

# From Cyprus, with love

WHEN George Calombaris's family fled northern Cyprus in 1974 in the wake of the Turkish occupation, they carried with them a chest of cooking utensils. Among their trove was a brass mortar and pestle, which were duly confiscated as mother, grandmother and four sisters disembarked the ship in Melbourne.

"What was customs in those days thought it was a weapon," he says.

Although Calombaris sees the funny side, the tale is a reminder of how unaware Australia was of other cultures.

It's a different story today, of course. When Epicure caught up with Calombaris recently, the chef with fingers in many pies was just back from 12 days in New York, where he used some of his R&R to hunt for ideas and see what other food folk were doing ahead of his new venue opening.

St Katherine's, which opens early next year in Kew, melds the foods of chef and business partner Shane Delia's Maltese-Lebanese background with Calombaris's Cypriot heritage and will include the wood-fired oven much loved by Cypriots.

It's an easy marriage of flavours with, as he puts it, "lots of crossovers". Calombaris explains that Cyprus itself is something of a "melting pot", sitting historically as a gateway between East and West, with Turkish/Middle-Eastern influences on one side and Greek/Mediterranean on the other.

"The cuisine of Cyprus is quite spice-driven," Calombaris says. "I was only there two years ago and found it rich in the flavours of cinnamon, star anise, cumin and coriander.

"My mother will make a simple salad of shredded coriander with onions, olive oil, lemon juice and have that with sheftalies [Cypriot rissoles], which are made from pork mince heavily spiced with cumin, coriander, onion, garlic and parsley rolled up in caul fat [the membrane covering intestines].

"She will chargrill them and serve with flat bread, salad and maybe a smear of hummus inside."

While Cypriot food is intensely flavoured, it's surprisingly light. "It's not heavy and dripping in oil and fats," Calombaris says.

Cypriots grill meat or fish over charcoal using a skara rather than cook with oil or sauces and they serve it simply on a plate with a wedge of lemon. "If you look at the Greek, Mediterranean or Cypriot diet, it's a



Early influence ... Calombaris with his parents.

great diet," Calombaris says. "They don't live that long only because of the olive oil . . . but also because of the way they cook."

Despite the obvious Greek influence on Cyprian cuisine, Cypriots see their food culture as distinct. "I'd have to agree with my mother that Cyprian food is technically more exhilarating," he says.

Calombaris's grandfather, on his father's side, came from the North Aegean Greek island of Lemnos so he believes he's able to enjoy "the best of both worlds".

What also separates Cypriot from Greek is the meze or appetiser. Greeks generally order their mezedes (plural for meze), which fall into three categories, each paired with a different alcohol.

There's a meze for beer, a meze for wine and a stronger-flavoured meze for ouzo. In Cyprus, mezedes are simply brought to you continuously and they can comprise the day's meals.

Mezedes include a lot of fresh ingredients and can be small — cheese, olives, lountza (Cyprian smoked ham) — and very simple, like cucumbers lightly pickled in vinegar with a sprinkle of sugar and coriander seeds.

When Hellenic Republic held a Cypriot food night in July, it featured several mezedes.

On the menu were tachinosalata (chickpea with olive oil and garlic), pickled octopus



Hellenic Republican ... George Calombaris.

cooked in red wine and coriander, beef loukanika (sausages) with paprika and cumin and koupes (the Cypriot pies made from pork and cracked wheat).

"Koupes remind me of Sunday afternoons," Calombaris says.

"After soccer, I'd go to my grandmother's and we'd have a plate of them in the middle of the table as a snack before lunch."

Mezedes can also be more substantial, served on larger plates: a beef casserole (tava); lamb short ribs slowly braised in tomato and an equal ratio of celery to meat in the oven; or kolokassi, a stew of braised pork and taro — much loved in Cyprus — in red wine.

"My father gets so excited when he talks about going down to his local tavern when he's in Greece and having his sardines, his ouzo, his cucumbers, olives. It's just the social thing to do."

Then there's the love of white cheese. Greece has feta; Cyprus has haloumi, also made from a mix of goat, sheep and, occasionally, cow's milk. Calombaris uses both in his restaurants.

He may take something typically Greek, like saganaki, and give it a Cyprian twist by topping the dish with peppered figs.

Sweets are also an integral part of the Cyprian diet. "When guests enter someone's house, the idea is you always offer them a refreshing cold glass of water and something sweet, either souzouko or spoon sweets," Calombaris explains. "The idea is when you're in someone else's house, you should be sweetened."

Spoon sweets, or gliko koutaliou, are preserved fruit eaten straight from the jar and, although highly fancied in Cyprus, are offered in the Balkans, Middle East, and Russia. Calombaris's grandmother makes one using watermelon peel.

Souzouko are peculiar to Cyprus. What appear as long sausages are, in fact, strands of almonds coated repeatedly in a caramel and cornflour mixture. "They're cool; very Cypriot. You never find them in Greece," Calombaris says.

"My mother told us to always have something sweet in the cupboard: baklava, or risogalo [rice pudding] in the fridge. [In Australia] we have this theory you can only eat something sweet after you've eaten your greens. Her theory is if you have a sweet tooth, you must nourish it, regardless of the time."

Calombaris pays tribute to his mother's desserts by including in his second cookbook, Greek Cook-ery from the Hellenic Heart, a couple of Cyprian favourites: shamishi, fried custard tarts and mahlepi, a chilled water jelly topped with rosewater, pistachio nuts and dusted with sugar.

"It was the best thing to have on a summer afternoon to cool you down," he says.

## RESTAURANT

A la Grecque  
Great Ocean Road, Aireys Inlet

"I loved sitting there with [owner] Kosta [Talimanidis]. A customer complained because there was no more lamb on the menu and he told them to rack off. He could get away with it. I couldn't, never."

Calombaris also nominates David Tsirekas's food at Perama Greek Restaurant in Sydney: "Very casual, very fun." But

he sheepishly confesses he doesn't eat out at many Greek restaurants.

## DELI

Oakleigh Market and surrounds

Good for traditional produce.

## CHEESE

Bill's Farm

Queen Victoria Market

"It has barrel-aged feta and great haloumi. I'm a massive ambassador of the Dodoni brand. It's very consistent and is made from goat and sheep's milk. It has all the Greek cheeses: keflograviera for the saganaki, kasseri, manouri. With manouri, which is a by-product of feta, we warm it up gently and serve it with a bit of balsamic vinegar and fresh rocket. At the moment, we have a manouri cheesecake, glazed with passionfruit jelly, at Little Press."

Calombaris also uses locally made haloumi and recommends haloumi imported by Will Studd.

## GREEK YOGHURT

Bill's Farm

"Bill's also has the best Greek yoghurts. They're so thick, they're quenelle-able. He has one made locally by a guy in Gippsland. We braise lamb in it, make purees with it and use it to finish off sauces. Instead of using butter, we use a spoon of yoghurt. It's lighter and fresher. You can also use yoghurt as a raising agent to make flat bread."

## GREEK SAUSAGES

Siketa Meats

Hughes Street, Bell Park (near Geelong)

"They're making styles of loukaniko. Cypriots will make them with pepper and red wine — lots of red wine. We also make our own at Hellenic Republic."

## OLIVE OIL

"My signature olive oil is sourced from Crete especially for me. It's a little olive grove just pressing for me. It's just beautiful. Very fresh, very clean. People ask why not use Australian olive oil? Some things can't be replicated. These olive groves have been around for 3000 years. The soil is the way it is. I did a blind tasting of 30 olive oils and I was just blown away. I've just got my first batch in. Toscana do a good oil."

Calombaris's Hellenic Republic online shop also sells Attiki Honey, Greek mountain oregano and tea, Sarantis Fondant Mastic and Sarantis Glyko, as well as Dodoni butter.

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