

The most important meal

by Helen Varvaritis

IF GASTRO-tourism depends on a blend of mouth-watering culinary experiences and wonderful holiday destinations for its success, then Greece is only two-thirds of the way there. Visitors to the country invariably testify that a Greek holiday is typically infused with the aromas and unique tastes of Greece, whether it's a lunch by the sea or a late-night feast.

But the missing link has always been a distinctly Greek breakfast.

The recent efforts of Athina Vorilla of Bluemetromedia, a consulting firm, and the Greek National Tourism Organisation represented an important first step in filling the culinary gap.

The two joined forces at this year's 42nd Xenia, a tourism tradeshow that on November 27 hosted the "Kalimera... with Taste" event, an innovative live demonstration of cooking designed to raise awareness over what could be called the "Greek breakfast issue".

A self-described Athenian-New Yorker, Vorilla arrived in Greece four years ago and discovered that although the country has much to offer on the food scene, breakfast represented a glaring void.

Bright idea

The Kalimera event was Vorilla's brainchild and "for the past year has been an exciting project but also very exhausting because it all revolved around the participation of seven big-name chefs on the Athenian restaurant scene".

With aplomb Vorilla introduced the innovative chefs and their enticing breakfast menus to an audience of hoteliers, restaurateurs, media and tourist professionals.

"Breakfast in Greek hotels has always been the same type of eggs and continental pastries," says George Pittas of the Hellenic Chamber of Hotels. "What we aim to do is show the world that Greek cuisine begins at the beginning of the day."

The seven participating chefs drew on their creativity, passion and regional products to present breakfast menus that were both familiar and inspiring.

Grigoris Chelmis, executive chef of Domotel Xenia Volou, reinvented the hot drink. His warm halva beverage with bitter-chocolate-dipped cinnamon stick was an interesting adaptation of the traditional halva dessert - and a definite winter winner.

Nikos Roussos and Georgianna Hiliadaki, chef-owners of Funky Gourmet, created a brunch buffet menu that covered all tastes, with lighter items such as the mastic-flavoured yoghurt mousse with caramelised nuts, as well as a sublime avgotaraho with chive and lemongrass creme fraiche on blinis. Add champagne and you're in heaven.

'Greek muesli', anyone?

Instilling his philosophy of using traditional Greek ingredients, Athiri chef-owner Alexandros Kardasis created a "salad" of wheat, dried fruit and nuts. His spanakopita incorporated one of his favourite products, trahana with anthotyro.

Inspired by the wonderful products of Crete, chef-owner Yiorgos Iliou of Polly Maggoo created a hearty breakfast of barley rusks topped with sauteed stamnagthi (Cretan greens), with tomato and apaki (cured pork) jelly and xino-myzithra sauce.

Chef Alexandros Fouroulis, the Mani Mani owner, proved that rustic Greek cuisine has all the



Eggs sunny side up done 'differently' and with a side of fresh sausage, potatoes and homemade 'spitiko' ketchup, from the breakfast menu of Yiorgos Venieris, executive chef, Electra Palace, Athens

charm of its Italian counterpart with his kayiana (scrambled eggs with tomato) with siglino (cured pork). Fouroulis' tyganites (fried pastry dough) with honey and walnut were superbly light and fluffy, a guaranteed success at any breakfast table.

Yiorgos Venieris, executive chef of Electra Palace Athens, freed his imagination, creating a unique carob spaghetti with nuts and dried figs and yoghurt sauce.

The audience was impressed.

Tia McPhee, a marketing executive visiting from London, was excited by the chefs' creativity and their obvious pride in traditional foods.

"I can't start my day if I don't have a carbohydrate-based breakfast, so the definite highlight for me was the wheat salad from Kardasis, a wonderfully Greek version of muesli," McPhee said. "Only problem I can imagine is that my thea [aunt] in Rhodes would be shocked to see me eating koliva for breakfast!"

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