

# Greek cuisine gaining fans



IT guy and part-time chef Constantinos Giannoulis is the driving force behind the World of Flavors catering company, developing it from his original rent-a-chef concept.

By Ioanna Fotiadi

## Three foodies working abroad are making a splash

Greek cuisine received unprecedented praise in the Michelin Guide in its presentation of the bistro L'Olivier, which opened three years ago in the Marais neighborhood of Paris, describing it as one of a kind.

The simple eatery, run by chef Vasilis Alexiou and his partner, was also hailed by the daily Le Monde for putting a modern twist on the forgotten flavors of Crete and the Cycladic Islands.

Alexiou remembers the early days of the restaurant. "At first people would read the menu at the entrance and then walk away. They expected to read that we had gyros and tzatziki." This Greek chef, however, has long departed from the customary, stereotypical Greek dishes, drawing instead on the wealth of cuisines across the country and through the ages. Today, L'Olivier works with reservations only, as it has just 10 tables. One of the reasons behind its success, Alexiou believes, is the fact that the menu changes depending on the seasonal ingredients available and the weather.

Over in another part of the world, in Stockholm, another Greek, Constantinos Giannoulis, is the driving force behind the World of Flavors catering company. The 29-year-old has a PhD from the University of Stockholm in IT and a passion for food.

"My parents only ever fought about what was on the stove," he recalls. Wanting to explore this passion, he teamed up with fellow Greek students Giorgos Mavrogonatos and Giorgos Kryparos and founded a small chef-at-home service about a year ago. "I don't think of myself as a chef; I cook because I like it," he says.

Within months, Giannoulis's food had generated a lot of buzz around Swedish gastronomic circles. "One day, a colleague of mine asked me if I could cater his birthday party," says the cook, who has lived in Stockholm for the past five years. And so the catering business grew out of his original rent-a-chef initiative.

Now, when their day jobs are over, the three Greeks get together and decide on a menu. "We shop for all the

necessary ingredients at the supermarket and take them home. We cook in our customers' kitchen and then clean everything up, even taking out the garbage at the end of the night," Giannoulis explains, adding that cooking in a different kitchen every time poses its own challenge. "The client may watch you work and criticize you. The magic of food is also lost by many customers who look in to see how we do things."

The success of the service is that the menus are never exclusively Greek. "I combine elements from different ethnic cuisines, adding my own personal brushstroke," says Giannoulis. Yet he admits that traditional Greek fare is still one of his top sellers. "You can't imagine how successful our traditional bean soup is." Nevertheless, Giannoulis prefers to go the gourmet way, also incorporating many Swedish favorites into his dishes. "I wouldn't exclude the possibility of one day dedicating myself entirely to cooking," he says.

Over in London, Sofia Gkiousou, known to her friends and readers as

Aunt Sofia, created the Greek-language blog "Digital Scullery" in 2009, featuring a myriad of recipes, videos of their execution and a forum for readers to post their input. "At some point I realized that we had a plethora of sites dedicated to gourmet recipes, but I couldn't find one to tell me how to make traditional soutzoukakia," the 30-year-old foodie told Kathimerini. It seems that there are many Greek living abroad who have a yearning for the dishes and flavors of their childhoods. "I uploaded a video on how to make walnut cake after a request from a group of Greeks living in San Francisco and another recipe for lentils for Greeks in London. There are Greek restaurants everywhere, but most of the dishes they serve are already familiar to non-Greeks," says Gkiousou. Her blog, however, does not snub gourmet recipes or ideas for dishes from all over the world. "I get e-mails from students who don't know how to boil an egg or who ask me what marinade means," she says. "My aim is to convince them that cooking is an easy sport."

# The precious yield of Kozani's regal crocus

Saffron has been a jewel in the country's crown for some 500 years

By Evi Voutsina

In the fields of many villages on the Tsarsambas Plain, which stretches south of the northern Greek region of Kozani to Lake Polyfytos, the mild climate and rich soil make them the perfect hosts for top-quality saffron extracted from Kozani crocus.

The region has been cultivating crocus flowers for some 500 years and now these efforts have been rewarded with a slot on the European Union's list of products of Protected Designation of Origin (PDO). The cultivation of this precious plant was initiated by Kozani merchants whose travels across Europe and the Mediterranean had made them aware of the commercial potential of the spice that is extracted from the plant. Saffron is also grown in Spain, Morocco and several countries in Central Asia, though the Kozani variety is widely considered to be of the best quality.

Crocus sativus is a domesticated perennial that bears three long stigmas of a bright orange/red hue

and with a strong aroma which can be used as a seasoning and coloring agent in food preparation.

Growing the Kozani crocus is not an especially difficult job. Extracting the saffron, however, is – and it takes 20-30 days of backbreaking work that normally begins in mid-October.

The plant wilts at the end of spring and does not produce any new shoots until the first rains of autumn. Farmers observe the plants' growth to see whether they can expect a good crop or not, waiting until the flowers cover their fields in a fragrant purple carpet. Once the plants have reached maturity, it is time for the farmers to get moving before the stigmas begin to wilt. The harvest begins early in the morning, with the laborers bent over double to gently pull the flower from the plant without harming the stalk or the stigma with an expert twist of the wrist. This continues until the entire field is cleared and can take several hours. The plants are then taken to the separating table and the field left to blossom again day after day for the 20-30 days of the flower's cycle.

The flowers are then tossed onto a round, spinning surface that separates the petals from the stigmas and then the stigmas are sorted by hand. They are



next placed on large wooden planks and left to partially dry out in a well-ventilated room at 35-40 degrees Celsius (95-104F). Once dried, the stigmas are gone through again by hand so that only the best of the harvest makes it to market. To produce 1 kilogram of Kozani saffron, producers have to pick and sort as many as 150,000 to 170,000 flowers within the space of a month. The Kozani crocus is also protected by a cooperative established in the area that includes all saffron producers. The product is sold in small packages or glass jars, though it really does take only a pinch of the spice to give dishes that deep orange tint and hay-like fragrance. To get the maximum color and flavor, soak the saffron in a small bowl of water for an hour or two before use.