

In Vefa's Greek kitchen

A GOOD way to test if a cookbook will be a fit for you is to look at its recipe for a dish you know well.

So when all 2.7kg of the "big fat bible" of Greek cooking landed on my desk, I asked Anastasia Nikitaras to cast an eye over the moussaka recipe.



Anastasia is the mother of Marco, Nick and Nektario of Hill Street in West Hobart, and for several years was in charge of producing the Greek-accented "counter meals" sold in the shop.

"Exactly the same," she said, nodding approvingly at Vefa Alexiadou's recipe for moussaka in Vefa's Kitchen, the latest in publisher Phaidon's series of culinary bibles long established in their country of origin.

In 2005, it was The Silver Spoon, a book of 2000 recipes prized by Italian brides for more than 50 years; and in 2007 it was 1080 Recipes, by Simone and Ines Ortega, 2.4 million copies of which have been sold in Spain since it was first published there in 1972.

Now it is the turn of what Gordon Ramsay has called "the sleeping beauty of cuisine", Greece, in the hands of Vefa Alexiadou, who wrote her first cookbook in 1980 at the urging of friends wanting to be spared the task of phoning her for recipes of whatever they had most recently eaten at her house.

Vefa (the "e" sound as in

"get" and "fa" as in the last syllable of "gaffer") is familiar to the Australian Greek community through her pay-TV shows. Anastasia has three of the 13 books Vefa has already published, and is pleased there is now the big collection of 600 recipes from all parts of Greece.

Anastasia comes from the Aegean islands, and found that in Vefa's recipes "lots of ideas of my grandmother's are there".

This is not surprising. Vefa acknowledges the women who gave her access to their "precious notebooks filled with handwritten recipes that belonged to their mothers and grandmothers".

When I phoned her in Athens last week, Vefa, who is 70, said her own mother, who was "all day in the kitchen" and had to create "things from nothing", was a major source of her recipes.

The coverage of "every corner" of Greece was greatly helped by recipe contests she ran for nine years on her television show. The recipes that

came in by the thousand needed a great deal of modification to make them easy to follow and to standardise the measurements that called for a "glass of ouzo" or a "handful of flour".

Vefa's previous career as an industrial chemist -- she created the formula for the Greek jelly mix -- stood her in good stead.

"If I was not a chemist, my cooking would not be the same," she said.

Anastasia had already told me that she always had success with Vefa's recipes "as long as you use the right measurements".

Greece, which claims to be the mother of Mediterranean cuisine (a peasant living in Crete 50 years ago had the prototypical Mediterranean diet), is also the Mediterranean country with

more consumption and more ways of using vegetables than any other.

Vefa pointed out that for 40 days before Easter and every Wednesday and Friday, the Greek Orthodox Church prohibits the consumption of meat, fish, eggs and dairy products.

"We had to put our minds to it and create vegetable recipes -- it is a long period of fasting," Vefa said.

Vegetables and pulse dishes made with olive oil for fasting days are called ladera. There are more than 200 vegetable dishes in Vefa's Kitchen.

For thousands of years, meat was eaten only on feast days and at celebrations in Greece. Though meat consumption is more everyday now, staples still are cereals, beans, greens, herbs, the olive and its oil, figs, grapes, wine and cheese. Seafood, pies and the use of wild greens such as nettles are a feature, as are yoghurt and honey and syrup-laden pastries and biscuits. Spices are not used much, but herbs are, especially thyme and marjoram.

In more than 30 years of being her own publisher, it was Vefa's dream to have a "big foreign publisher" pay attention to Greek cuisine. Two years ago Phaidon offered her the chance to "make the perfect book".

"I don't write in the computer," Vefa said. "I love handwriting because I can think; I

can extend my imagination -- writing in the computer, I can't do that."

So, having handwritten all 600 recipes, she handed them over to her secretary to be keyboarded, then two American women who have lived and cooked in Greece for 30 years helped with the translation into English.

"Every recipe has been tested," Vefa said. "And I have gone through each recipe seven times correcting the detail -- then Phaidon has gone through again five more times. I believe the language is perfect."

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Anastasia, whose current Vefa library is in Greek, is pleased the big book is in English "for my daughters-in-law and grandchildren".

As with the previous Phaidon books, this one has recipes by Greek chefs from throughout the world, including George Calombaris and Theo Kostoglou in Melbourne, but it is more their mothers and grandmothers who are celebrated by Vefa Alexiadou, who has served on the board of the Centre for the Preservation of Traditional Greek Gastronomy. Vefa's Kitchen, Phaidon, \$69.95.

Article from The Mercury

Illegal exotic wildlife including fish, turtles and toads have been seized from properties in Concord and Mt Druitt

Among the 100 specimens seized by the Federal environment investigations officers on Friday were fire-bellied toads, red-eared slider turtles and a number of exotic fish species, including snakeheads and freshwater sharks. Spokesman Luke Bond believes there were plans to sell the species over the internet.

"Two men are now helping us with our inquiries," he said.

"Under the national environment law, it's illegal to import these species into Australia.

"If they get into our waterways, they can pose a serious risk to our environment as they can compete with our native animals for food or habitat, or more seriously, introduce diseases."

"Some of the species seized can also pose a risk to humans - in particular, adult snakeheads can inflict a severe bite and fire-bellied toads can be toxic to children."

Mr Bond said his department was investigating the find with the help of the Australian Quarantine and Inspection Service and customs.

"People need to make sure that if they're going to buy exotic species, that they check first to see if they can be legally imported into the country," he said. The maximum penalty for these offences is a \$110,000 fine or 10 years in prison.

