

Food at the heart of civilisation

YOU must eat today as though tomorrow will never come." My Greek host's *yiayia*, or grandmother, waves her arm over the table. It is covered with plates of *mezedes*, the Greek equivalent of Spanish *tapas*. There's *gigantes* (giant lima beans in a tomato salsa), *melitzanosalata* (a dip of eggplant puree) and *saganaki* (a deliciously fresh fried cheese served with lemon). These are merely the starters. Just when I think I've consumed enough to satisfy *yiayia*, she urges, "Eat!"

Most Greeks, especially the elderly, have a love affair with food. Younger generations, whose first memories include their grandparents running after them with spoonfuls of freshly cooked fare, attribute the fixation to a war syndrome.

During World War II and the ensuing civil war, people struggled to survive in Greece: there was never enough food to go around. The country's economic, political and social despair prompted the famous exodus of Greeks to Australia, Canada and the US.

The Greek food obsession extends beyond lingering memories of hunger; it is integral to the Greek sense of *filoxenia*, or hospitality. *Filoxenia*, the roots of which are tied in with religious beliefs and festivities, is extended to all visitors, whether they are in a formal meeting or have dropped in for a chat.

Hospitality is courtesy, and courtesy means food, as I discover during my tour of the Peloponnese.

The Peloponnese, the large peninsula of mainland Greece separated by the Corinth Canal, is 80km southwest of Athens.

My first stop is the stunning port of Nafplio, the first capital of modern Greece. Perched on a peninsula and set beneath two fortresses, the town is a gourmet paradise. Cafes and restaurants line the waterfront or are nestled in narrow alleyways among the Venetian-style mansions.

Here, as elsewhere in Greece, the day's routine is set by meal times. About 10pm each evening, families come out en masse to feast on several courses.

In the mornings, the older men meet at the *kafeneia*, the traditional coffee house, to confer with friends over their worry beads and coffee. An hour or two later, trendy youths sporting Dolce & Gabbana T-shirts, Gucci sunglasses and carrying the latest-model mobile phone descend on the cafe of the moment to linger over their frothy-topped iced coffees.

Away from the fashionable cafe crowd, Nafplio's gastronomic scene extends to its tiny streets. At Amalias 5, I discover Dimitris Karonis the wine man, whose shop Karonis carries an impressive range of Greek wines, including the local Nemean reds. At Antica Gelateria di Roma (at the corner of Farmakopoulou and Komninou), Italian gelati maestro Marcello Raffo (pictured) enthusiastically hands out small spoonfuls of superlative homemade ice cream. He is of the old school: only fresh ingredients — fruit, milk and sugar — are used.

The nearby honey shop Nectar & Ambrosia is run by the charismatic Nikos. He proudly claims to produce the best honey in Greece and, as I swoon over a spoonful of thyme-



THE CURIOUS COOK

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infused nectar, I agree. Once a year, Nikos transports his bees to Tripoli to feed on the region's superior pollen.

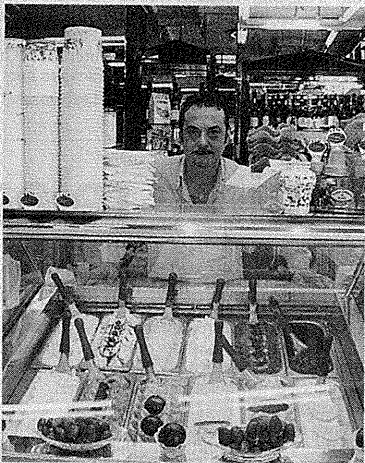
From Nafplio, I head south towards the Mani, passing the snow-capped Taygetos mountain range, the base of which is covered in wild herbs and olive groves, though many were destroyed by bushfires in June.

At Gerolimenas, a tiny fishing village nestled around a compact, sheltered bay on the Inner Mani's west coast, a plush five-star hotel is housed in a 14th-century feudal Maniot tower.

Alexandros Kyrimis, owner of the Kyrimai Hotel, speaks proudly of his conversion of the family's former trading post. Like the establishment's decor, its cuisine is unashamedly contemporary.

The restaurant's high-profile consultant chef, Yiannis Baxevanis, creates Greek and French fusion dishes. Greek cooks here are usually traditionalists but my evening meal of caramelised octopus served with fava in a cocktail glass is an invigorating change.

I am invited to sample goat with mushrooms, currants and chestnuts,



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and fried cod with beetroot and garlic sauce. Alexandros orders Ktima Gerovasiliou, an aromatic white wine that is a perfect accompaniment for Mediterranean fare.

However, local and regional specialties are what make eating so special in the Peloponnese. Everywhere I travel, delicacies abound, whether to Leonidio for its pale purple, streaky Tsakoniki aubergine (there is an annual aubergine festival in August), Kalamata for its large, crimson olives or the region of Nafplio for its citrus fruits.

All over the Peloponnese I am plied with *glyko tou koutaliou* — fruits stewed in a sugary syrup — and freshly baked *baklava*, oozing a nutty, sticky sweetness.

And Greek *fetta* cheese (the best is made by the villagers) has been afforded the same protection of origin status as champagne in France.

■ www.visitgreece.gr

■ www.kyrimai.gr