

Greek-style Easter

When it comes to Easter, there's one country that really knows how to celebrate and that's Greece. It is by far the most important religious festival on the Greek Orthodox calendar, and everything comes to a standstill. Even Athens becomes a ghost town, and tourists are left to their own devices.

Wherever you go in Greece at Easter, you will find tsoureki, a brioche-style bread enriched with sugar and butter. Literally translated as "shining" or "epiphany" bread, it is to Greeks what hot cross buns are to us. My version is flavoured with orange, lemon and cumin seeds, and will give you a light and fluffy loaf. Serve it sliced or toasted with butter for breakfast or as an afternoon treat.

Another typical dish is spanakopita, the good old feta and spinach pie.

Usually baked as a whole pie, I've turned it into bite-size triangles that work as a light lunch or canapés. Serve them with my aubergine salsa; lightly spiced with garam masala and cardamom and full of herbs that complement the feta and spinach really well.

Finally, Easter wouldn't be Easter without a lamb main course, so here's my recipe for a hazelnut and herb-crusted rack. You don't need anything fancy with such a tender cut of meat, so try it with potatoes sautéed with thyme and garlic and roasted vine-ripened cherry tomatoes on the side.

Greek Easter loaf

Makes 1 large or 2 small loaves

You can, of course, make a plain loaf, but to be authentically Greek, this should be plaited. Divide the dough into 3 equal pieces and shape them into long sausages. Lay 2 pieces parallel to each other, about 2.5cm apart, then put the third piece perpendicularly across the middle, tucking it under one piece and over the other. Start plaiting from the middle and work your way outwards to one end, then continue to plait towards the opposite end. Finally, tuck the ends under to secure the plait in place.

30g fresh yeast or 2 x 7g sachets active dried yeast 200ml milk, warmed until tepid

100g golden caster sugar
500g strong white flour (preferably organic, unbleached)

1 tsp salt - Grated zest of 1 orange
Grated zest of 1 lemon
3 eggs, 1 lightly beaten
85g unsalted butter, melted
1 tsp cumin or caraway seeds

1 Cream the yeast with 3 tbsp of milk and a large pinch of sugar until the consistency of thin cream. Sift the flour and salt into a large mixing bowl then stir in the rest of the sugar and orange and lemon zests (stir in the dried yeast now,



if using).

2 Make a well in the centre then pour in the yeast mixture and crack 2 eggs on top. Stir the butter into the remaining milk then pour almost all of the milk mixture into the middle. Quickly stir the mixture together with a wooden spoon, adding the remaining milk mixture if needed, until you have a soft, slightly sticky dough.

3 Knead the dough vigorously for 8-10 minutes, either in a machine with a dough hook, or by hand on a lightly floured surface. The dough is ready when it feels soft, springy and smooth and leaves a thumbprint when pressed.

4 Shape the dough into a ball and place in a lightly oiled bowl. Cover with a clean, damp cloth or lightly oiled clingfilm and leave to rise until doubled in size (this will take about 2 hours).

5 Knock back the dough on a clean surface by punching the air out and kneading for 5 minutes. Divide the dough into 3 equal pieces then roll each piece into sausages, about 40cm long for a large loaf. (Divide into 6 pieces and roll into 25cm lengths, if making 2 small loaves.) Loosely plait the dough, tucking the ends under to secure.

6 Lift the plaited loaf onto a lightly greased baking sheet, cover with a damp cloth or oiled clingfilm then leave to rise for about 1 hour or until doubled in size.

7 Heat oven to 180C/Fan 160C/Gas 4. Brush the loaf with the beaten egg and sprinkle the cumin or caraway seeds. Bake for 25-30 minutes until the loaf is golden brown and sounds hollow when tapped underneath. Cool on a rack before slicing.

Feta and spinach filo triangles with aubergine salsa

Makes 20 triangles

You can make the filo triangles up to 2 days before baking or freeze them and bake from frozen, adding 5-8 minutes to their cooking time. The salsa will keep in the fridge in an airtight container for a few days, helping you be super-organised for Easter.

250g fresh leaf spinach
Freshly grated nutmeg
Sea salt and freshly ground black pepper

2 tsp chopped mint
100g feta, cut into cubes
50g Gruyère, grated
1 egg - 300g filo pastry

50g unsalted butter, melted
For the aubergine salsa
3 tbsp olive oil
1 large aubergine, finely diced
3 shallots, finely chopped
2 tsp sherry vinegar
1 tsp ground cumin
1 tsp garam masala
6 cardamom pods
2 gherkins, finely diced
Sea salt and freshly ground pepper
1 tbsp each chopped fresh coriander, basil and chives

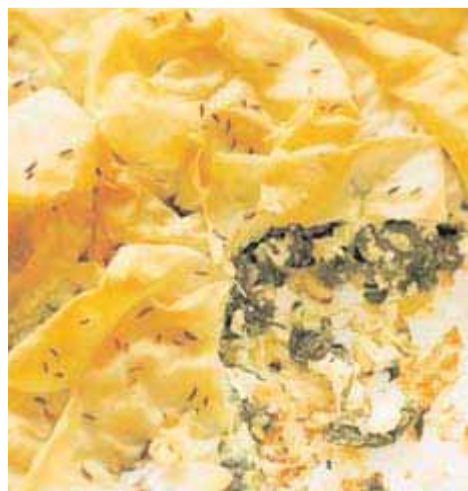
1 First, make the aubergine salsa. Heat 2 tbsp of the oil in a pan and gently cook the aubergine and shallots, stirring occasionally, for 10 minutes or until soft.

2 Add the vinegar, spices and gherkins and cook for a further 2 minutes. Season lightly, then remove from the heat. Stir in the remaining oil and set aside to cool. When tepid, remove the cardamom pods and stir in the chopped fresh herbs.

3 Roughly chop the spinach leaves then blanch in a pan of boiling salted water for 1 minute. Drain and rinse under cold running water. Squeeze out as much excess liquid from the spinach as possible. Tip into a bowl and season with nutmeg and salt and pepper. Stir through the mint and set aside.

4 Put the feta, Gruyère and egg into the bowl of a food processor. Blend to a purée then season with a little more nutmeg (no salt, as the feta is salty enough).

5 Brush a sheet of filo pastry generously with butter then lay a second sheet on top. Cut into 6 x 25cm strips. Spoon 1 heaped teaspoon of the cheese mixture onto a filo strip, about 1cm from the corner edge closest to you. Flatten the cheese slightly with the back of the



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spoon then top with a heaped teaspoon of the spinach.

6 Fold the corner over to encase the filling and form a triangle. Fold the pastry over and over, keeping a triangle shape, until you reach the other end. Place the triangle, seam side down, on a lightly greased baking sheet then repeat with the remaining pastry and filling, to make about 20.

7 Heat oven to 200C/Fan 180C/Gas 6. Brush the filo triangles with the remaining butter then bake for 20 minutes or until the pastry is golden and crisp. Serve warm with the aubergine salsa.

Hazelnut and herb-crusted rack of lamb Serves 4

At the restaurant, our racks of lamb are delivered French trimmed and ready to go. Ask your butcher how they do theirs. If they come as a West Country rack, they are usually larger with more meat and fat, so you may need to trim the excess fat and cook them for an extra 5-10 minutes.

2 racks of new season lamb, about 300g each, chined and trimmed

Sea salt and freshly ground black pepper - 2-3 tbsp Dijon mustard

For the crust

100g blanched hazelnuts
100g white breadcrumbs, from a day-old loaf

Large handful of basil Large handful of parsley

Few sprigs of thyme, leaves removed
50g butter, softened

1 Blitz the hazelnuts in a food processor until coarsely ground. Add the breadcrumbs and whizz again until the mixture resembles fine crumbs. Roughly chop the herb leaves and add to the processor with seasoning. Blend until the crumbs turn green then add the butter and pulse until incorporated.

2 Line a flat baking sheet with clingfilm and tip the mixture on top. Pat the mixture into a rough rectangle then cover with another layer of clingfilm. Roll the mixture out to a sheet approximately the same size as the layer of fat of the two racks of lamb. Chill the crust on the baking sheet until firm.

3 Score the layer of fat on the lamb with the tip of knife into a criss-cross pattern and season well. Heat a nonstick frying pan then brown the lamb for 4 minutes on each side. Transfer the lamb to a roasting tray and pour any juices from the pan over.

4 Brush the lamb with the mustard. Cut the crust into two pieces, the same size as the layer of fat on each rack of lamb. Press the crust on to the fat surface then set the lamb crust side up, and roast for 10-12 minutes for pink meat. Rest the lamb for

5 minutes before cutting each rack in half or into individual cutlets

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