continue to wrap food in grape leaves; to eat yogurt as a dip, side dish, or snack; to serve dried and preserved fruit; and to use nuts and honey in our desserts.

## What were the major influences on Greek cuisine?

There were a lot of factors! The sea gave us a bounty of fish. Our hot climate and rocky terrain provided us with foods that could only flourish in harsh conditions...olives, grapes, wild greens, herbs, grains, figs, honey, milk products from goats and sheep. Climate has always played a large role in how

we cook, serve, and eat our food, too. From ancient times, we Greeks have eaten our largest meal midday to stay out of the afternoon heat, and smaller meals for breakfast and supper.

Silk traders from the East brought in nutmeg, cinnamon, and black pepper, spices we use today in desserts, cooked grains, and various meat dishes. The Romans introduced eggplant, peaches, and citrus fruits, while the Arabs taught us to distill spirits like ouzo, our national liquor made from anise seed. When Greek-speaking Byzantines made Constantinople the center of their Greco-Roman empire, the best chefs, artists, and artisans from around the known world flocked to this new center of wealth and power,



which led to a great exchange of ideas and techniques.

Byzantine traders also brought salt roe and caviar from the Black Sea, something we still use today in our appetizer dip *taramasalata*. Salt-cured cheeses were introduced at this time, too, among them feta, a cheese we now serve at all meals. The custom of snacking on many small dishes, or *mezedbes*, while drinking spirits developed into a fine art during this era.

Later on, Venetian traders brought in New World crops like corn, and Ottoman Turks introduced coffee.



SIMPLE INGREDIENTS  
COMBINE TO  
GIVE LEMON OREGANO  
CHICKEN A FLAVOR  
THAT'S EXTRAORDINARY  
(RECIPE ON PAGE 56).



BITE INTO THESE  
FLAKY, SYRUP-COATED  
PASTRY ROLLS AND  
YOU'LL FIND A SWEET  
ALMOND CUSTARD  
(RECIPE ON PAGE 56).



# What makes Greek cuisine so healthy?

We have always eaten a healthy diet without knowing it. According to a recent study comparing the life spans of people across Europe, Greeks live the longest. This may be due to the way we have eaten since antiquity, by balancing food intake with moderate exercise. The modern nutrition community recently rediscovered our “Mediterranean diet,” and believes that this explains why we suffer fewer deaths from serious



COUNTERCLOCKWISE FROM ABOVE: THE DISPLAY OF FOODS AT ATHENS MARKET SEEMS ENDLESS. ON MT. PELION, VEFA ENJOYS MARINATED HORTA (WILD GREENS) WITH RED PEPPERS AND OLIVES PREPARED BY HER FRIEND ALEKA. SPOON SWEETS ARE FRESH FRUITS PRESERVED IN SYRUP OFFERED TO WELCOME VISITORS.

diseases like cancer, heart disease, and stroke than other Europeans do.

The Greek diet revolves around heart-healthy mono-unsaturated olive oil. The following delicious recipes from Vefa’s archives are no exception.

## EGGPLANT ROUNDS WITH MINT SAUCE (MELIZANES ME DHYOZMOS)

PREP AND COOK TIME: 2 hours  
 NOTES: This recipe is from one of Vefa’s most recent offerings—*Sunny Mediterranean Cuisine*.  
 MAKES: 6 to 8 servings

4 pounds medium globe

- eggplants
- Kosher salt
- ¾ cup olive oil
- 4 to 5 large green bell peppers, in ½-inch-thick rings
- 1 onion (1 lb.), thinly sliced
- 2 cups tomato juice
- 2 tablespoons finely chopped fresh mint
- About ½ teaspoon finely ground black pepper
- About ½ teaspoon salt
- 1 to 2 large tomatoes, thinly sliced crosswise

1. Wash eggplant, wipe dry, and slice horizontally into 1½-inch-thick rounds. Sprinkle with salt and allow to drain 1 hour in a colander. Rinse slices under running water and gently squeeze out excess water.
2. Heat ¼ cup olive oil over medium heat in a 12- to 14-inch nonstick pan. Lightly fry half of the eggplant slices until lightly browned, about 3 minutes per side. Repeat with ¼ cup olive oil and remaining slices.
3. Arrange eggplant slices in a single layer in a large nonstick roasting pan. Place a pepper ring on top of each eggplant round. Set aside.
4. Using the same roasting pan, heat remaining ¼ cup olive oil over medium heat. Lightly sauté onions in the oil until transparent and lightly browned, about 10 to 15 minutes.
5. Add tomato juice, mint, pepper, and salt. Adjust heat to medium-high and cook sauce until slightly thickened, about 3 to 5 minutes. Add salt and pepper to taste.
6. Remove onions with a slotted spoon, allowing some of sauce to drain back into pan. Spoon onions into pepper rings.
7. Top each eggplant round with a slice of tomato, then sprinkle with a little salt and pepper. Pour remaining sauce on top of and around eggplant.
8. Cover pan with vented aluminum foil and bake at 400° for 35 to 40 minutes until sauce has cooked almost down to the oil, and the vegetables are lightly browned and tender. Serve hot

# Bring Greece to Your Table

“IT IS EASY TO COOK GREEK STYLE IN AMERICA, because all of our main ingredients are available in most grocery stores,” says Vefa. “Fresh is best when it comes to fruits, vegetables, and herbs.” Here are Vefa’s suggestions for using traditional Greek ingredients in your everyday cooking.

## Seasonings

Olive oil, lemon juice, wine vinegar, garlic, onion, green onion, parsley, oregano, mint, and dill  
 For an all-purpose dressing, combine ⅔ cup olive oil with ⅓ cup lemon juice or wine vinegar. Season with 1 tablespoon of a mixture of any of the fresh herbs above, and add salt and pepper to taste.  
 Drizzle over green salads, pasta, hot potato salad, or freshly cooked vegetables, or as a marinade for grilled meats, poultry, or fish.

## Cured Greek Olives:

Toss pitted olives in green and pasta salads, with cooked vegetables.  
 Top frozen or homemade pizza dough with chopped olives and chopped green onions sautéed in olive oil. Sprinkle with shredded mozzarella, a dash of oregano, and sliced tomatoes before baking.

## Feta Cheese

Serve sliced with fresh bread and honey for breakfast.  
 Crumble over greens, pasta, or potato salads and freshly steamed vegetables.  
 To make a quick vegetarian side dish, roll crumbled feta into partially cooked slices of eggplant or zucchini. Place in a shallow pan, spread with tomato sauce, and bake uncovered in a 350° oven for about 25 minutes.  
 For a quick dip, mix 1 cup crumbled feta with ¼ cup low-fat sour cream. Stir in finely chopped roasted hot pepper, 1 tablespoon olive oil, and freshly ground pepper to taste.  
 Mix into meat loaf with finely chopped mint, oregano, garlic, and onion. Use as a filling with finely chopped oregano, dill, and/or mint for butterflied lamb, rolled flank steak, or rolled chicken breasts.



TOP TO BOTTOM: SARDINES MARINATING IN SALT. VEFA FRIES UP CRISPY BARBOUNIA (RED MULLET) FOR A FEAST WITH FRIENDS AT HER HOME ON THE HALKIDIKI PENINSULA IN NORTHERN GREECE.

or at room temperature.

Per serving: 290 cal., 60% (187 cal.) from fat; 4.3 g protein; 20 g fat (3 g sat.); 26 g carbo (5.9 g fiber); 501 mg sodium; 0 mg chol.

### CHICKEN WITH LEMON SAUCE (KOTOPOULO LEMONATO)

PREP AND COOK TIME: 1½ hours  
 NOTES: This classic recipe is from *Greek Cuisine*.  
 MAKES: 6 to 8 servings

- 1 3½- to 4-pound chicken
- 1 small lemon
- 4 pounds russet potatoes, peeled and quartered
- ½ cup olive oil
- ⅓ cup lemon juice
- 2 teaspoons salt
- 1 teaspoon ground black pepper
- ⅓ cup finely chopped fresh oregano, or 2 tablespoons dried
- ⅓ cup chicken broth

1. Wash chicken and pat dry. Pierce lemon all over with a small sharp knife. Put lemon in

the cavity of the chicken. Tie the chicken legs together with kitchen string.  
 2. Place chicken in the middle of a large nonstick roasting pan and arrange the potatoes around it.  
 3. In a small bowl, whisk olive oil, lemon juice, salt, black pepper, and oregano. Pour over the chicken and potatoes, then rub in with your fingertips to coat. Add chicken broth to outer

edges of pan. Bake, uncovered, in a 350° oven for about 1½ hours, or until chicken and potatoes are tender and browned.  
 Per serving: 468 cal., 65% (306 cal.) from fat; 30 g protein; 34 g fat (7.6 g sat.); 11 g carbo (4.8 g fiber); 714 mg sodium; 101 mg chol.

for this recipe comes from Vefa's book *Greek Pastries and Desserts*. To keep the filo crisp after baking, do not cover. To make ahead, prepare the rolls through step 4, then freeze in an airtight container for up to three months. Defrost in the refrigerator overnight, or at room temperature for 2 hours, before proceeding with step 5.  
 MAKES: 10 to 12 servings



edges of pan. Bake, uncovered, in a 350° oven for about 1½ hours, or until chicken and potatoes are tender and browned.  
 Per serving: 468 cal., 65% (306 cal.) from fat; 30 g protein; 34 g fat (7.6 g sat.); 11 g carbo (4.8 g fiber); 714 mg sodium; 101 mg chol.

### ALMOND CUSTARD PASTRY ROLLS (FLOYERES ME KREMA)

PREP AND COOK TIME: 2 hours  
 NOTES: The sweet inspiration

- 2½ cups milk
- ½ cup coarse semolina (cream of wheat—*not* instant)
- ½ cup sugar
- 4 tablespoons butter
- 4 egg yolks
- ½ teaspoon almond extract
- 1 teaspoon vanilla extract
- 1 cup blanched almonds, finely ground
- 1 pound filo dough
- ¾ cup unsalted butter, melted
- 2 cups sugar
- 2 tablespoons lemon juice

1. In a 2-quart microwave-safe baking dish, warm milk uncovered on full (100%) power for 5 minutes.  
 2. Stir in semolina and sugar, and microwave, uncovered, on full (100%) power for 10 to 12 minutes, stirring every 3 minutes until very thick.  
 3. Stir in butter. Add egg yolks, one by one. Add extracts and almonds; mix until well blended. Set aside.  
 4. Cut sheets of filo widthwise into three parts and separate into strips. Cover with plastic wrap and a damp cloth. Removing one strip at a time, lay each one out flat and brush lightly with melted butter. Fold in half across the width. Place 1 tablespoon of custard filling at one end, fold the sides over the filling, and loosely roll up. Arrange seam side down ½ inch apart on a nonstick or buttered rimmed baking sheet. Brush tops lightly with remaining butter. Repeat process until all the rolls are made.  
 5. Bake in a preheated 400° oven for 10 to 15 minutes, or until golden brown. While the rolls are baking, boil the sugar and 1½ cups water for 5 minutes, then stir in lemon juice. Pour hot syrup over rolls as they come out of the oven. Allow to cool to room temperature before serving.  
 Per serving: 559 cal., 43% (247 cal.) from fat; 8.8 g protein; 27 g fat (12 g sat.); 71 g carbo (1.6 g fiber); 253 mg sodium; 119 mg chol.

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## Get to Know Greece Better

FOR MORE INFORMATION ABOUT ALL THINGS HELLENIC, CONSULT THE FOLLOWING SITES:

- Greek National Tourist Organization:** [www.greektourism.com](http://www.greektourism.com)
- Greek Cuisine:** [www.greekcuisine.com](http://www.greekcuisine.com)
- Greek Ingredients:** [www.greekshops.com](http://www.greekshops.com)  
[www.greece.com](http://www.greece.com)

**More about Vefa and her recipes:**  
 Vefa Alexiadou's books are available at most major bookstores, or you can order them on the Web by logging on to [www.vefa.gr](http://www.vefa.gr).