



Greek island takes olive tree census

ATHENS — Scientists are trying to catalogue hundreds of olive trees, some more than 1,000 years old, on the Greek island of Crete in a bid to save them from abandonment amid falling olive prices, an agronomy institute said on Wednesday.

Olive trees have for centuries been a Cretan staple and a major source of income but falling prices threaten the trees' as the crop is unprofitable.

Some of the trees date back more than 1,000 years, as old as Greece's famed archaeological treasures, scientists say. "We want to determine the age of these natural monuments and protect them," Dimitris Lidakis, director of Crete's School of Agronomy told AFP.

Hundreds of olive trees have already been cleared for construction, prompting the environmental initiative organised by some 30 associations and supported by the local technical institute.

Organiser Bella Lasithiotaki said there was one olive tree in the northern village of Vrysses in Rethymno prefecture that was more than 1,000 years old, with a trunk around 20 metres (66 feet) in circumference.

Another four trees of the same age have been located in the neighbouring prefecture of Iraklio, the semi-state Athens News Agency reported.

On a visit to Greece last year, Chinese President Hu Jintao visited a Crete archaeological cooperative where he helped workers picking olives.

caption: Children gather around an old olive tree in Rethymnon, on the Aegean island of Crete

Nia's private grieving is over

NIA Vardalos acknowledges a strong autobiographical component to her latest film, My Life In Ruins.

Unlike the Parthenon, which features prominently in the new comedy, set in Greece, the Oscar nominee's public facade didn't require any attention. But, unknown to those outside her inner circle, the foundations of her private life had started to crumble.

"I was very quiet about why I didn't want to be on camera," says the 46-year-old writer-actor who had been trying to conceive and then adopt a child for more than a decade. According to one report, she also explored the option of surrogacy.

While she was celebrating the runaway success of *My Big Fat Greek Wedding*, which was made for \$US5 million (\$6.4 million) and grossed \$US369 million worldwide, Vardalos was grappling with her own private grief.

"I had immense career success while hiding a secret. I had been pursuing being a parent at that point for about seven years," she says.

After starring opposite Toni Collette in the genre-bending 2004 comedy *Connie And Carla*, which she also wrote, Vardalos decided to take a break from acting.

"I just wanted to step away. My agent said, 'Who does that?' And I said, 'A sane person, I think. I can't continue to try to grieve this situation, flying all over the country, trying to adopt, and also be an actor'. It just wasn't possible," she says.

Vardalos kept herself occupied, behind the scenes, by writing screenplays for the likes of director Jonathan Demme (*The Silence Of The Lambs*) and Tom Hanks.



Hanks was instrumental in adapting *My Big Fat Greek Wedding* for the big screen after his wife Rita Wilson saw Vardalos's one-woman stage play and loved it. The Hollywood couple also have a production credit on *My Life In Ruins*, in which Wilson has a small role.

Oddly enough, Vardalos didn't actually write the screenplay for her comeback vehicle; *The Simpsons* writer Mike Reiss did. But the comedienne admits that she couldn't help but make a few contributions of her own - with Reiss's blessing, of course.

"I added the bit about the woman looking for her mojo, her kefi, because that's what I was personally going through at the time," Vardalos says.

Vardalos's 10-year battle to become a mother was resolved after *My Life In Ruins* finished shooting in Greece. She and husband Ian Gomez, also an actor, adopted a three-year-old girl through American foster care.

"Most people live with their own personal secret or something they are pursuing and I only acknowledge it publicly to say, 'Hey, this happened to me and perhaps it's happening to you and you might want to consider adoption when you are ready'. Because I know I felt I had to try everything and do everything and so I don't want to push anybody in that direction," she says.

The forthright Greek-Canadian also wants to go on record in defence of high-profile mothers such as Madonna and Angelina Jolie who have chosen to adopt children from Third World countries.

"I know people love to make fun of them, but a child is a child. And a child needs a home," she says.

In person, Vardalos is as warm and direct as her much-loved character, Toula, from *My Big Fat Greek Wedding*. Presumably, it was this

winning combination - along with her ability to speak fluent Greek - that convinced Greek authorities to let director Donald Petrie (*Miss Congeniality*) shoot at the Acropolis.

Vardalos lightens discernibly when quizzed about the stereotypical portrayal of Australian tourists as uncouth tinnie-guzzlers in *My Life In Ruins*, in which she plays a disillusioned tour guide.

Since her brother and his family live in Sans Souci and her cousin has an optometrist's shop in Paddington, Vardalos has first-hand knowledge of Antipodean ways.

"They are stereotypes through my character's unhappy eyes," she says.

"The only thing we did to save ourselves from a public lynching by Australians was to cast real Australians in the roles. And we had them come up with all their own lines."

Vardalos isn't seriously worried, though, about the reaction of local audiences. Speaking from past experience, she says, people like to laugh at themselves.

"In *My Big Fat Greek Wedding*, I made fun of all my relatives and I seem to have gotten away with it," she says.

Despite the similarities between Toula and Georgia, *My Life In Ruins'* Greek-American protagonist, Vardalos isn't overly concerned that she will be pigeonholed.

"With this nose? Nah! I am what I am. And De Niro - not to compare myself - but Robert De Niro plays Italian roles," she says.

She might have nabbed an Oscar nomination for her first screenplay, but it's only at this point, with six new ones under her belt, that she feels comfortable describing herself as a writer as well as an actor.

Recently, she had her first shot at directing. *I Hate Valentine's Day*, which she wrote as well as starred in, sees Vardalos reunited with *My Big Fat Greek Wedding* co-star John Corbett.

"It's so low-budget, it makes the budget of *My Big Fat Greek Wedding* look like a blockbuster. We shot it in Brooklyn. Everybody worked for scale (award rates). I asked 70 per cent of my friends to be in it - including John Corbett - so that I could have a shorthand with everybody on set: 'Can you do that thing you did in my living room last Thursday? OK. Action'."

As well as scripts written for others, Vardalos has two projects in development.

But she is happy to take each day as it comes.

"I've learned not to plan life," she says. "I was meant to be my daughter's mother. I know that now. Cosmically, she was coming towards me and I get it. I just wait to see what comes my way."

Article from The Sydney Morning Herald

Students not detained for failing

Contrary to published media reports, students are never detained simply for breaching attendance or failing minimum course requirements. While it is correct to say that student visas can be cancelled for failing to meet course requirements, not one student of the 36 currently in detention had their visa cancelled for that reason. Student visas can be cancelled for a variety of reasons. Failing to meet course requirements is just one. Wherever possible, students who are cancelled are given the opportunity to resolve their immigration status from within the community. Generally a bridging visa is granted on departure grounds. Of the some 370 000 students currently in the country, the 36 student detainees were there for failing to leave the country after having their visas cancelled. Many of them had been given numerous opportunities to do so and ignored the department's instructions. Under the government's recent changes to immigration policy, detention is a last resort and those who are detained have repeatedly flouted immigration laws or are a risk to the community. It should also be noted if a student has difficulty fulfilling course or visa requirements, they are given ample opportunity and time to work with their education provider and the Department of Immigration and Citizenship to resolve the matter.