

HOW TO SPEAK BETTER GREEK

By Rachel Zemser, CCS

"AS FOR THE FUTURE, YOUR TASK IS NOT TO FORESEE IT, BUT TO ENABLE IT."
—Antoine de Saint-Exupery, *"The Wisdom of the Sands"* (1948)

Feta cheese salads, gyros, baklava and triangles of spanakopita are the items most people in the United States associate with Greek food. But not one of these items has anything to do with what this country is currently experiencing: a Greek revival! Traditional foods from different regions of Greece today are served at a slew of Greek restaurants, including QSR chains; evolved, contemporary "Greek fusion" restaurants, where feta cheese foam meets heirloom tomatillos; and upscale authentic places with *taverna* menus and expense-account prices.

Like all trends in the food industry, it always starts on the runway—the runway of New York City, Chicago and

Los Angeles, that is. Pricy, big-city dining is where it all begins, and then those trends slowly trickle down to casual dining, fast food and retail.

Of late, Greek food has hit mainstream foodie magazines such as *Bon Appétit*, which voted Greek food as the best cuisine of the year in 2007. Also, *San Francisco* magazine featured a Greek lamb chop dish on the cover of its Aug. 2007 issue.

Americans are hungry for something new—and Greek food is so wholesome



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The retail market for noncommodity Greek food is virtually untouched.

and fresh that it could very well be the next ethnic cuisine accepted into the various sectors of everyday American food.

AN EVOLVING CULINARY HISTORY

When looking at a map of Greece, it’s easy to see how the geography of the country—dominated by mountain ranges and coastal areas—has contributed to the various regional cuisines.

The shepherds who lived in the mountains of north-western Greece depended on livestock for food, and the backbone of their cuisine was made up of meat, milk, cheese, butter, yogurt and mountain greens like Swiss chard, spinach and amaranth, as well as mustard, radish, turnip and dandelion greens. Their nomadic lifestyle also suited easy-to-carry foods, such as savory pita pies.

Further south in the Aegean Islands, the locals had to make the most of limited resources. They prepared common ingredients such as split peas, winter squash and wild fennel in hundreds of different ways. Island cuisine is usually described as simple and uncomplicated, but seasonal and flavorful.

Up north in the Asia Minor region, a 2,000-year political history of warrior influence, great empires and Venetian trading activity, combined with the traveling privileges of wealthy Greek merchants, resulted in the most-complex Greek cuisine. The Asia Minor table includes French-influenced moussaka, Turkish-style dolmas and Persian baklava.

When Greeks emigrated to the United States, most of them stayed in New York or traveled to Chicago, but never truly set up shop in the rest of the country. As a result, Greek food never became part of core casual dining like other ethnic foods.

Up until around 10 years ago, Greek food largely meant either gyros or a hybrid Greek-Italian cuisine, with Greek salad (*horiatiki*)—the famous combination of tomatoes, cucumbers and olives—served with Italian dressing, meat kebabs (*souvlaki*), and spinach pies (*spanakopita*). These items continue in food courts, and at street fairs, pizzerias and QSR operations. According to the 2007 Flavor-Trak™ Report on

Flatbread can serve as an accessible canvas for a wide range of Greek flavors, extending the gyro concept into new—but still familiar—territory.



Greek Cuisine, Greek salad is the most-popular Greek dish in the 645 chains listed.

Today, new chains serve more-authentic fare. Daphne's Greek Café, with 50 units in California, Arizona and Colorado, successfully sells dolmas, *tzatziki* and *avgolemono* soup, along with the mainstream salads, gyros and kebabs. The casual-dining chain Mr. Greek, with 22 units in southern Ontario, is in the process of crossing the borders and setting up franchise shops in Texas, Washington and Tennessee. The chain takes its menu a bit further, serving up items like *saganaki*, souvlaki, grilled octopus and taramasalata.

The growth of these chains ties in with what several restaurant critics have referred to as a "Greek revival." Emerging "new Greek" restaurants impress patrons with exciting dishes such as dolmas drizzled with truffled wild mushroom citrus foam, grilled octopus in orange purée, and beef-cheek moussaka. Chefs have

broken this food down into its essential components and paired it with the flavors of other cultures to create an updated cuisine that's inventive, but true to its Mediterranean origins.

The retail market for noncommodity Greek food is virtually untouched, and numerous opportunities exist for food manufacturers to develop Greek-inspired products. Trader Joe's does an eggplant spread and frozen spanakopita, and Mr. Greek has a retail line of souvlaki, *tzatziki* and Mediterranean spice blends in select super-

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INNOVATIVE AND APPROACHABLE GREEK DISHES

Examining select menu items at various types of restaurants—from fine dining to casual and QSR, traditional to contemporary—provides a glimpse of the potential for more diversification of Greek cuisine in America.



Traditional Greek Cuisine

Periyali, New York—*keftedakia*: Greek meatballs stewed in tomato sauce

Greek Islands, Chicago—*briami*: mixed vegetables baked with olive oil and seasoned with oregano

Kokkari Estiatorio, San Francisco—*gigantes*: oven-baked giant lima beans with tomato sauce, olive oil and herbed feta

Contemporary Greek Cuisine

Dio Deka, Los Gatos, CA—*paithakia*: mesquite-grilled lamb chops

Kyma, Atlanta—*avgolemono*: chicken egg lemon soup with organic pearl barley

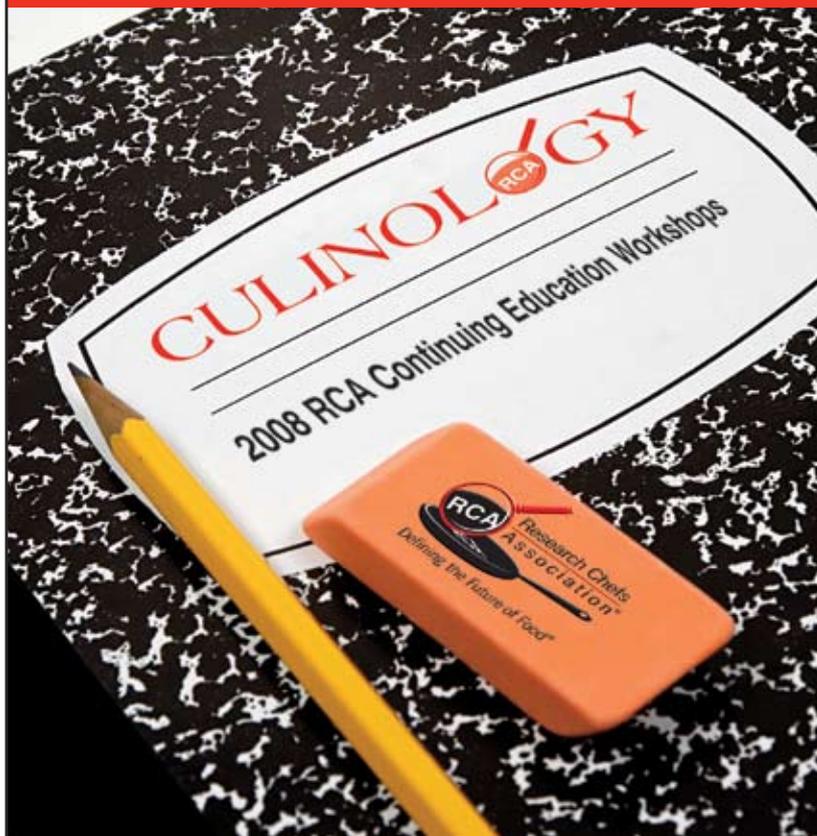
Anthos, New York—*loukoumades*: sugar-coated donuts served with honey ice-cream

Chain Greek Cuisine

Daphne (United States)—pita pockets, lemon chicken, dolmas

Mr. Greek (Canada)—souvlaki, *tzatziki*, *taramosalata*

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markets, but many empty Greek slots are waiting to be filled with frozen and refrigerated foods, seasoning blends, and shelf-stable items.

TRANSLATING GREEK

Greek food reflects a healthy and refreshing Mediterranean theme easily translated into menu items and retail products. The key to the successful development and execution of these items lies in the ability to translate the signature flavors and/or concepts of Greek cuisine into approachable versions of the original dish.

Product developers have easy access to staple Greek commodity ingredients, including feta cheese, olive oil, capers, olive spreads and spices. Suppliers can also provide foodservice clients with ready-to-use items like entrées, sauces, stuffed vegetables, flatbreads and kebabs, which allow restaurant chains to maximize repeatability across franchise units.

But first you need to get a foot in the door. One of the ongoing challenges for product and menu developers is trying to figure out a way to introduce ethnic foods into mainstream channels. Companies have several routes to effectively introduce Greek items to everyday America.

Looks ethnic, tastes American. Combining favorite flavors in new ethnic formats is a proven way to help introduce new ethnic concepts into the market. Meat on a stick is an international fast-food favorite and is slowly catching on over here. Last summer, the Krystal sandwich chain introduced its version of Greek souvlaki called “Chick N Stik’N,” breast tenderloins served on a skewer.

The mainstreaming of flatbreads isn’t entirely new, thanks to the popularity of the portable gyro, and the new \$2 “Sammie” flatbread sandwiches from Quiznos—in familiar formats like turkey, steak and chicken—take advantage of American familiarity with the

bread. Pita sandwiches appear in several formats at the Greek-influenced chain Extreme Pita, as well as in mainstream-chain items like the Chicken Fajita Pita at Jack in the Box and the handful of pitas menued at Bakers Square.

Once customers grow more com-

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Greek cheeses, perhaps accented with authentic blends of herbs, can add flavor and value to a number of foods in both retail and foodservice.



Portable with such Greek-inspired concepts, operators can introduce more-authentic Greek flavors—seasoned with oregano, paprika and lemon, perhaps served with a creamy cucumber yogurt sauce—to differentiate themselves.

The name game. Use straightforward descriptions of traditional Greek foods and change unfamiliar, sometimes difficult to pronounce Greek names to something more accessible. *Galaktoboureko* is simply “custard wrapped in phyllo pastry.” Trader Joe’s carries a *melitzanosalata* labeled as “Eggplant Spread.”

Familiar with a twist. Michael Psilakis, executive chef, Anthos Restaurant, New York, serves a fig, feta and *pastourma* sausage appetizer. He based this idea on the classic party favorite, bacon-wrapped dates.

At the QSR level, crispy seasoned pita chips, with a side of Mediterranean spinach dip, can substitute for tortilla or potato chips. Other options include breadsticks with *skordalia*, a spread made of whipped, seasoned feta cheese.

Lamb is a stranger to QSR and fast-casual menus, but substitute ground beef for the ground lamb in mousaka, and perhaps swap the eggplant with zucchini and bell peppers, all topped with béchamel and dusted with cinnamon, and you have a rather consumer-friendly “Greek lasagna.”

Shapes and colors. Kids are sometimes more open to trying out new foods than adults, and kids like to have

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fun with their food. Greek food easily lends itself to other shapes and sizes, such as fun-shaped spanakopita or colorful kebabs, which might interest the 13-and-under crowd.

Small plates. Greek *mezethes*—similar in concept to Spanish *tapas* or Chinese dim sum—play directly into the growing small-plates phenomenon. Greek *mezethes* range from simple items like olives, Greek salad and *saganaki* to more-complex *gigantes* (large lima beans often spiced with garlic, onions and tomatoes, among other ingredients), *domatokeftethes* (tomato fritters), spanakopita, dolmas and grilled lamb riblets.

FETA AND BEYOND

Feta cheese is a signature flavor in Greek cuisine. Many argue that the best fetas are the protected designation of origin (PDO) types, made from goat's milk, soaked in brine and crafted in Greece. Domestically manufactured fetas are usually made with cow's milk and are milder than their Greek counterparts.

While European rules on feta are strict, American feta does not have any standard of identity and can be customized to fit a food-service or retail application (see 21CFR 133.185 for details on domestic specifications for feta). Textural aspects, like moisture levels and acidity, of domestically manufactured feta can be adjusted to extend the cheese's shelf life and resolve moisture-migration issues in sandwiches and meal kits. Flavor aspects can be customized as well, allowing a developer to be creative with herbs and spice inclusions. Saputo Cheese USA, Inc., Lincolnshire, IL, makes a peppercorn feta and

can provide its cheese in five different forms: crumbles, wheels, blocks, loafs and pails.

While feta is popular in the United States, several other Greek cheeses might find use in a range of products. *Kefalograviera* is a hard table cheese made from sheep's milk that can be pan-fried to make *saganaki*. Other common Greek cheeses include *kefalotyri* (a very hard, salty goat's and/or sheep's milk cheese used as a table cheese, fried in oil, or as an

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Few foods compare to the inherent convenience of grilled meat on a stick.

Greek dishes can involve complex flavors and elaborate preparation techniques that require accurate replication when entering processing scenarios.

ingredient) and *kasseri* (a medium-hard goat's and/or sheep's milk cheese, similar to Cheddar, used as a table cheese and in sandwiches).

TECHNICAL CHALLENGES

Greek dishes can involve complex flavors and elaborate preparation techniques that require accurate replication when entering processing scenarios. Flavors like brine, dill, cinnamon and oregano can lose their strength or character while going through extreme processing conditions involving high heat and freezing.

One method of bringing back those lost flavors is via natural and artificial flavors. For example, adding olive and "cooked eggplant" flavors to a Greek marinara sauce can help keep flavors bold and authentic. Oleoresins—such as a dill oleoresin for frozen spanakopita filling—allow a product to have a consistent, repeatable flavor.

Many products require shelf-stable or frozen

CLASSIC GREEK CUISINE

Mountain Range

Spanakopita—savory pie of phyllo dough filled with spinach, feta cheese, onions, eggs and dill

Saganaki—pan-fried cheese

Tyropita—cheese-filled, triangle-shaped phyllo dough

Horiatiki—Greek salad with feta cheese, tomatoes, green peppers and red onion

Aegean Islands

Dakos—barley rusk salad: tomato, feta cheese, olive oil and oregano served on top of a barley rusk

Fava—yellow split-pea purée seasoned with oregano and red-wine vinegar eaten as is, spread on bread or thinned into soup

Domatokeftethes—tomato fritters: deep-fried tomato, onion, cheese and herbs like basil or mint

Asia Minor

Moussaka—layered and baked casserole of ground lamb, sliced eggplant, tomatoes and béchamel

Taramosalata—purée of cured carp, potatoes, olive oil and lemon (a dip for bread or raw vegetables)

Tzatziki—yogurt, cucumber and dill sauce (served with bread, or as a sauce for souvlaki or gyros)

Dolmas—grape leaves stuffed with rice and seasoned with dill

Skordalia—garlic and almond potato purée (often served with fried salt cod or fried vegetables)

Melitzanosalata—eggplant spread (served with pita wedges or bread and fresh vegetables)

Other Classic Dishes

Glyka tou koutaliou—"sweets of the spoon" (fruit preserves served as is, or sometimes spooned over yogurt or ice cream)

Avgolemono—egg-thickened lemon soup or sauce (served with vegetables and stuffed cabbage)

Souvlaki—skewered meats and vegetables

Galaktoboureko—pie of crispy, flaky phyllo pastry, stuffed with custard and drizzled with syrup

distribution and sale in order to remain competitive in retail settings, or to permit easier storage in foodservice, where refrigerated space is often at a premium. Shelf-stable creamy, yogurt-based sauces like *tzatziki* are possible via cold-fill manufacturing methods, similar to the process for many shelf-stable salad dressings, and adding spoilage-inhibiting preservatives, along with cucumber, lemon and yogurt flavors. Vegetable-based purées such as the eggplant dip, *melitzanosalata*, can be acidified to a pH of less than 4.6 using red-wine vinegar. Oil-packed, low-pH, shelf-stable blends of feta cheese, red peppers, sun-dried tomatoes, olives and herbs are on the market. Creamy sauces like béchamel come into play in Greek casseroles like mousaka and *pastitsio* (a dish similar to lasagna, often with layers of pasta, *kefalotyri* cheese and spiced, browned meat, all covered with the sauce). By using a modified food starch instead of flour, the product can withstand the freeze/thaw cycle without breaking.

SAILING THE NEW GREEK SEAS

Greek food provides a welcome break from overexposed Mediterranean cuisines. This untapped category can provide product developers with numerous opportunities to create unique, exciting products.

As we venture into this largely uncharted territory, questions about how authentic we can go without losing a profitable cus-

tomers audience will inevitably arise. We will discover, as we move forward, what types of menu and retail items can work as authentic, and which require adaptation in order to fit into current market expectations.

But it will take more than just great flavor for these products to maintain staying power; they're going to have to incorporate other traits that go beyond authenticity, including portability, affordability, creativity, freshness and fun.

If restaurants and manufacturers keep an eye on what consumer trends will result in successful products, it won't be much longer before we can buy a "make your own dolmas" kit in the local supermarket, or have sun-dried-tomato fritters as a seasonal QSR appetizer.

Rachel Zemser, CCS, is manager of creative development for Kagome, Inc., Foster City, CA, and a member of the Research Chefs Association. She would like to thank the following individuals for their assistance during the creation of this article: Teresa Landis, National Food Laboratories, Dublin, CA; Sean McGrath, FoodMatch, Inc., Chicago; John Matchuk, Grecian Delight, Chicago; and Diane Kochilas, editor-in-chief, *Greek Gourmet Traveler*, New York.

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