

# HEALTHY GREEK COOKING

AN IMPROVED MEDITERRANEAN DIET



ANNA NALTSATZIAN BOURLA



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**ANNA NALTSATZIAN BOURLA**



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*To the brave people whose lives have been forever changed by cancer.  
I wish you comfort, peace, and strength in your journey.*



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## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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Visiting the nuns in Greek monasteries was a memorable experience. I wanted to discover their secrets to exceptional longevity and warding off disease. Their response was open and sincere. They graciously answered my questions and described their everyday life, especially diet and cooking. They joyfully offered me their culinary secrets, and I have used them in many of my recipes. I cherish the experience and look forward to learning more about their philosophy and habits of daily living.

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I'm blessed to share love and friendship with you all.



# INTRODUCTION

Writing is not something that I usually enjoy doing. So why have I written a cookbook? Well, like most things in my life, this book more or less gave form to itself. When I was diagnosed with cancer, I traveled a long and winding road to recovery. This journey included a life-altering visit to Greece, where I learned that changing my diet empowered me to change my life for the better. Sharing my experience with others who may find themselves in a similar situation is therapeutic for me.

In a way, writing this book helped me recover from cancer. I share my experiences in the hope that they may be of value to others who are struggling with difficulties in their lives.

This is not a book about cancer. It is about how one is able to triumph, to live with and after it, as well as how such a life can be a more fulfilling one. Most importantly, it is not just for cancer patients. Traditional Mediterranean—and especially Greek—cuisine is renowned for its health benefits. By following the sensible and healthy cooking and eating habits in this book, you can enjoy a longer, fuller, and healthier life. I hope my book will help you find comfort, joy, and even a few laughs!

## **How I Conquered Cancer While Gaining Happiness and Creativity**

Some time ago, I received a call from fate. Without it, I would have continued to live a blissful life without incident. But in 2005, I was diagnosed with breast cancer. Now every day is a new journey, and I actively appreciate the good. I unleashed my creative self and live my life with joy and fulfillment, the way I have always wanted. I take pleasure in meeting new people. I have started painting. I am delighted to see the bright-blue Athenian sky despite the political problems that exist in my city and my country. I admire people in their late 80s and 90s who maintain good health naturally and are focused and creative, whether they express that creativity by writing poetry or working on marble sculptures. They have found the secret to living a good life and always being

productive. For them, purpose and serenity replace concerns about high blood pressure, heart disease, and many other ailments.

I modeled my life after this example and have adopted a new lifestyle. Liberated to express myself creatively, I have found purpose and happiness through creative cooking, writing, and painting.

During my illness, I went from a size 10 to a size 16. Now I am losing weight without starving myself by following a healthy diet from the recipes in this book. I discovered that eating healthy food makes one feel great. I came to realize that the process of aging is directly related to nutrition; making wise choices in the kitchen is the key to a long, healthy, and happy life. I hope that this book will inspire you to embark on a journey that will lead you to acquire strength and help you achieve fulfillment and joy. We are what we think and do; thus, all is possible!

## **My Realization**

Healthy Greek home cooking is a self-empowering art and joy. I began practicing it to protect myself from cancer, inspire my painting, overcome the sadness, and most importantly be my own person in charge of my own life! In this book you will learn the art and joy that is healthy Greek home cooking.

As anyone who has beaten a serious illness will attest, the experience brings life into crystal-clear focus. It enables you to distinguish what's really important and makes you aware of the time left to enjoy life, to make every day the happiest yet. Every minute is precious when you want to make the hours satisfying and fulfilling.

## **My Kind of Therapy**

Cooking your own food, especially when you live alone, is a form of therapy. Whether you're in a good mood or have had a bad day, cooking can change your attitude for the better. Go to your kitchen, turn on the radio, open your refrigerator, and think about what you can prepare with the ingredients you have. This is a creative process, so don't overthink it. As you dream up new dishes, imagine what you would like to do today, tomorrow, or even next summer. And if the music inspires you, dance a little!

Life is what we make of it. Learn to take control of your emotions and to forget everything that brings you down. Consider what makes you happy and go for it. Embark on a journey of self-discovery. As I'm now well aware, facing cancer will make you less patient; you will tend to get angry more easily. Try to calm down and speak gently. Don't expect anybody who hasn't been there to understand what you have gone through. Be considerate; remember that others cannot imagine, regardless of their love for you, just how much you have changed inside.

Cook the foods that give you energy while nurturing your body and helping yourself, as well as the people you love. Learn about the vitamins and minerals contained in foods you prepare. We can help cure ourselves; we just have to find the right combination of ingredients! Good food can heal our bodies and our minds. Make room for tranquility in your life and try to surround yourselves with happy, positive people. We don't need pills to sleep, and we don't need pills to be happy. Nature has remedies for everything. It's all out there!

The aim of *Healthy Greek Cooking* is to give you the strength to relax and help you focus on eating well and living a healthy and vibrant life. It is a chronicle of my journey from there to here, detailing how my understanding of food helped me to beat my illness. I appreciate life more than ever before. Life is beautiful. It is also what you make of it. I have chosen to stay in Greece permanently, as I felt that a change of environment would also soothe my soul. In the beginning, coming back to my country of origin felt a bit daunting, as I was all by myself, far away from my son and my friends, and far removed from my doctors. It felt as if I'd left behind my security.

Today, I hardly recognize myself! I decorated my apartment the way I wanted and have put my paintings on the walls. I have a small terrace with lovely roses and vegetables, including cucumbers and green peppers, and in August I harvest my own small crop of watermelons. I have met wonderful people and reconnected with high-school friends. I enjoy the mild Athenian weather while visiting the open-air fruit and vegetable markets.

I feel like I've traveled back in time every time I prepare these recipes, as if I have instantly been transported back into my mother's kitchen. When combining ingredients, I feel her presence and artistry. I enjoy the same pleasure and gain the same strength that she had while preparing food for her customers or for us at home. The sense of her beside me is inspirational, making me feel as if her spirit were cooking with me. Writing down my recipes and taking photos of the dishes was fun. I learned to use a PC to write this book, a challenge when you are not any longer in your twenties!

Compiling this collection of recipes has been one of the most rewarding things in my life. I hope it will improve your health and give you the strength it has provided for me. I would be delighted to hear from you and will do all that I can to help you start or continue a new path of life with the support of a better way of cooking. Please don't hesitate to contact me through my publisher.

## **My Early Life in Greece**

I was born on the Greek island of Corfu, a green and beautiful land full of

flowers and friendly people, reminiscent of scenes in an Italian movie from the Amalfi coast. The island's culture is a fusion of influences: Italian, French, Armenian, Jewish, and English happily merged with Greek culture. Creativity and the love of the arts is everywhere; there have always been many musicians and painters on the island. Within this environment, it is hardly surprising that my father was a painter and my mother a professional chef who worked in some of the best restaurants in the town of Corfu – which is the cultural center of the island – and later on in Athens.

My mother, Christina, was a beautiful, vibrant, and outgoing woman. I recall walking through the piazza with her as a child and noticing men coming out of their shops just to look at and talk to her. She was never formally trained as a chef but instead acquired her cooking skills through the years from people she would meet. She loved cooking, and I retain fond memories of her kitchen, radiating warmth and wafting aromas as she cooked lunch every day. In those days, breakfast was not considered essential. But after school we would always come home for lunch. Although the period following the end of WWII was a difficult time for Greece, my mother always managed to maintain a comfortable, pleasant home, in which I remember having a happy and carefree childhood. Since my mother was a successful professional chef, her restaurant openings were



*With my mother, Christina*

always big events where all the townspeople would arrive in order to dine, dance, and socialize. Sundays at the restaurant were also rather memorable: I remember doing my best to dance, frequently by standing on other people's feet, as I was so little. As soon as the place was packed, the agoronomia would also invariably show up. Agoronomia (if it still functions) is the municipal police that inspects restaurants. In those days, one of its duties was to weigh the food, just before the plate was offered to the customer, in order to ensure that portion sizes were correct. I distinctly remember that, although my mother never actually weighed anything, she was always accurate. All inspectors knew that, but they would still arrive, simply because what they really wished for was to be treated to a nice meal.

Since my mother worked year round while I was growing up, much of my time was spent in the company of my father, Sarkis, a survivor of the Armenian genocide in Asia Minor that began in 1915. At the tender age of seven, my father had lost all of his family, who were brutally killed in front of his eyes. Because he was between the ages of seven and fourteen, by order of the Turkish authorities he was placed at a school in Constantinople (the city is now officially called Istanbul, but we Greeks still refer to it by its traditional name), in order to learn Turkish and subsequently be converted to Islam. He somehow escaped and arrived on Corfu by boat with several other young Armenian orphans. Throughout his life, he would never forget either his family or his Armenian roots and language.



*With my father, Sarkis*

Sarkis stayed at school until the age of sixteen, when, having to earn a living, he became an apprentice at the workshop of an Italian painter who lived on Corfu. There he learned how to paint and do restoration work. Soon he was able to accurately draw and paint everything he saw. I still have a picture of him as a young man enjoying a day out in the countryside alongside his friends; everybody is looking around, savoring the view, while my father is drawing the landscape.

Already a well-known painter when he met my mother, my father always remained a kind, quiet man. He was a typical Armenian of his time: tough, reserved, and very private. Although he lived amongst Greeks for most of his life, he was never really comfortable with them, feeling much closer to other Armenians who lived on the island. Honor was always the most important thing in his life, which also meant that he would never break his promises. Growing

up, I constantly felt surrounded by his love. My father has always been a source of great pride for me, and also my own link to our common Armenian heritage, which I hold dear despite that fact that I do not speak the language.

Sarkis was not a man of many words, but I can still recall so many memorable things he said. I also remember the feeling of security and happiness I enjoyed while, as a little girl, I held his hand.

Every summer, I would accompany my father to different palaces on the island, where he restored faded and peeling frescoes. The whole process seemed like a mystery to my eight-year-old self! I remember watching him climb up a ladder so that he could reach the ceiling, as many of the frescoes were painted there. Day in, day out, he worked until the painting was restored and was finally revealed in all its glory. I can also recall being fascinated by the bright and richly detailed images of historical figures in the frescoes. It is actually quite telling that at a time when he had completed work in one of the palaces, the then-king Constantine, whilst on a visit to Corfu, asked for my father in order to congratulate him on his work. But my father never went. He felt such an honor was rather overwhelming.

I also remember him frequently taking me out. I have fond memories of getting dressed up on Sundays, Christmas, or Easter to go to Listòn, in the heart of Corfu town, and of walking next to vibrant cafés and hearing happy voices. Then, as now, sitting at cafés, socializing, and flirting with boys of a similar age was customary. However, no flirting for me since I was very young. As my father enjoyed his beer, I enjoyed the hors d'oeuvres. I was not fond of beer – it was too bitter for me.

Sarkis never gave me formal painting lessons. I learned by watching his work closely and imitating what he was doing. When I was twelve, I started painting watercolors and participating in art events at school. I even sold a watercolor landscape to a local store. Painting relaxed me, and I continued to paint at school. When I was sixteen, my family moved to Athens. Without my friends, or greater family except for my parents, I felt lost in the big city. Ironically, it was during that first summer that I met my future husband. I noticed an advertisement in a magazine for girls to act in a movie. With considerable difficulty, I managed to convince my parents to allow me to audition. The story was about a young high school girl in love with her teacher, and I was the director's first choice. I was of the right age and had a distinctive look: an innocent face and long, braided hair. That day I met Daniel, an American producer, who was editing a film at the same studio. We married a few years later. Then I had my son, David.

I spent most of my early adult life enjoying being a mother, whilst also helping my husband with his work. His filmmaking career gave us the opportunity to travel all over Europe and Israel before settling in New York in the late 1960s. And although I have been painting since I was twelve, it never occurred to

me to pursue a career as an inspired artist. I believed that my talent was in restoration and reproduction, just like my father, the restorer of old frescoes.



My husband did acknowledge the beauty of my work, but he would observe that I needed to develop a style of my own. As I have always been overly concerned with other people's opinions of my painting, I felt foolish for pursuing it. It seemed an indulgence on my part, and I started to neglect it. It would take me over a year to finish a painting, and I would

*With my son, David, one year old*

hide my work behind curtains or keep it inside closets. Needless to say, the thought of having an exhibition or showing my work to strangers never occurred to me. On the other hand, like most housewives, cooking was part of my daily routine. Daily life progressed in this pattern until 2005, when I was diagnosed with breast cancer.

## **My Life with Cancer**

When I was diagnosed, it was as if a lightning bolt had struck me and everything would be changed forever. It was a lonely time. Endless questions filled my mind as I constantly thought, "Why had this happened to me?" Having no family history of cancer and being healthy to the point of almost never getting a cold, two questions preoccupied me: How had it come about? What had I done wrong? My cancer was treatable, and I am grateful for that. Cancer also forced me to take a hard, honest look at my life.

My operations, constant exams, and the trauma of separation from my husband after forty years of marriage reversed my relationship with my son; I became a burden on him. Previously, I was so very happy looking after him as a doting mother. It was as if my world had stopped and turned upside down. Confronting my mortality was heart breaking. It made me focus on myself for the first time. Inconsequential things faded away as I focused on one thing: surviving.

To try to reduce the duration of the constant stress and avoid being a burden to my son, I opted for the stronger and faster course of chemotherapy, lasting two months instead of six. I wanted to get it over as soon as possible and return to relax in my native Greece. Although chemotherapy notoriously drains energy, I hardly felt tired or depressed during treatments. It sounds vain, but the hardest time for me was when I lost my hair.

I vividly recall touching my head one time, shortly after starting the

chemotherapy, and having most of the hair come out in my hand. Then came a day when David said, “Mother, I have to shave your hair.” I said nothing. I just let him shave the little that remained, and I felt his pain in doing it. I felt two affectionate hands on my head, which he wiped and covered with a warm, wet towel after finishing. It was the sweetest touch I was ever blessed with. Facing my vanity in mirror was not easy, so I bought a wig to hide it.

As the chemotherapy progressed, I was overcome by a flood of emotions. With my energy focused on survival, I lacked the stamina to restrain emotions I had suppressed for years. I needed to ease my mind, so I sought comfort in painting, releasing my sorrow, grief, and frustration onto canvas. I painted non-stop during chemotherapy, forgetting what was happening elsewhere. I found the strength to paint a self-portrait, capturing my hairless face and chest covered with bandages in iconographic form. Remarkably, despite the hair loss and the effects of the powerful drugs, I felt more energized, creative, and in control than ever before.

For the first time ever, I was able to do something just for myself simply because it made me feel good, without feeling guilty or being concerned about someone else’s opinion. Painting offered me a release, and I embraced it with fervor. It’s amazing how a disease can change your view of the world, and most importantly, how you can see yourself in it. I learned a priceless lesson—do not waste your time. I painted; it felt good, so I continued doing it. Painting enabled me to live in the present, to steady my emotions, and to focus on the future. I worked all day without stopping, consumed with the process of creating my art. I ceased to feel pity for myself. Focusing completely on my work made me forget that cancer had ever been a part of my life. For the first time I felt my own personal sense of strength.

I was my own subject. I understood that there was no use for talking or crying. I could express myself, reveal my personal tragedy, by baring my broken heart on the altar of my canvases. It was there that I could show how far I had travelled and where I wanted to go. I painted myself in the emotional and physical condition that I was in. I painted myself with no hair and a bandaged chest sitting on a Chinese-red lacquer chair while chemotherapy is being administered through a tube to a vein in my arm. Behind me a big, black, threatening silhouette with long, dry, hooked fingers is leering over me, trying to pull away the intravenous tube. All is offset by a youth resembling a Byzantine angel.

I no longer desired to produce copies of other people’s work. I was so consumed with my work that I completed a painting every week or two. In two months, I finished five paintings, all originals. I recall that wonderful sense of accomplishment knowing that I no longer needed to copy others. For the first time in my life, I felt like a real artist.

Inspired, I felt the need to research. I wanted to occupy my mind, to find and consume knowledge. I was never scouring for books, and I hardly knew how to use a computer, so nothing was simple or easy for me. However, I knew I had to think about how to change my life.

Having spent so much of my life preparing it, one of the first things that came to mind was food. Questions arose like: What could have possibly been wrong with my eating habits so far? What was I supposed to eat from then on? All my life I thought I was being careful with the food I had been cooking for my family and myself. Could it be that I was wrong? I felt that I had to improve my way of living. That

was the time when I first contemplated the idea that the human body is one of the wonders of the world; yet we hardly know how to look after and protect it. It was an overwhelming thought. As a result, I became careful about my diet. As I finished chemotherapy, I was aware that I needed more information on how to fight my illness to keep it from returning. I asked the American Cancer Society for brochures and received a booklet, which I read thoroughly. I was astonished to realize that, according to them, there were no food restrictions whatsoever! Red meat, white bread, and butter were all allowed! It saddened me to discover that our health experts neglected to guide patients towards beneficial nutrition. That was the moment I became determined to explore diet and its connection to health.

About that time, some Greek friends came to stay with me for a few weeks. As a good host, I felt that I had to cook at home or accompany them to restaurants, which I did not want to do. I did not want to discuss my problem with them. So whenever we went out to eat, I took a little bottle of olive oil with me to give to the chef so that he could cook the simplest dish of spaghetti with olive oil and garlic for me. But most of the time I would cook for my friends and myself at home. One evening, while preparing an elaborate moussaka, I came to realize the changes that I had made in the way I prepared that particular dish; I had in fact significantly altered the recipe in order to accommodate my newly found health consciousness: blanching the eggplant instead of frying it, exchanging butter with olive oil, replacing the rich béchamel topping with one simply made from cheese.



*A self-portrait, painted during my cancer treatment*

You can imagine that I was thrilled to receive rave reviews from my friends, who noted that the dish was often tastier, lighter, and easier to digest than the original version. I continued to cook for my guests over the next month, modifying old recipes and creating new ones. By the time they left, I had developed a whole set of new recipes. I noticed an improvement in my health and mental state that progressed over time. Could it be the food itself, and Greek cuisine in particular? The feeling that I had taken control over my body and mind improved my self-esteem and sense of well-being.

I finally understood the dual benefits of healthy Greek home cooking. Being able to take food stuffs in their natural state, combine them with herbs and spices, and create something new – to share it with people – appealed to my creativity, as well as my social life. Most importantly, I realized that proper food and nutrition could be a vital part of my healing process and healthy living. Wanting to know about nutritional content of the food that I consumed became a habit. It was fortunate that my mother was a chef, for I had cooked for many years. Medical authorities increasingly appreciate that proper nutrition is the first medicine for many kinds of disease. It mimics the play of action and reaction. I do not consider this book to be simply an aid for cancer patients; I'd like to think that it is helpful for everyone who wants a better, healthier life.



*A second self-portrait. I felt I had taken control over my body and mind and improved my self-esteem and sense of well-being.*

“The body is the temple of the soul,” the ancients proclaimed, and therefore what we consume helps to shape what we are. I believe that the way we feel and think can poison our bodies. Cancer may be one of many unfortunate results. We know that cancer is not necessarily lethal and that hope is a key component of well-being, perhaps equal in importance to nutrition. I never felt that I would die of cancer. I believe that there is a way to solve every problem, so deep down I knew that there had to be a way to wellness. I just had to stop doing all those things that I did not enjoy and that made me unhappy. I knew all too well what they were. Learning how to stop obeying orders was first and foremost for me; putting an end to always doing what others wanted while feeling guilty about my own wishes was also key. I felt I had found a way to free myself from

these things and that I had a right and duty to protect myself by alleviating distress and worry so I would be able to live longer. I believe that everybody has this right.

## **My Life After Cancer**

With the chemotherapy complete, I felt the need to get away. I wanted to be alone. I wanted to be able to sleep whenever I felt tired; to talk to people only when I wished; to relax my body and mind. As it was summer, I had three months ahead of me to think about other things. I left for Greece.

That was the time when I felt an urge to take a closer look at Greek cuisine. I visited a Greek nutritionist, Dr. Koumentakis, a disciple of Dr. Shelton, who firmly believes that adopting a better diet is the key to maintaining one's health. As a result, Dr. Koumentakis does not prescribe any medicines whatsoever and only cures with the help of the appropriate diet. Some of the things he told me were quite astonishing, offering an early insight into the route I was about to follow.

I researched the dietary habits of the monks at Mount Athos, a place where culinary customs still remain distinctly Byzantine. I discovered that the monks rarely suffer from illnesses and typically die of old age. Unfortunately, being a woman, I was unable to visit Mount Athos in person, so I read every book I could find on their cooking habits. I also visited women's monasteries, where the kind nuns generously shared their recipes with me. This part of my research lasted a year.

I'm now free of cancer and feel better than ever. I am happier and have more strength to continue my life. Within five years, I have grown into an accomplished artist and re-invented myself as a writer and a cook with a healthy vision. Despite the feelings of pressure and insecurity that at times resurface, I believe I can do anything I choose, provided I am able to focus on it. There are other issues besides health and happiness, but I have been taught a valuable lesson: life is what you make it. From this perspective, I do not regret all that has happened. Cancer intervened to offer me the life I had wanted; it brought me the hope of happiness. I felt renewed and invigorated. Perhaps it was the food itself; perhaps it was the creative act of cooking. But the simple fact was that I felt good and wanted to continue feeling that way.

Wishing to continue in good spirits, I decided to refine and organize my recipes, drawing from my mother's handwritten recipes so that I could share them with others. The foundation of these recipes is well-known to Greeks who cook the traditional way. Some of the recipes have been collected during my stay in monasteries; others are my mother's. A basic rule is that I never fry. I begin by adding a little olive oil and a little filtered water (I never use tap water), simmer on low heat and never use a microwave oven, and use only a tiny pinch

of natural sea salt or pink Himalayan salt. Most importantly, I ensure that the ingredients are organic and fresh.

Carefully taste the food while preparing each recipe to ensure that it has the traditional and authentic Greek flavor. I prefer simple tastes; I'm not a fan of the elaborate style of cooking, where the natural taste of the ingredients disappears.

## For Cancer Patients

Do not drink coffee. Actually avoid everything with caffeine. Stay away from sugar and alcohol other than the occasional glass of red wine. In the morning, before you drink or eat anything, take a tablespoon of organic sunflower oil, swish it in your mouth for a few seconds, and then spit out. You will notice that what you spit will have become white. You have just got rid of all the toxic bitterness that stays in your mouth from the medicines of the night before. The result is a clean mouth and a pleasant sensation.

I feel that knowing the vitamin and mineral content of food is important. I like to start off each recipe by explaining the nutritional aspects of the ingredients. But listing vitamins and their benefits is not enough. For example: "Vitamin B5 or Pantothenic Acid: vitamin B5 is excellent for stress, arthritis, infections, skin disorders, graying of hair, cholesterol, fatigue, listlessness, sensation of weakness, numbness or weakness, and soothing tingling and burning pain in the feet." That's all very well, but where are we to find that particular vitamin when we need it? What are the best foods for it? I thought these were important elements to include this in this book.

I have tried to explain everything in a simple and understandable way. The recipes are presented in an order similar to that seen on most restaurant menus so you can plan your meal as if you were in a Greek restaurant. *Bon appétit*, or as they say in Greece, *kali orexi!*



# APPETIZERS



*In Greece, mezedes (appetizers or hors d'oeuvres) provide an environment for social discourse. At a local taverna, over retsina (a wine originating from the Aegean Island of Chios) or ouzo (an anise-flavored aperitif), loves blossom, fortunes rise and fall, and politics are hotly debated while nibbling at an array of appetizers. Mezedes are also the first course for most meals. In addition to the recipes in this chapter, you'll find more dishes suitable as appetizers in the fish and seafood chapter.*

## **TZATZIKI**

*Yogurt Dip*

Strained yogurt (thicker yogurt) can be found in Greek delicatessen shops. Otherwise it can be easily made at home, starting with plain, unsweetened yogurt.

Serves 4

### **Ingredients**

1 small cucumber, peeled and seeded	2 cloves garlic, minced
2 cups Greek strained yogurt (yaourti sakoulas)	2 tbsps. first pressed olive oil
	½ cup finely chopped fresh dill
	Pinch sea salt

### **Preparation time: 30 minutes**

Line a colander with cheesecloth or a large flat-bottomed coffee filter. Put a bowl underneath the colander and add the yogurt. Refrigerate for at least an hour, until all excess water has drained and the yogurt has thickened.

Coarsely grate the cucumber in a medium bowl. Drain the cucumber well, and then pat it dry with a paper towel to remove any remaining liquid.

Return the cucumber to the bowl and add the yogurt, garlic, olive oil, dill, and sea salt, mixing well. Refrigerate for 30-60 minutes. Serve with olives and hot pita bread.



*Tzatziki increases your appetite!*

# MELITZANOSALATA

## Eggplant Dip

Eggplants are a good source of vitamin K, which helps with blood clotting and osteoporosis, and also serves as a source of folic acid, which is important for pregnant women and helps with anemia. They contain vitamin B6, which fights diabetes, stress, and insomnia, and potassium and manganese, two vital nutrients. Eggplants are also a good source of dietary fiber.

Serves 4

### Ingredients

3 large eggplants

½ medium onion, finely chopped

¼ cup finely chopped fresh dill

¼ cup finely chopped fresh parsley

1 small, fresh tomato, finely chopped

½ cup finely chopped scallions

1 clove garlic, crushed

¼ cup olive oil

Juice of ½ lemon

Sea salt and black pepper to taste

1 tbsp. mayonnaise

### Preparation time: 40 minutes

Preheat the oven to 350 degrees. Wash the eggplants and pierce with a fork to allow moisture to escape. Place in an oven-safe dish and bake for 20 minutes, until the skins turn soft and wrinkled.

Remove the eggplants from the oven and cool at room temperature. Peel. Finely chop the eggplants and place the pieces in cheesecloth, squeezing off any remaining liquid.

In a large mixing bowl, combine the eggplant, onion, dill, parsley, tomato, scallion, garlic, olive oil, lemon juice, sea salt, and black pepper. Mix well. Add the mayonnaise, mixing until combined.

Serve at room temperature.



# SPANAKOPITAKIA

## *Small Spinach Pies*

Feta cheese contains many vitamins and minerals, but it can also be high in saturated fat and sodium. Too much saturated fat is unhealthy, but when eaten in moderation, feta cheese is a delicious treat. It contains calcium, which keeps bones strong and can help prevent osteoporosis, and vitamin B12, which should be part of your daily diet to protect red blood cells and promote healthy brain activity. Feta also provides small amounts of iron, folate, and vitamin D.

Because of its high salt content, I usually cut a block of feta cheese into small slices and soak them in water overnight. I change the water on the second day and let it soak a little longer so it is properly de-salted.

Yields 24-32 pieces

### **Ingredients**

¼ lb. feta cheese

½ cup olive oil

2 medium onions, chopped

⅓ cup water

3½ lbs. fresh baby spinach, without stems, washed and roughly chopped

½ cup chopped scallions

½ cup chopped fresh dill

½ cup chopped fresh parsley

2 fresh leeks, chopped

Sea salt and black pepper to taste

2 eggs

Olive oil, for greasing

1 lb. frozen phyllo pastry sheets, defrosted

½ cup olive oil, for brushing the phyllo sheets

### **Preparation time: 1 hour**

Soak the feta cheese in water for at least two hours to remove excess salt. Drain and pat the cheese with a paper towel and then crumble the cheese. Set aside.

Preheat the oven to 350 degrees. In a large pan, warm the oil over medium heat. Add the onions and water and simmer for a minute and a half.

Add the spinach, scallions, dill, parsley, leeks, sea salt, and pepper. Cover and simmer for a minute and a half. Uncover and stir constantly until the spinach wilts.

Remove the pan from heat. Place the mixture in a colander, squeeze out any excess liquid, and pat dry with paper towels.

Set the mixture aside in a refrigerator to chill, occasionally checking and removing any liquid that may appear using paper towels. To prevent the phyllo from becoming soggy, the filling must be cold and dry.

In a medium bowl, whisk the eggs. Add the crumbled feta cheese and mix.

Fold the cold spinach mixture into the egg mixture until well combined. Grease 2 large baking trays with olive oil.

Unroll the phyllo. Lay a sheet flat on a clean work surface. Take care to keep the phyllo covered with a slightly damp, but not wet, towel while working in order to prevent it from drying out and becoming brittle.

Brush a sheet of phyllo with olive oil. Place a second sheet of phyllo on top, brush it with olive oil, and top with a third sheet of phyllo, also brushed with olive oil. Repeat this process and form stacks of three phyllo sheets until all phyllo sheets have been used.

With a sharp knife, cut the sheets lengthwise into thirds or fourths to form 2½-inch strips. Repeat the process with all phyllo sheets.

Place a tbs. of filling near a corner of each layered phyllo strip. Fold each end at an angle over the filling to form a triangle. Continue to fold the triangles along the strips, like folding up a flag, until you reach the end.

Brush the tops of the pies with olive oil and place them on the baking trays. Keep the trays covered while preparing the remaining pies. Repeat until all the filling and phyllo strips are used.

Bake for 20 to 30 minutes until the triangles are crisp and light golden brown. Serve hot, warm, or cold.



# TIROPITAKIA

*Individual Cheese Pies*

Yields 20 pieces

## Ingredients

½ lb. feta cheese

2 eggs

¼ lb. cream cheese or goat cheese

4 tbsps. grated parmesan cheese

Freshly ground black pepper to taste

Olive oil, for greasing

1 lb. frozen phyllo pastry sheets, defrosted

⅓ cup olive oil, for brushing the phyllo sheets

## Preparation time: 1 hour

Soak the feta cheese in water for at least two hours to remove excess salt. Drain and pat the cheese with a paper towel and then crumble the cheese.

Preheat the oven to 350 degrees.

In a large bowl, whisk the eggs. Add the three cheeses and black pepper, mixing thoroughly. The mixture should be thick and slightly lumpy.

Grease two flat baking pans by brushing with olive oil. Unroll the phyllo pastry, taking out one sheet at a time. Take care to keep the rest of the phyllo covered with a slightly damp, but not wet, towel while working in order to prevent it from drying out and becoming brittle.

Brush the sheet of phyllo with olive oil. Place a second sheet of phyllo on top,



brush it with olive oil, and top with a third sheet of phyllo, also brushed with olive oil. With a sharp knife, cut the sheets lengthwise into fourths to form 2½-inch strips. Repeat this process with 4 additional stacks of 3 phyllo sheets each to obtain a total of 20 strips. Put the unused phyllo in an airtight plastic bag and return to the freezer.

Place a tbsp. of filling near a corner of each layered phyllo strip. Fold each end at an angle over the filling to form a triangle. Continue to fold the triangles along the strips, like folding up a flag, until you reach the end.

Brush the tops of the pies with olive oil and place on the prepared baking pan ½ inch apart.

Bake for approximately 15 minutes, checking every couple of minutes after the first 12 minutes, until the pies are light golden brown.



*Place a tbsp. of filling near one end of each layered phyllo strip.*



*Fold the end of the phyllo strip at an angle over the filling to form a triangle. Continue to fold the triangle along the strip until the end, like folding a flag.*



*Brush the tops of the pies with olive oil and place on the oiled baking pan 1/2 inch apart.*



*Bake for approximately 15 minutes, checking every couple of minutes after the first 12 minutes, until the pies are light golden brown.*

# TYROPITTA STRIFTI

*Twisted Cheese Pie*

This recipe is very similar to the previous recipe, tiropitakia. The only difference between the two is the method of shaping the phyllo. Instead of layering three phyllo sheets and cutting that stack into quarters, two full, uncut sheet are required to make each pie. You can also add spinach to the filling and turn this into spinach pie.

Serves 5

## Ingredients

½ lb. feta cheese  
2 eggs  
¼ lb. cream cheese or goat cheese  
4 tbsps. grated parmesan cheese  
Freshly ground black pepper to taste  
Olive oil, for greasing  
1 lb. frozen phyllo pastry sheets, defrosted  
⅓ cup olive oil, for brushing the phyllo sheets

## Preparation time: 30 minutes

Soak the feta cheese in water for at least two hours to remove excess salt. Drain and pat the cheese with a paper towel and then crumble the cheese.

Preheat the oven to 350 degrees. In a large bowl, whisk the eggs. Add the three cheeses and black pepper, mixing thoroughly. The mixture should be thick and slightly lumpy.

Grease a flat baking pan by brushing with olive oil. Unroll the phyllo pastry, taking out two sheets at a time. Take care to keep the rest of the phyllo covered with a slightly damp, but not wet, towel while working in order to prevent it from drying out and becoming brittle.

Brush both sides of both phyllo sheets with olive oil. Place the two sheets, one on top of the other, lengthwise in front of you.

Cover ⅓ of the phyllo (the bottom third closest to you) with a uniform, ⅛-inch-thick layer of the cheese mixture. This should be about ⅓ of the filling mixture. Leave a ½-inch border along the left and right edges of the dough, as this will prevent the filling from leaking. Roll tightly from the bottom (the end nearest you, which contains the mixture) to the top, forming a long roll.

Gently twist the roll with a movement similar to that of wringing water from a towel. Twist about 1 inch of each end of the dough in the opposite direction. Take care not to over-twist the roll to the point of breaking.

Holding one end of the phyllo down with your finger, turn the twisted dough around your finger to form a spiral (as shown in the photograph).

Repeat this process with eight additional sheets of phyllo to make a total of five pies. Put unused phyllo in an airtight plastic bag and return to the freezer.

Place the pies on the prepared baking sheet. Bake for approximately 15 minutes, checking every couple of minutes after the first 12 minutes, until the pies are light golden brown.



## **DOLMADES**

### *Stuffed Vine Leaves*

Yields 20 pieces

#### **Ingredients**

1 cup rice (brown or white)

2 cups water

5 tbsps. olive oil

1 tsp. vegetable bouillon or  
½ vegetable stock cube,  
divided

Black pepper to taste to taste

1 tbsp. tomato paste

1 medium onion, grated

2 cups veal mince

Sea salt to taste

1 jar prepared vine leaves (or see below)

Juice of 2 lemons, divided



#### **Preparation time: 1 hour (including stuffing and rolling)**

In a saucepan, simmer brown rice with 2 cups of water on low heat, covered, for 20 minutes. If you're using white rice, soak the rice in 2 cups of water but do not cook it. Drain the rice, retaining the water.

In a medium pot, mix the olive oil, half of the bouillon, and black pepper. Stir. Simmer the mixture for 20 minutes.

Meanwhile, prepare the rice and mincemeat filling. In a large bowl, mix the rice, tomato paste, onion, and veal mince with very little sea salt and additional black pepper.

Carefully remove the vine leaves from the jar. Place them in a colander and rinse with cold, running water to remove excess salt.

Arrange the leaves on a clean work surface. Place a spoonful of filling on each vine leaf, just above the point where the stem was. Fold up the bottom of the leaf, fold down the top of the leaf, and then fold in the right and left sides.

Arrange the stuffed vine leaves tightly next to each other in a separate pot. Be sure that there is no space between the leaves, as they might pop open. Layer the stuffed leaves on top of one another once the bottom of the pot has been covered.

Pour the simmered olive oil, bouillon, and black pepper mixture into the pot with the stuffed leaves. Add the reserved water mixed with the other half of the bouillon and the juice of 1 lemon to the pot. The water level must be at least 1 inch above the level of the stuffed leaves.

Put a heat-resistant plate inside the pot to hold down the stuffed leaves and prevent them from falling apart while cooking. Simmer, covered, on low heat for about 30 minutes, until almost all of the water has evaporated. (Check frequently after 20 minutes.)

Carefully tilt the pot sideways and remove the plate. Add the remaining lemon juice. Replace the plate.

Let the dish sit, covered, for 10-15 minutes to allow the leaves to absorb any remaining juices.

Serve garnished with fresh lemon slices. Olives, feta cheese, Greek salad, and other mezedes (appetizers or hors d'oeuvres) can accompany this dish.

### **How to prepare fresh vine leaves for stuffing:**

Select vine leaves without thick veins. Remove the entire stem. Bring water to a boil in a large pot.

Add the leaves (making sure they are completely covered by the water), the juice from one fresh lemon, 2 tbsps. of olive oil, and a pinch of sea salt.

Cover the pot and reduce the heat to low. Simmer the leaves for 1-2 minutes and remove from heat.

As soon as the leaves are softened, remove them from the pot and immerse in cold water for 5 seconds.

Drain the leaves, stack, and tightly cover with foil. Place them in an airtight bag, squeeze to remove all air, seal, and freeze until needed.

If you do not have time to prepare your own, you can buy ready-to-use vine leaves from any Greek or Middle Eastern food store. These are parboiled, rolled, and preserved in brine, so make sure you place them in a colander and rinse with cold, running water to remove excess salt before using.



## ELIES ME KAFTRERES PIPERIES

*Mixed Olives with Red Chili Peppers*

Red chili peppers are rich in antioxidants and vitamins A, C, and K, which can help prevent cell damage, cancer, and other diseases. This dish is usually served before a meal with wine or ouzo.

Serves 2

### Ingredients

4-5 chili peppers

2 cups mixed olives

1 tbsp. olive oil

### Preparation time: 5 minutes

Lightly grill the chili peppers, if desired. In a small bowl, toss the olives with the olive oil. Transfer to a serving plate and arrange the chili peppers on top.

## TYRI FETA

*Feta Cheese*

Feta cheese is made with sheep's or goat's milk, and it has a strong, tangy flavor.

Serves 2



### Ingredients

2-4 oz. feta cheese, sliced from a block

Olive oil to taste

Chopped fresh oregano to taste

### Preparation time: 5 minutes

Place the feta slices on a serving plate. Top with olive oil and oregano to taste.

Note: If you are concerned about salt intake, soak the feta slices in water overnight before serving.

## ELIES KALAMATAS

### *Kalamata Olives*

Picking your own olives is a wonderful activity. Because they are large, Kalamata olives are particularly easy to pick. With their lovely black color, they look nice in a variety of dishes.



Slice the Kalamata olives on one side or pierce with a fork several times. After being cut or pierced, they should be left to soak in water for eight to ten days. This water has to be changed every day or two.

Drain the olives. Add extra virgin olive oil—enough to cover the olives—and very little vinegar, as well as half a tablespoon of sea salt. Cover the olives and let them sit until the bitterness is removed.

If you are working with more than two or three pounds of olives, they have to stay longer in the water before they are drained. The procedure is exactly the same; just be sure to add a bit more salt when you add the olive oil and vinegar.

Olives are a source of vitamin E, which improves skin tone, protects against heart disease, and aids gastrointestinal functions. They also have anti-inflammatory qualities.

## ELIES ANAMIXTES

### *Mixed Olives*

This appetizer is quick to make and has a delicious flavor that's milder than a dish made with Kalamata olives.



Serves 4

### **Ingredients**

4-5 cups mixed olives  
2 tbsps. olive oil  
1 fresh lemon, thinly sliced

### **Preparation time: 5 minutes**

Place the olives in a serving bowl and add the olive oil and lemon slices. Toss well to coat all olives evenly and distribute the lemons. This dish will stay fresh for about 5-6 days.

## PASTA ELIAS

*Olive Spread*

Serves 4

### Ingredients

40 unsalted black olives, pitted

1 tbsp. capers, soaked, rinsed, and drained to remove excess salt

1/3 cup chopped fresh parsley

1 clove garlic

2 tbsps. olive oil

1 tbsp. fresh lemon juice

### Preparation time: 5 minutes

Place all ingredients in a blender. Cover and blend on the highest speed for 1 minute.

Reduce the speed to medium and continue blending for 2 minutes. Continue blending longer if necessary until smooth, adding a tsp. of water if the mixture becomes too dry.

Refrigerate and use within 10 days.

Note: This is a tasty spread for sandwiches, is delicious on crackers, and can also be used as a condiment.

## REVITHIA STO FOURNO

*Baked Chickpeas*

This is a staple for monks during wintertime. Chickpeas contain zinc and folic acid. A good source of protein, they are high in dietary fiber and low in fat. Recent studies maintain that they can also assist in lowering cholesterol.

Serves 4

### Ingredients

1 1/2 cups dried chickpeas

6 medium onions, peeled and sliced

1/3 cup olive oil

Sea salt and black pepper to taste

### Preparation time: 2 hours and 10 minutes

Soak the chickpeas in water overnight. They should be doubled in size the next day. Wash thoroughly and drain. Preheat the oven to 300 degrees.

In a small saucepan, cover the chickpeas in water. Boil on low heat for 40 minutes.

Place the chickpeas in an oven-safe pan with their cooking liquid, adding the sliced onions on top of the peas.

Bake for 30 minutes. Add the olive oil, lower the heat to 200 degrees, and cook for another hour. Taste for seasoning and add water if needed.

## REVYTHOKEFTEDS

### *Chickpea Patties*

The monks' favorite!

Serves 4-5

#### **Ingredients**

1 (15 oz.) can ready-cooked chickpeas	½ cup all-purpose flour
1 large onion, finely chopped	½ cup corn flour
2 cloves garlic, pressed	1 tbsp. lemon juice
1 cup chopped fresh parsley	1 egg, beaten
½ tsp. ground cumin	Sea salt and black pepper to taste
	Olive oil, for baking

#### **Preparation time: 1 hour 10 minutes**

Preheat the oven 350 degrees. Drain the chickpeas and put them in a blender. Blend for 2-5 minutes.

In a large bowl, thoroughly mix the chickpeas, onion, garlic, parsley, cumin, all-purpose flour, corn flour, lemon juice, egg, sea salt, and pepper. Knead the mixture until it reaches a stiff, doughy consistency.

Shape the mixture into patties that are 1½-inches in diameter and ¼-inch thick. Put on a plate, covered, or in a sealed container. Refrigerate for at least 20 minutes or until thoroughly chilled.

Place the patties in a baking pan and cover with a ½-inch layer of olive oil. Bake for 20 minutes on each side for a total of 40 minutes.

Sprinkle with additional lemon juice and serve with a mixed salad and bread as an appetizer.

# GIGANTES PLAKI

*Baked Beans in Tomato Sauce*

Beans contain vitamin B6, which helps fight stress, arthritis, various types of infection, high cholesterol, fatigue, and skin disorders. It also maintains healthy hair.

Serves 4

## Ingredients

½ lb. dried lima beans  
5 cups water  
½ cup chopped fresh parsley  
2 cloves garlic, chopped (optional)  
1 cup organic vegetable or chicken stock  
2 large, ripe tomatoes, chopped  
1 tbsp. dried oregano  
¼ cup first cold-pressed olive oil  
1 large white onion, chopped  
1 tbsp. tomato paste  
Sea salt and black pepper to taste

## Preparation time: 1 hour and 45 minutes

Soak the lima beans in water overnight.

Preheat oven to 350 degrees. Drain the beans. Add the beans to a saucepan and cover with the 5 cups of water.

Bring the beans to a boil. Reduce heat and simmer on low for 50 minutes. Drain the beans, retaining the cooking liquid.

Place the beans in an oven-safe dish with enough of the cooking liquid to just cover them. Add the parsley, garlic, stock, tomatoes, oregano, olive oil, onion, tomato paste, and salt and pepper. Bake for 45 minutes, until the beans are soft and the sauce has thickened.



# FAVA

## *Yellow Split Peas*

Yellow split peas are rich in amino acids, which help regulate mood and control hunger. It is also rich in vitamin B1, which aids metabolism and helps the nervous system. Phosphorus helps develop healthy bones, and potassium regulates blood pressure and promotes healthy arteries.

Serves 4

### **Ingredients**

1½ cups yellow split peas  
4½ cups water, divided  
3 tbsps. olive oil  
Sea salt to taste  
½ tbsp. fresh lemon juice (optional)

### **Preparation time: 30 minutes**

Boil the peas in 4 cups of water until the peas are cooked through and all the water has evaporated. This will take approximately 25 minutes. If the peas are still not well done, add more water and continue boiling.

Purée the peas in a food processor with ½ cup water and the olive oil. Return the mixture to the pot. Simmer on low heat with sea salt and lemon juice, stirring constantly with a wooden spoon to prevent sticking, until the peas reach a creamy consistency.

Remove from the heat, cover, and let the peas sit for 5 minutes before serving to cool and thicken. Serve at room temperature.

Garnish with finely chopped onions (squeezed and rinsed under cold water, if a milder taste is required) and olive oil.



# TARAMOSALATA

*Fish Roe Purée*

Tarama, or roe, is usually carp roe, but the name also extends to cod fish roe. Carp roe is normally sold in glass jars and tends to be very salty, so take care when you're preparing this dish. The roe can be purchased from Greek or international markets in larger cities. Try to avoid the dark-pink variety, as color is due to a chemical dye. The best quality has a light pink-cream color.

There are many ways to make taramosalata. This recipe uses potatoes, but it can also be made with white bread (crusts removed), sometimes with the addition of ground walnuts.

Serves 6

## Ingredients

5 medium potatoes  
2 tbsps. carp roe (tarama)  
Juice of 2 fresh lemons  
½ cup olive oil

## Preparation time: 1 hour

Steam the potatoes in the skins, to retain nutrients, for 35 minutes. Cool, peel, and slice. Cover and set aside.

Combine the tarama, lemon juice, and olive oil in a food processor, mixing well on medium speed for 2 minutes.

If the mixture gets too thick, add 1-2 tsp. of water. Add the potatoes to the food processor. Switch to low speed and blend for 2 minutes. Increase the speed to medium and blend for an additional 2 minutes.

Serve with warm pita bread, carrots, celery, or any other fresh vegetables.



## SKORDALIA

### *Garlic Dip*

Greeks usually serve this garlic dip as an accompaniment to baked or fried bakaliaros (cod or halibut), but it also goes well with many other types of fish or vegetables, such as eggplant or zucchini.

Serves 6

#### **Ingredients**

5 garlic cloves, minced

⅓ cup olive oil

1 tbsp. white wine vinegar

¼ cup water

Sea salt and black pepper to taste

4 medium potatoes, steamed and mashed



#### **Preparation time: 30 minutes**

Combine the garlic, olive oil, vinegar, water, salt, and pepper in a blender. Cover and blend for 1 minute on highest speed. If you are using a smaller blender, add the ingredients little by little.

Turn off the blender and add the mashed potatoes. Blend on medium speed until soft and smooth. If necessary, add a little additional water one teaspoon at a time.

## HTAPODAKIA

### *Baby Octopus*

Serves 2

#### **Ingredients**

1½ lbs. baby octopus

1 cup water

½ small anchovy

2 tsp. extra virgin olive oil

1 tsp. vinegar or fresh lemon juice

Black pepper to taste

½ lb. baby arugula

½ fresh carrot, peeled and thinly sliced

#### **Preparation time: 40 minutes**

Clean the octopus under cold, running water. Boil 1 cup of water, add the octopus, reduce heat to low, and simmer for 30 minutes.

Mash the anchovy with the olive oil in a small bowl until completely smooth. Add the vinegar or lemon juice and black pepper, whisking well.

Drain the octopus. Arrange the arugula leaves and carrots on a serving dish and place the octopus on top. Pour the anchovy sauce over the octopus and serve.

# HTAPODI STI SCHARA

## *Grilled Octopus*

A type of seafood that is available year-round, octopus is a good source of iron, selenium, vitamin B12, and zinc.

Serves 4

### **Ingredients**

1 medium octopus  
2 cups water  
2 tbsps. red wine vinegar  
2 tbsps. red wine vinegar or fresh lemon juice, for the sauce  
2 cloves garlic, finely chopped (optional)  
3 tbsps. olive oil  
2 tbsps. dried oregano  
Sea salt and black pepper to taste

### **Preparation time: 1 hour**

Clean the octopus and separate the tentacles from the body in order to facilitate placing it in the pan.

Boil the water and 2 tbsps. of red wine vinegar in a large pan. Add all of the octopus, reduce the heat, and simmer over very low heat for 40 minutes; this way it will be cooked in its own juices. Turn off the heat when the octopus starts to soften and acquires a deep-red color. Remove with a fork and taste for doneness.

Preheat the grill to 350 degrees. When the octopus is cool enough to handle,

rub it under running water to remove the dark outer membrane. Grill for 5 minutes on each side and place on a serving plate.

Mix 2 tbsps. of red wine vinegar (or lemon juice), garlic, olive oil, oregano, salt, and pepper in a blender or in a bowl with a fork until thick. Pour over the octopus. Sprinkle with additional oregano and serve.



# CALAMARI SALATA

*Boiled Squid*

Serves 4

## Ingredients

3 lbs. squid, cleaned  
4 cups water  
2 sticks celery, finely chopped  
2 fresh tomatoes, chopped  
½ cup olive oil  
Juice of ½ fresh lemon  
½ tbsp. dried oregano  
½ cup chopped fresh parsley  
3 cloves garlic, finely chopped (optional)  
Sea salt and black pepper to taste

## Preparation time: 45 minutes

Ask your seafood supplier to clean the squid, or prepare it in advance and refrigerate until use.

Bring 4 cups of water to a boil with sea salt to taste. Slice the squid in ½-inch rings and add to the boiling water. Reduce heat to low and simmer for 8-10 minutes, until the squid starts to soften.

Drain the squid in a colander and place it in a bowl. Add the celery, tomato, olive oil, lemon juice, oregano, parsley, garlic, sea salt, and pepper. Mix thoroughly and refrigerate in a sealed container if needed.

Stir and serve at room temperature on a bed of lettuce, over a mixed salad, or as an accompaniment to grilled asparagus.

