

September 9, 2007

FOOD: THE WAY WE EAT

## Olympic Dinners

By SARA DICKERMAN

A few years ago, I helped to open a Greek-inspired restaurant in my Seattle neighborhood. I'm not Greek, but somehow the big, bright flavors seemed instinctive. One of my greatest discoveries was the pleasure of working with Greek cheeses. Even though I still have a hard time pronouncing them, they remain a staple of my kitchen, both for traditional Hellenic dishes and more free-form riffing.

Greeks, it turns out, are great consumers of cheese. "Last I heard, Greeks eat more cheese than anyone else in the E.U.," says Diane Kochilas, the author of "Mediterranean Grilling." Take that, France! While the varieties we get in the States aren't, for the most part, best served on a cheese plate, they do splendidly when roasted, grilled or combined with other foods. She says that at Pylos, the Manhattan restaurant for which she serves as consulting chef, "we work hard to keep cheese from appearing in every dish."

The chef Michael Psilakas, who serves updated Greek cuisine in his Manhattan restaurants Anthos and Kefi, isn't shy with them either. "What Greek cheeses do, since they're not so expensive, is afford you the ability to play around with them," he says. Play he does, topping a pasta dish with braised rabbit and snails and wedges of delicate manouri or pairing grilled halloumi with a strapping salad of roasted red peppers, anchovies and herbs.

Mostly made from sheep's and goat's milk, Greek cheeses come in an astounding range of textures and flavors. There is the workhorse feta — which is often a blend of sheep's and goat's milk — bright, sharp and, if you're working with a good brand like Dodonis or Mt. Vikos, not too salty. (Beginning this fall, feta will legally have to be made in [Greece](#) in order to keep the name.) There is the strange and lovely halloumi, which is actually from Cyprus but eaten widely in Greece; with its squeaky texture and high melting point, it maintains its bounce even if you grill it or sauté it to a golden crust. My favorite Greek cheese is the creamy, sheepy manouri: delicately scented and almost spreadable, it's like a softer, pudgier feta. There are also firm, sharp offerings, like kasseri, kefalograviera and graviera, which are just right for a pecorinolike kick in a savory pie or fried up into tzaganaki.

A number of Greek cheeses are not exported to the United States, including soft, raw-milk cheeses like the kopanisti of the Cyclades islands, which, according to Kochilas, are naturally fermented in clay jugs, animal skins or baskets. Considering the popularity of Greek yogurt in recent years, savvy American cheesemakers might want to look into F.D.A.-approved baskets. Until then, I'll work on my pronunciation of what's in my fridge.

## ***Manouri*, Eggplant and Orzo Salad**

Kosher salt

2 cups dried orzo

6 tablespoons extra-virgin olive oil, or as needed

3 cups 1/2-inch-diced eggplant (from a 1-pound eggplant)

1/4 cup canola oil

3 tablespoons flour

Freshly ground black pepper

1 tablespoon, plus 1 teaspoon, fresh lemon juice, or as needed

1/4 cup Kalamata olives, pitted and sliced lengthwise into 1/4-inch slivers

3/4 cup chopped roasted red peppers (jarred or homemade)

1 tablespoon finely chopped mint

1 tablespoon finely chopped dill

2 tablespoons roughly chopped basil

4 ounces *manouri*, cut into 1/2-inch cubes (about 3/4 cup).

1. Bring a large pot of salted water to a boil and cook the orzo according to the package directions. Drain, toss with 1 tablespoon of the olive oil and spread on a baking sheet. Let cool in the refrigerator.
2. Toss the eggplant with 1 1/2 teaspoons salt and place in a colander set over a bowl or in a sink. Put several bowls or plates on top of the eggplant and let drain for at least 30 minutes.
3. Line a baking sheet with paper towels and set aside. In a heavy 10-inch skillet, heat 4 tablespoons of the olive oil and the canola oil over medium heat. Squeeze the excess liquid from the eggplant, blot with paper towels and toss in a bowl with the flour. In two batches, fry the eggplant until the cubes are crisp and golden brown. Using a slotted spoon, transfer to the prepared baking sheet. (Add a little extra oil to the pan for the second batch, as needed.)
4. In a large bowl, toss the orzo with 1 teaspoon salt, 1/4 teaspoon pepper, the lemon juice and the remaining tablespoon of olive oil. Fold in the olives, peppers, mint, dill, basil and *manouri*. Taste and adjust for seasoning with additional salt, pepper, lemon juice or olive oil. Just before serving, toss in the fried eggplant.

*Serves 6 to 8. Adapted from a recipe created by Sara Dickerman for Vios Café in Seattle.*

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### **Roasted Feta With Thyme Honey**

1 8-ounce slab Greek feta, blotted dry

2 tablespoons extra-virgin olive oil

1 tablespoon Greek thyme honey, or other honey

Freshly ground black pepper

Greek-style pita bread, toasted and cut into wedges

Heirloom tomatoes, roasted beets, nuts or pickled vegetables (optional).

1. Preheat the oven to 400 degrees. Select a small oven-to-table earthenware dish or a small ovenproof sauté pan lined with aluminum foil to help transfer the cheese to a plate after roasting. Place the feta in the dish and cover with the olive oil. Bake until the cheese is soft and springy to the touch but not melted, about 8 minutes.

2. Preheat the broiler. Heat the honey in the microwave or over a pan of simmering water until it is fluid enough to be spread with a pastry brush and then paint the surface of the feta with it. Broil until the top of the cheese browns and just starts to bubble. Season to taste with black pepper. Serve immediately with pita wedges and, if desired, sliced heirloom tomatoes, roasted beets, nuts or pickled vegetables. *Serves 4 to 6. Adapted from Sara Dickerman.*

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### **Grilled *Halloumi* and Minted Zucchini Sandwiches**

2 zucchini (about 8 ounces each), ends removed and cut lengthwise into 1/4-inch slices

2 tablespoons extra-virgin olive oil

2 teaspoons fresh lemon juice

1 teaspoon kosher salt

8 ounces *halloumi*, sliced across the short side into 1/4-inch slices

1 small red onion

1 small garlic clove, minced

1 tablespoon chopped mint leaves

1 wide baguette.

1. Preheat a grill to medium-high and clean and oil the grate. (Or preheat a grill pan over medium-high heat.)
2. Marinate the zucchini in 1 tablespoon of the olive oil, the lemon juice and 1/2 teaspoon salt. Set aside for at least 30 minutes. In a separate dish, brush the sliced *halloumi* with 1 teaspoon of the olive oil. Peel the onion and cut it into 1/2-inch wedges through the core to hold each wedge together. Marinate the onion in 1 teaspoon olive oil and the remaining 1/2 teaspoon salt.
3. Grill the zucchini until it has dark grill marks and is tender. Toss immediately in a bowl with the garlic and mint; then set aside. Grill the onion wedges, turning once, until they are slightly charred on the edges and a bit softened but not totally limp. Grill the *halloumi* until softened and marked by the grill.
4. Slice the baguette lengthwise, leaving one side slightly attached. Brush with the remaining teaspoon of the olive oil. Cut crosswise into four even segments. Distribute the zucchini, *halloumi* and onions evenly among the sandwiches. *Serves 4. Adapted from Sara Dickerman.*

### **Thyme and Feta Lamb**

2 tablespoons lemon juice

2 tablespoons olive oil

2 cloves garlic, smashed

2 tablespoons fresh thyme leaves, finely chopped

Salt and freshly ground black pepper

12 small lamb chops (2 to 2 1/2 pounds total)

4 ounces feta cheese, preferably Greek or French

2 tablespoons chopped mint leaves

Extra-virgin olive oil, to drizzle.

1. In a wide, shallow dish, mix the lemon juice, olive oil, garlic, 1 tablespoon thyme, 1 teaspoon salt and 1/2 teaspoon pepper. Add the lamb chops and turn until well coated. Cover and refrigerate for at least 1 hour.
2. Preheat a grill to high. Crumble the feta into a small bowl and add the mint and remaining tablespoon of

thyme.

3. Grill the lamb, turning once, until both sides are golden and the fat is toasted and bubbling, about 4 minutes per side. Transfer to warm plates. Sprinkle the herbed feta over the lamb, then drizzle each plate with extra-virgin olive oil. Serve immediately. *Serves 4. Adapted from "The Kitchen Diaries" by Nigel Slater.*

### ***Halloumi Tzaganaki***

1 large (8-ounce) Vidalia onion

2 tablespoons, plus 2 teaspoons, extra-virgin olive oil, or as needed

12 anchovy fillets in oil, drained

1/2 cup finely julienned roasted red peppers

1/2 cup pitted Kalamata olives

16 capers

1/4 cup loosely packed parsley leaves

1/4 cup loosely packed young dill fronds (if older and coarse, roughly chop)

1/4 cup loosely packed mint leaves

1 1/2 teaspoons freshly squeezed lemon juice, or as needed

Kosher salt and freshly ground black pepper

8 ounces halloumi cheese, cut crosswise into 1/4-inch-thick slices

Rustic bread, for serving.

1. Preheat a grill or broiler to high. Cut the onion crosswise into 1/2-inch slices, keeping the rings intact. Lay the slices in one layer on a baking sheet and drizzle with 1 tablespoon of the olive oil. Grill or broil, flipping once, until browned and crispy on the edges, about 5 minutes per side. Cool to room temperature.

2. In a medium mixing bowl, combine the onions, anchovies, red peppers, olives, capers, parsley, dill and mint. Dress with the lemon juice, 2 teaspoons olive oil, 1/2 teaspoon salt and 1/4 teaspoon pepper, adjusting the amounts as needed to taste.

3. Place a 10-inch skillet over medium-high heat. Add 1 tablespoon olive oil. When hot, sear the halloumi

until browned on both sides. Transfer to a platter and top with salad and serve with bread. *Serves 4 to 6 as meze. Adapted from Michael Psilakas, the chef at Kefi and Anthos in Manhattan. This dish is from Kefi.*

### **Mixed-Greens Pie With Cornmeal Crust**

1/3 cup, plus 3 tablespoons, extra-virgin olive oil

2 large leeks, white and light green parts only, cut into 1/8-inch slices (about 2 cups)

1 pound mixed dark greens (chard, lacinato kale, spinach), washed, stems removed and cut into broad ribbons

2 teaspoons kosher salt

4 scallions, white and light green parts only, thinly sliced

2 tablespoons finely chopped dill

3 tablespoons roughly chopped flat-leaf parsley

2 ounces *kefalograviera*, *kefaloteri* or *kasseri* cheese, grated (about a heaping 1/2 cup)

1/2 cup ricotta cheese

1/2 cup manouri or feta cheese

2 eggs, lightly beaten

1 1/4 cup whole milk

1 cup cornmeal

All-purpose flour, as needed

Greek yogurt, for serving.

NOTE: *Kefalograviera* is available at Titan Foods, (718) 626-7771; [titanfood.com](http://titanfood.com). *Kasseri* is available at Murray's Cheese, (212) 243-3289; [murrayscheese.com](http://murrayscheese.com).

1. Preheat the oven to 375 degrees. Grease a 10-inch straight-sided skillet or baking pan with 2 tablespoons of the olive oil. In a deep-sided sauté pan at least 12 inches wide, heat 1/3 cup olive oil over medium heat. Add the leeks and cook, stirring occasionally, until they have softened but not colored, about 10 minutes. Add as many of the greens as can fit in the pot, along with 1 teaspoon salt. Stir and cover until the greens have wilted,

2 to 3 minutes. Add the remaining greens, stir, and cover until they have wilted, another 2 to 3 minutes. Remove from the heat and stir in the scallions, dill and parsley. Transfer the mixture to a colander set over a bowl and let cool to room temperature.

2. Meanwhile, in a large bowl, mix the *kefalograviera*, ricotta and *manouri*. Squeeze excess liquid from the cooled greens and add them to the cheeses. Season to taste with salt and pepper. Stir in the eggs and set aside.

3. In a small saucepan, heat the milk over medium heat until it starts to bubble. Whisk in the cornmeal and 1 teaspoon salt. Continue stirring as the mixture thickens into an almost unstirring paste. Remove from the heat. With lightly floured fingers, press half of the mixture into a thin layer across the bottom of the prepared pan. Top with the greens and cheese filling, spreading each evenly to the edges. Stir about 1/2 cup water into the remaining cornmeal to make a milkshake-thick batter (there will be a few lumps). Pour the thinned batter across the filling (some greens will poke through). Drizzle the remaining tablespoon of olive oil across the top of the pie. Bake until firm and golden brown around the edges, about 1 hour.

4. Serve warm or at room temperature, with Greek yogurt on the side. *Serves 6. Adapted from "The Glorious Foods of Greece" by Diane Kochilas.*

*Sara Dickerman is the food editor of Seattle Magazine and a frequent contributor to Slate, Chow and Offsprung.*

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