

Greek food is a celebration in every dish

By JORGE PORRAS, FOOD WRITER

Updated 06:54 p.m., Tuesday, October 4, 2011

If you think of feta cheese, pita bread and hummus when you think of Greek food, you're just scratching the surface of a rich culture.

Visitors to the 45th Original Greek Festival at [Annunciation Greek Orthodox Cathedral](#) will find much more.

While many Greek dishes start simply - beginning with a handful of chopped onions and some olive oil in a pan - the flavors and variety are anything but. Ancient Mediterranean trade routes brought travelers and merchants with new foods and spices, all of which contributed to the country's unique people and flavor.

The country's cuisine is essentially a giant menu of comfort food ranging from succulent lamb strips and vegetables in a gyro to

the endless layers of buttery phyllo dough in a piece of baklava, both of which you will find at the festival.

The principals for being Greek are fairly simple: have pride in all that you do, never cut corners when it comes to food and always be ready to feed someone, say festival volunteers.

People like [Maria Christie](#), who spent hours creating pans of baklava for the festival, can attest that being Greek is intertwined with the country's food.

"It's the way we keep our culture and tradition alive," Christie says. "We can connect with our culture through food."

Greek Americans like [Demetri Dale](#) were raised on ideals such as always bringing food with him when invited to a dinner party - even if it already looks like a buffet. The gesture is meant to show respect and love for family and community.

"When there is Greek food, there are always family and friends around. And when there are family and friends around, there is always Greek food," Dale says.

Their welcoming nature means there's always an extra seat at the table and there is no such thing as a single-serving recipe.

Maybe it is something programmed in our DNA to come together when there is food; from when we lived in caves and gathered around a fire to now when we live in cities and sit down at dinner tables, it has been something inside us always. Cultures around the world, like Greece, have turned this subconscious desire



into a celebration with each dish.

BAKLAVA

SYRUP

4 cups sugar

2 cups water

½ lemon, sliced

1 stick cinnamon

¼ cup honey

FILLING

4 cups pecans or walnuts, ground

2 cups almonds, ground

1/8 teaspoon ground cloves

½ teaspoon ground cinnamon

1½ pounds butter, melted

1½ pounds phyllo pastry

Whole cloves (optional)

Syrup

FOR THE SYRUP

Preheat oven to 350 degrees.

Combine sugar, water and lemon slices; bring to a boil. Add cinnamon stick and simmer for about 15-20 minutes. Add honey and heat only until blended. Remove lemon slices and set aside to cool to lukewarm.

FOR THE FILLING

In a large bowl, combine nuts, ground cloves and cinnamon.

Brush bottom and sides of 17-inch-by-11-inch pan with melted butter.

Layer pan with 10 sheets of phyllo, brushing each with butter.

Sprinkle the stack of phyllo with a layer of nut mixture, then top with 1 phyllo sheet brushed with butter. Repeat until all of the nut mixture is used.

Top with 10 sheets of phyllo, brushing each individual sheet generously with melted butter.

Refrigerate for 30 minutes before scoring.

Using a sharp knife, cut the baklava into rows across the length and width, creating small squares. Then cut each small square diagonally to create triangles. Do not cut pastry through to the bottom; score only about three-fourths of the way through.

If desired, you may insert 1 whole clove in the middle of each piece to keep the sheets of phyllo intact and add flavor.

Bake for about 1 hour until puffy in center and light golden brown. Cool for 15 minutes.

Pour syrup slowly in thin stream over the entire surface of the baklava.

Allow to sit for 1 hour, then cut the pastry through to the bottom. Leave in pan for several hours or overnight before serving.

Makes 70 servings

GREEK FESTIVAL SPINACH PUFFS

1 small white onion, finely chopped

2 tablespoons vegetable oil

1/4 cup parsley, chopped

2 tablespoons fresh dill, finely chopped or 1 teaspoon of dry dill

3 green onions, finely chopped

1/2 teaspoon salt

Pepper to taste

1 pound fresh spinach, chopped and drained of water, or 2 (10-ounce) packages of frozen chopped spinach, thawed

5 ounces evaporated milk

1 pound feta cheese, crumbled (or 1/2 pound cottage cheese and 1/2 pound feta cheese)

3 eggs, beaten

1 pound phyllo pastry

1 pound butter, clarified

Preheat oven to 350 degrees.

Saute white onion in oil until soft and transparent.

Add parsley, dill, green onions and seasonings and cook for five minutes.

Add spinach and cook until all moisture is absorbed, then add evaporated milk and allow to cool.

Crumble feta cheese into well beaten eggs; add to the spinach mixture until completely incorporated.

Unfold phyllo and cut lengthwise into 3 even strips.

Brush each strip of phyllo lightly with butter; add 1 tablespoon of spinach mix to one end of each strip. Slightly fold up the edges lengthwise, then roll up the phyllo in a sleeping bag fashion.

Place spinach puffs on an ungreased cookie sheet. Brush tops with butter and bake about 20 minutes or until golden brown. Serve warm.

NOTE: Spinach puffs can be frozen. To bake them, place frozen pieces into preheated 400-degree oven and bake for 24 minutes or until golden brown.
