

When thinking about the rise of Greek food in Australia, I can't help but think of a story the acclaimed Greek-Australian poet Dimitris Tsaloumas once told me. Back in 1950s Melbourne, Tsaloumas – then a recently arrived young Greek immigrant – went looking for olive oil. After trying several grocery stores, he was eventually directed to a pharmacy where, to his disbelief, he was presented with a small 10ml vial.

When he explained he needed more than a couple of drops, the curious pharmacist asked what he wanted to do with it. "I want to dress my salad and cook with it," Tsaloumas recalls telling him. «He said, 'oh we don't have anything like that.'"

Fast forward to cosmopolitan Melbourne 50 years later and the Australian culinary landscape could not be more radically different.

Post-war immigrants turned Australia's bland cuisine into one of the world's most creative, where feta, Kalamata olives, and phyllo appear alongside pesto and bok choy on menus spiced with flavors from around the globe.

Among the early pioneers of Australia's culinary transformation were Greek immigrants like legendary brothers Kostas and Chris Talihmanidis, who opened trailblazer restaurants in the Victorian seaside town of Lorne in the early 1970s, when seafood was synonymous with fish'n'chips. "When we started cooking octopus, people didn't know what it was. They used it for bait and sold it for 50 cents a kilo," recalls Kosta, who now runs the popular A La Grecque at Aireys Inlet, west of Melbourne. "At the start we never used to put it on the menu, we just offered it to people to try. Calamari was easier to establish but octopus took about a year."

Greeks have long been key players in Australia's food industry, in the fruit and vegetable markets, in the fishing in-

Down Under Greek



dustry, in running milk bars, the Australian equivalent to the corner deli, country cafes, fish'n'chip shops, fast food outlets, and late-night souvlaki joints.

Many are behind some of the country's most successful restaurants – Stan Sarris with Banc in Sydney, Paul Mathis with Taxi in Melbourne, to name two.

The best Greeks chefs, such as electrician-turned-chef Janni Kyritsis in Sydney, trained in French and European cuisines and made their mark in the country's leading restaurants. When Kyritsis hung up his apron last year, closing his acclaimed MC Garage restaurant, he had amassed countless accolades and awards for his Mediterranean-influenced cuisine.

Greek restaurants, however, on the whole remained on the periphery of the epicurean scene. Most were cheerful, suburban places with kitsch, faux island

decor run by owner-cooks who churned out set banquets of dips, salads, and meat- and- seafood platters. They bred a few cross-cultural oddities like kangaroo souvlaki, but few had ever managed to excite the country's food writers.

At Mediterranean restaurants in Sydney now a third or even half the dishes have a Greek influence, even if they are not strictly Greek," says Conistis. "People know the food now. Moussaka and spanakopita are as well known in Sydney as lasagna or duck confit," he continues.



The Rose Hotel, an up market pub in middle class Port Melbourne, recently went Greek to rave reviews, with a menu that includes ingredients such as lakerda (cured mackerel), nettles, and pomegranate and beetroot salad with walnut skordalia. At Whiteblu in Sydney's posh Double Bay, chef **James Konstatinidis** is doing contemporary Greek food in a chic setting.

Greek ingredients and recipes also make a strong statement on the menu at Melbourne's trendy Souk, a Middle Eastern restaurant, run by up and coming **Greek chef George Bilonis**.

In Sydney's popular Perama restaurant, former swimming and water polo coach **David Tsirekas** turned to ancient Greece for inspiration when he entered the kitchen. "I didn't study the last 100 years, I took it way back to ancient times to see how Greek cuisine had developed," Tsirekas says.

His Homeric beef is based on descriptions in the Odyssey, while the ocean trout emerges from Arcestratos' accounts of salting fish. "For me, it's about the flavors and the history."

His twists on classic dishes include pork belly baklava with pistachios, dates, and Chios Mastiha sauce and a pastourma, fig, and ricotta tart in a kataifi base. For dessert he makes chocolate halva, melomakarona crumble (with pears poached in red wine), and ice cream infused with olive oil, dried figs, and pistachios.

Tsirekas finds Greek cuisine exciting because it has no boundaries.

"It's not like Italian or French or even English cuisine which are very regulated, where that is the recipe and that's how you do it. Everyone has added an individual flavor to it and that's always been part of the Greek psyche –they have been proud of their own way of doing things."

Pioneering **Conistis** is a case in point. "No one was doing this style of food when I started cooking.

Even in Athens it's only been in the past few years that this modern food began emerging," says Conistis, who is publishing his third book next year and leads annual gastronomic tours to Greece.

"It's been a mission for me to take it to another level and to show it is one of the great cuisines." Since opening Omega in central Sydney, he has brought his creative cuisine to a broader market, with a steady clientele of media and business types during the day and fine dining foodies at night.

Old favorites like his rabbit and black olive pie on flaky phyllo are still on the menu, and he is continuing to create unique dishes inspired by Greek ingredients, techniques, and recipes. While local fresh produce is excellent, he uses only Greek feta, olives, and olive oil and sources many products from Greece.

"There are a lot of things I get shipped here that no one sells in Australia, like



organic gigantes beans from Prespes and Chios Mastiha."

Conistis says his food may be experimental and a little whimsical but it is not fusion. "I do not do a spanakopita of Asian greens. It's a modern take, but still with the purity and the respect. It's about the flavors."

Australia's next big Greek statement will be the Press Club, the much-anticipated new restaurant by Melbourne's hot young Greek chef George Calombaris in the iconic Herald & Weekly Times building.

The 27-year-old, who had tongues wagging – and salivating – with his radical tasting menu at the Reserve "food laboratory" in Federation Square is making a bold return to his roots. "Whenever I'd bring my friends over for dinner they would freak out at my mum's food. It's taken me this long to understand that Greek food is great if it's done right," says **Calombaris**.

"I want to put an end to the souvlaki culture. You won't see a plate of dips go out. There will be twists on the food. I want to portray the ingredients and cook them to perfection.

I want to glorify things on the menu like Mastiha, saffron, Aegina pistachios, and Greek honey. It's going to be a hard slog to get people to understand [Mastiha] here, but we'll get there."

By Victoria Kyriakopoulos
Photography: Peter Brennan,
Louis Porter

MASTERPIECE OF GREEK RECIPES

Yoghurt and mastic-braised neck of lamb with olive oil pomme puree

4 tbsp olive oil - 4 lamb neck fillets - 8 shallots, roughly diced
1/4 tsp ground mastic* - 1 clove garlic, crushed -
6 sprigs fresh thyme 4 tbsp white wine -
Grated zest of 1 lemon - 4 tbsp Greek honey
3 litres chicken stock - 525ml thick Greek yoghurt
Olive oil pomme puree - 1kg rock salt - 3kg desiree potatoes
200g butter - 4 tbsp olive oil - 200ml milk



Preheat the oven to 120C. Heat oil in a heavy frying pan. Add the meat and cook over medium-high heat for eight-10 minutes until well browned all over.

Remove meat from the pan and place in a large, deep, ovenproof dish. Add shallots, mastic, garlic and thyme, then sprinkle with wine and lemon zest. Drizzle honey over the meat and pour the chicken stock into the dish until the lamb is just covered. Spread the yoghurt over the top carefully and cover with greaseproof paper, then cover the whole dish with foil. Cook in oven for 10 hours or until tender. Remove from oven and let cool slightly. To make pomme puree, cover the bottom of a large ovenproof dish with salt and arrange the potatoes on top. Bake at 160C for two hours or until the potatoes are tender. Let cool slightly and pass through a fine strainer while still warm. Heat the butter in a frying pan with the oil and milk and whisk until thoroughly combined. Add the sieved potatoes to the pan, whisk until smooth and season with salt. Keep warm. To make sauce, strain the lamb-cooking liquid through a fine strainer into a pan, bring to a boil over medium heat and simmer until reduced to a sauce-like pouring consistency. Pour over the lamb and serve hot, accompanied by the pomme puree. Serves 4 - * Sold at Greek delis