

MARIA BENARDIS:

# She gave up a successful career in business to become Australia's most passionate ambassador for Greek food

Continues from Thursday's edition



I did what every good little Greek girl should do, and that was I went to study accounting. Unfortunately at the back of my mind it wasn't what I wanted to do. In 2004 my family asked me to go to Greece with them. It was the first trip back to Greece since my childhood. For some bizarre reason, I had this inclination that I had to videotape everything.

(IN GREECE) We're at the Acropolis now. And it feels absolutely breathtaking. That's OK, let's stop. We don't need that many close-ups.

For the first time in my life, I started to reconnect myself to the ancient. I was obsessed with going into all the archaeological museums and getting to see what were they eating, what were they doing? I went to a few of the lovely islands, including Santorini and then, of course, Mykonos. I think the most amazing thing was landing and just seeing everything blue and white. It was just absolutely beautiful. And that's where the little church of St Venerius was. I felt that it was a little sanctuary and this is where I was going to find myself and I was going to find what I was looking for. The effect of that experience in that church just totally transformed me into another human being.

PETER THOMPSON: You were a great loss to tax accountancy. My goodness.

MARIA BENARDIS: Yes, especially GST, I've been told.

PETER THOMPSON: You were a GST expert, weren't you?

MARIA BENARDIS: Yes, I was.

PETER THOMPSON: You knew far more than Peter Costello ever knew about the GST.

MARIA BENARDIS: I did, actually. I did. I still look at food and say, "That's subject to GST, that's not." So I still sort of apply GST, in a weird kind of way. But it wasn't that path for me.

PETER THOMPSON: Why not?

MARIA BENARDIS: Cos I wasn't happy. I enjoyed doing tax, don't get me wrong, it was a really good profession, it treated me well.

PETER THOMPSON: It's different to do tax than to pay tax, is it?

MARIA BENARDIS: Exactly, and it wasn't very good dinner conversation.

Every time I turned up and say "What do you do?" "Tax, tax office." I'd have everybody abandoning the conversation and I'd be left there on my own. At least now when I go to a dinner party and say I'm in food, everybody is attracted.

PETER THOMPSON: Wants to know more.

MARIA BENARDIS: It's like, "Boy am I glad I left the tax."

PETER THOMPSON: Now, St Venerius. Why is St Venerius particularly significant?

MARIA BENARDIS: He's particularly significant because he's our patron saint in the Greek Orthodox

faith, of finding things. So he's the patron saint that we pray to if we want to find love, if we want to find more money, peace, so anything that your heart desires, he's the patron saint that you pray to.

PETER THOMPSON: Seems like you went to this church one person and came out another.

MARIA BENARDIS: I certainly did, and I had no idea what church I was going to.

PETER THOMPSON: What actually happened?

MARIA BENARDIS: It wasn't as if I heard a loud voice in the church, but every time I asked a question from my heart the answer would come.

PETER THOMPSON: Whose idea was the book, yours or St Venerius?

MARIA BENARDIS: My book? Yeah, my cookbook. I never had a cookbook idea in my mind before that.

PETER THOMPSON: Was it your idea or St Venerius?

MARIA BENARDIS: It was St Venerius.

PETER THOMPSON: Was it?

MARIA BENARDIS: Never had I thought of going into food, as a profession, that is. Never had I thought of writing a book. I mean, I'd written tax books, but I'd never written a cookbook and had no idea, and I asked the question and I said, "I have no idea how to do this, how to research," and I was told that the answers would come to me and that I would be guided, and I had to not fear and just follow my heart.

PETER THOMPSON: Why do you think it was about food?

MARIA BENARDIS: Maybe because that's where I always felt a connection to human beings and having that connection back to the island, it just seemed perfectly natural that that would be my next progression. Memories of me making bread with my grandmother, I'd just almost feel like I just want to cry cos it's just so beautiful.

In 2005 I finally worked up the courage to

go back to Psara where I got to see my grandmother again, who wasn't expecting me. She recognised me straightaway. The wonderful thing about the Island Psara is it hasn't changed that much. They still rely on nature. They still barter, which was amazing. When I first went to Psara it wasn't meant to be a research trip. It was a big family reunion. I can't separate the two cos I'm surrounded by food. I'm constantly filming and documenting ingredients or documenting food.

My uncle Panagioti on the island of Psara, who happens to be my father's brother, has now basically become my surrogate father. So I'm finding subjects that we're both very passionate about, cooking, of course, cos he loves cooking, and that's our connection now. A favourite dish of his is goat, fresh goat from the island that he stuffs with rice, with lots of lemon and olive oil and oregano which he's picked himself, of course, from the mountains, and then we sort of slow-bake that. The island of Psara means a lot of things to me. It's where a part of my heart remains.

PETER THOMPSON: Maria, did you need courage to go back to Psara?

MARIA BENARDIS: I had a lot of fears. And one of the fears was that I was going to face my father there, cos my father actually still lives in Greece, but he lives in Chios, but visits the island. And I wasn't sure how I was going to handle that confrontation. So it took a lot of courage, yeah.

PETER THOMPSON: Well, in the end you didn't meet him, did you?

MARIA BENARDIS: No I didn't, and till this day, cos I've returned to Greece every year, I still haven't met my father or seen him. But nevertheless, when I arrived I still felt like I had gone through that confrontation. Because I walked into my grandmother's house, effectively in the room that he would visit, and sleep. So in a way I felt like I was facing him, cos I was in his space, in his environment. And therefore, it forced me to face the issues that I had, you know, with my father, and to deal with those issues.

PETER THOMPSON: It says something about your family in a positive way that you were able to actually talk about his brother, Panagioti, as being your surrogate father.

MARIA BENARDIS: Absolutely, I love him. And it's really quite funny cos every time I go to Greece, I say to him, are you sure there wasn't some sort of accident and we sort of got mixed up at birth? Because we have the same personality and characteristics.

PETER THOMPSON: And I might say, it's not common for men to cook in Greece, is it?

MARIA BENARDIS: It's not. He's always had a passion for cook-

ing, which is unusual, especially for that generation of men. But also my aunt is blind. So she can't see, so therefore he's taken over all the duties of cooking and cleaning and washing. And he does everything so effortlessly, and it just doesn't faze him, and I think "You're just so not a typical Greek male."

PETER THOMPSON: Maybe just as well.

MARIA BENARDIS: Yeah, thank God.

PETER THOMPSON: Being a good tax accountant, you'd make everything orderly. So have you, in your journey into Greek food, taken lessons, taken cooking classes and the like?

MARIA BENARDIS: I haven't. The way I've obtained my experience was A) to work in one of Neil Perry's restaurants, at XO. So that gave me good background in terms of how a professional kitchen works, how things are done, professionally organised. To learn about Greek cuisine, I'm not just talking about the Greek cuisine that we know here, I'm talking about ancient Greek cuisine and so on, I actually went to Oxford University cos they've translated a lot of ancient Greek texts into English, I also travelled round Greece, and what I do is when I come across a place or a house where I smell something nice I actually knock on their door. And I say "I'm Maria, I'm from Sydney, Australia, what are you cooking? It smells beautiful. Would you please allow me into your house, and show me what you're cooking?" And that's how I've gained most of my knowledge, by actually cooking with the people from those various regions.

PETER THOMPSON: That's Greek hospitality for you.

MARIA BENARDIS: That's exactly right. And then you're invited to dinner and lunch, and then you're invited to stay over and sleep over. But it was amazing, because if you're gonna learn about a region, you really need to live with the locals.

PETER THOMPSON: Not only did you knock on strange people's doors, but you knocked on the doors of monasteries too.

MARIA BENARDIS: Absolutely. What a lot of people don't realise is the best chefs in Greece are monks and nuns and a lot of the monks and nuns have actually written cookbooks. I started to discover all these other ingredients that I'm now using that are made in monasteries. What attracts me to the Greek culture is because it's a known documented fact, that's where everything started. The father of gastronomy was Archestratos, he was the first one. "Sprinkle it with salt. Ground together with cumin and with greyish olive oil, pouring the God-given stream out of your hand down over it." He had this profound effect where he ►

