

Stunning Surprises from Greece!

There is an irresistible Mediterranean country, rich in heritage, rife with exotic possibilities, about which American foodies have become complacent--thinking they know it all, have tasted it all, have drunk it all, even have visited it all. That country is Greece--which, as I discovered on two thrilling visits within the last six months, holds a plethora of surprises for the foodie, the wine-lover, and the traveler. Greece will rock you. When you start to really delve into this warm and multi-layered place, you begin to realize: what we've been poured as Greek wine, what we've been fed as Greek food, and what we've been pitched as Greek travel destinations, only scratches the surface of the rich, rich hedonistic possibilities perched on the Aegean Sea. The Real Greece, without question, produces some of the world's most exciting local wines, features some of the world's most heart-thumping travel destinations, and, of course, is responsible for some of the world's most delectable eats.

Here are my major Greek discoveries of 2006--the things you need to know now!--broken into the three categories that interest us the most:

GREEK WINE

One could argue that Greece's gastronomic image problems in the U.S. begin with the grape. Yes, most Americans know that Greece was one of the first wine-producing nations...even that the Greeks invented Dionysos, the god of wine. But the years (that is, the aeons) have not treated Greece's reputation well. Ask most American wine-drinkers today what kind of wine Greece produces, and the answer will be: Retsina, the ancient wine flavored with pine resin. Now, I happen to be a fan of Retsina--because I think it goes splendidly with Greek food. But I'm a fan of Spanish sherry, as well--which doesn't mean I confine myself to sherry when I think

about Spanish dining! Greece, like Spain, is producing waves of wine outside the clichés--fabulous wine, local-tasting wine, great wine for food. The only problem is that the Spaniards are getting all the press--while non-Greek wine drinkers rarely talk about Greek wine outside the Retsina box.

On my recent visits, I toured vineyards all over Greece--from the Macedonian and Thracian lands in the north, to the fields of Attica around Athens, to the gorgeous valleys of the Peloponnese, to the bizarrely windy turf of Santorini. I was dazzled. Oh, of course, some of the modern Greek winemakers have caught the international bug, and just have to get those oak-aged Chardonnays, those tannic Cabernets, out of their systems. Grudgingly, I have to admit that they're making these kinds of wines extremely well. But the real excitement, to me, is with the hundreds of winemakers who are re-discovering native Greek varieties, and vinifying them in such a way so that they taste like they come from somewhere... namely, Greece.

You will soon be hearing about many of these native varieties (see my blissed-out notes on p.). One red-wine variety has already captured the imagination of some wine lovers around the world: it is called Agiorgitiko (pronounced ah-your-YEE-tee-ko), and its home is in the beautiful valleys of the Peloponnese, mostly around Nemea. Why has it gotten on to the international agenda? Because it offers what the international types look for: rich color, fairly high alcohol, considerable tannin, and the ability to blend well with new oak. If you had to compare Agiorgitiko to something non-Greek, you might call it the Cabernet of Greece.

But I've got a big surprise for you: I am not particularly smitten by Agiorgitiko. I am much more smitten--I mean really smitten, like hyper-smitten, like smitted-out--by a much less well-known grape, one that hasn't yet begun to make international inroads.

The grape, whose home is Macedonia, in the north, is called Xinomavro (and if you want to sound really Greek, make sure to say zee-NO-mah-vro). Jump on this now, before the prices rise!!!

Why my excitement? For starters, if one had to pick a non-Greek image for wines made from Xinomavro--I'd say it'd be a toss-up between red Burgundy and Barolo, two of my favorite wines in the world!

Now, if you know the wines of the world, you're probably wondering: how can a wine be compared to both Burgundy and Barolo, since those two classic reds can be so different from each other?

Let's start at the beginning. Xinomavro is a difficult-to-grow red grape variety that can produce wines of widely varying styles--depending on the specific Xinomavro clone (there are three main ones), altitude of the vineyards, etc. Its name means "the black, acidic one"--and not even that is really correct. Acidic, yes--with a wonderful kind of fresh-fruit acidity that keeps these wines really, really nimble and graceful. But "black," though it may describe the blue-black skin, has nothing whatsoever to do with the wine that Xinomavro produces; classic Xinomavro is a light-colored, light-bodied red, with a tendency to shade towards brown after not too much time in bottle--like red Burgundy and Barolo (made, respectively, from Pinot Noir and Nebbiolo).

But--and here's the really important thing--Xinomavro, like red Burgundy and Barolo, yields an exquisitely cryptic nose, one that can't be summed up in a simple statement such as "Cabernet smells herbaceous." Xinomavro, just like red Burgundy and Barolo, gives you a whiff of something exotic, a soupçon of sexiness...and then scurries back to its aroma hole, frustrating your attempts to get specific.

Here's my attempt. When Xinomavro is young, like most red wines, it shows fruit--but there's something refined about this fruit, more like strawberries or raspberries than like plum or currants. As Xinomavro ages, it lurches into tomato territory--what I consider to be its most characteristic aroma and flavor! And not just any tomatoes. Xinomavro tomato is ripe tomato, sitting-in-the-sun tomato, tomato jam even. It is not tomato vine, which has a green quality--an image I use for the Picual olive oils of southern Spain, but not for Xinomavro. As Xinomavro ages--and good ones will go a few decades--it morphs into something ineffably poignant, with hints of earth, white truffle, cedar (like a cigar box), even tobacco. An old Xinomavro has as distinguished a line-up of complex flavors as many an old Burgundy or Barolo.

Another advantage to aging Xinomavro-based wine is its tendency to fatten and soften with the years. But drinkers of young Xinomavro beware--this is a tannic grape variety when young, much more like Barolo in youth than red Burgundy in youth. Of course, it has its own quirks: the tannin,

though it can be abundant, has a soft, furry quality, which creates not pain, but an adult kind of astringency that I like very much. Young Xinomavro is fantastic with most red-wine foods, superlative with grill food; old Xinomavro is one of the wine world's great thrills, the kind of wine you serve with simple food to protect the wine's subtle complexity.

And there's one more huge Xinomavro plus--bottles of it, usually very reasonably priced, rarely disappoint! High-priced red Burgundies and Barolos both have reputations for letting their purchasers down, for not living up to the hype. When it comes to Xinomavro...there is no hype! What you'll find, over and over again, is elegant, sound, well-made wine, with real Xinomavro character, that goes particularly well with food. Sometimes, you'll hit the jackpot and find truly great wine.

All of that being said--what do you look for in the wine shop if you want to buy Xinomavro? And this is where it gets really confusing.

Here's the good news: My favorite Xinomavro of all, the classic Xinomavro wine, comes from one particular area in Macedonia, which, among Greek wine-lovers, is a famous place: it is the region of Naoussa, centered on the lovely town of Naoussa. In 1968, the Greek government began creating a national labeling system that was intended to mirror the appellation system the French had created in the 1930s. Unfortunately, the Greek system is hopelessly complicated, filled with loopholes and exceptions. But if you know just one of the levels that the Greek government created, you'll be fine: the OPAP, roughly the initials for *oeni onomassias proelefseos anoteris poiotitas*, functionally the Greek equivalent of appellation d'origine contrôlée in France. Macedonia has four OPAPs, and, phew, Naoussa is one of them. And...to be labeled "Naoussa"...a red wine has to be made from 100% Xinomavro. Xinomavro/Naoussa should be a knee-jerk connection for wine-lovers, like Pinot Noir/Burgundy, or Nebbiolo/Piedmont (home of Barolo).

But... always those buts... there are different sub-regions within Naoussa... with seven of these sub-regions usually getting singled out as the best places to grow Xinomavro for Naoussa. There is hot debate right now as to whether or not winemakers should start including these names on the labels--places such as the very high-altitude Yianakohori, down to the lower-altitude Ramnista. Personally, I haven't yet seen clear enough sub-regional differences to worry about this--so I'm going to advise that you, for

now, shouldn't worry about it either.

What we do need to worry about is the fact that Naoussa producers have varying ideas of what a Xinomavro wine from Naoussa should taste like. Konstantinos Lazarakis, in his excellent, up-to-date book *The Wines of Greece* (Mitchell Beazley Classic Wine Library, 2005)--in which he says "Naoussa is one of the great Greek wines, offering an amazing depth, breathtaking complexity, and possibly the longest ageing potential of any dry Greek wine"--identifies four different style of Naoussa Xinomavro being vinified today, ranging from light and traditional, to "dense, extracted, tannic and oaky." Feh. I mourn the emergence of the fourth style, jerry-rigged for wine-writer committees. And there's no way of telling, from the label alone, if the winemaker has gotten Gold Medal Religion. So, for now, you're going to just have to depend on me. Here are 6 Naoussas that I recently selected out of dozens, Naoussas that I like a great deal. And their notes will give you a good idea of which stylistic territory we're in. Please note that it may be the case, since these wines are imported in small quantities, that not all of the vintages I tasted are still available in U.S. wine shops. But the following notes, at least, will clue you in to each winery's aesthetic. The wines are listed in descending order of wow-ness:

XINOMAVROS WITH THE NAOUSSA OPAP

2001 Kir-Yianni Ramnista Naoussa . The extraordinary Kir-Yianni winery, one of the best in Greece, was founded in the 1990s by Yiannis Boutaris--who had achieved great fame over the years as the owner of Boutari, one of Greece's hugest, most commercial wineries. He got out--and opened instead this small, boutique-y winery in the hills of Naoussa, dedicated to artisanal winemaking. Yiannis and his U.C. Davis-trained son Mihalis have made a huge success out of the venture, producing--among other things--some of the best Xinomavro in Greece. What I like about this winery the most is that they manage to "do" new, with wines that have a kind of modern freshness about them--but the informing idiom of the wines is definitely "old." This five-year-old Naoussa, from grapes grown in Ramnista, is a very pretty medium-dark ruby, with some lightening at the edge. Absolutely drop-dead gorgeous nose of white truffle, red and yellow fruits, sun-dried tomatoes, and something like vanilla/brown sugar. Fairly rich for a Naoussa (that's the "new" part), but still with excellent grip and acidity. Now turning to silky velvet with age--but should go on beautifully

for another decade or so. Of the more recent vintages, I prefer the 2005 (tasted at the winery) to the 2004.

1999 Tsantali Naoussa Epilegmenos Reserve. Don't fret over the missing "s" in Naoussa; some wineries spell it that way in English. And don't fret over the long Greek e-word, which simply means "reserve." This wine is a thoroughbred, a great effort from a large northern winery, Tsantali, that sometimes gets overlooked by Greek wine snobs because of its size. I visited them in March...and generally love what they do! This dark-garnet wine, with ruby hints at the edges, combines young, currant-like fruit in its intriguing nose with raspberry jam, minerality, a little smokiness, and a hint of green leafiness. Frankly, despite its age, there's not too much evidence yet of aging! Rich and round palate, that still has the tartness and structure characteristic of young Xinomavro. Hints of spice in the long finish. Gorgeous wine! I'm also very fond of Tsantali's 1997 Naoussa Epilegmenos, which has the classic tomato character.

2003 Katogi & Strofilia Naoussa . This ground-breaking winery, situated not in Macedonia, but further down the peninsula, in Thessaly, has been responsible over the years for many Greek experiments with non-Greek grape varieties. But this baby is Naoussa Xinomavro all the way. Lightish ruby-garnet with touches of brown. Textbook Xinomavro nose: dried tomatoes, incipient white truffle, along with something candy-like. Textbook palate, as well: light-to-medium, but with a surprising velvet, good fruit sweetness, fresh fruit acidity, and some finishing astringency. Great grill wine.

2003 Chrisohoou Naoussa . This old Naoussa estate, from the 1940s, is now experimenting with lots of Xinomavro blends. But when you hit into their straight Naoussa, you get the real, light, old-fashioned stuff. The bottle I recently tasted, a healthy, light-ish ruby in color, had a bizarre, quirky nose with which I totally fell in love: the sauna smell of hot, dry wood is the best descriptor, along with peat, licorice, boiled beets, and something like incense. Medium-light body, but mouth-filling at the same time. A surprising amount of tannic payload in the finish.

1999 Hatzimichalis Naoussa . It's ironic that Hatzimichalis slipped onto this list--because, since 1962, Hatzimichalis, located in central Greece, has been the Grecian home of French grape varieties, having introduced to the Greek public (or unleashed on the Greek public) Greek-grown Cabernet, Merlot and Chardonnay. So it was with some surprise that I tasted this ultra-traditional Xinomavro from Naoussa. Light in color (pale-ish ruby), light in body, very dry--but the aging has reduced its tannin to a pleasant scratch. Very evocative mossy, earthy, white-truffle kind of nose, with a little dried-fruit jam mixed in. Gorgeous balance, with very refreshing acidity. Not a deep wine, but with character to spare.

2003 Domaine Karydas Naoussa. Winemaker Petros Karydas has a big reputation in Naoussa, and his straight Naoussa wines, according to wine writer and Master of Wine Konstantinos Lazarakis, are, on release, "at a very complex stage of development." I can see that in this fairly young, lightish-ruby wine, with touches of brown, that sports a pretty fruit-tomato-white truffle nose. The medium-bodied palate has even more in store--dried fruits and tobacco. Very fine mid-price Naoussa.

(STEVE: TAKE BIG SPACE HERE, PLEASE.)

Well, that's the report from Naoussa, which happens to be in the Imathia prefecture of Macedonia (Macedonia has 13 prefectures, sort of like counties). But this tasting wasn't over--nor was the education needed to understand my favorite Greek red grape, Xinomavro. For in addition to all the complications surrounding Xinomavro from Naoussa--there are many other Xinomavro possibilities in northern Greece aside from Naoussa, even aside from Macedonia, in other regions and prefectures! I decided to segregate all of the non-Naoussa Xinomavros, and consider them in a separate tasting.

Now, for starters, just because a Xinomavro doesn't carry an OPAP Naoussa designation... doesn't mean it's not from Naoussa! The OPAP, like

the French AOC, carries certain winemaking requirements for the Naoussa designation--and some winemakers would rather flout the rules, making what they consider to be better wine, then get the official "Naoussa" name on the label. One of the most common ways to flout the rules is to blend Xinomavro with other grapes--because the government requires that Naoussa be 100% Xinomavro. This kind of blending is done both in the Naoussa area, and outside of it.

Many Xinomavro wines, of course, come from other prefectures outside the Naoussa region. Some of them even have the big-deal OPAP. There are, in fact, aside from Naoussa, three other OPAPs in northern Greece, in three other prefectures, that require at least some Xinomavro in the blend:

- 1) Amyndeio (a very cool-climate place in the Macedonian prefecture of Florina)
- 2) Goumenissa (a warmer spot in the Macedonian prefecture of Kilkis)
- 3) Rapsani (a very warm spot in a Thessalian prefecture)

Then there are the Xinomavro wines that come from non -OPAP areas in the north, places with broader government designations such as "Regional Wine of Macedonia." Many of these designations are officially known as TOs (*topikos oinos* , translated as "regional wine designations"), but let's not worry about that now.

So here are 6 non-Naoussa Xinomavro wines I tasted that I liked a great deal. I must confess that I went into this with a lot of skepticism--particularly because quite a few of these wines are blends of Xinomavro with other things. There seems to be a perception among some Greek winemakers that Xinomavro needs to be "pumped up" with other grape varieties to make it fleshier, and therefore more appealing to foreign palates. What I feared, of course, was that it would be made, at the same time, less flavorful, more alcoholic, less acidic and more tannic. But I needn't have worried--because I soon discovered that part of Xinomavro's magnificence is its ability to share! Xino (as I now fondly call it) is a great grape for blending, as long as the winemaker respects it, and is able to preserve its unique qualities.

XINOMAVROS WITHOUT THE NAOUSSA OPAP

2001 Tsantalis Rapsani Epilegmenos Reserve. Here's a ringing demonstration of how perfect Xinomavro is for blending--it's even perfect for a little New World treatment! Rapsani, a warmer-weather OPAP further south, in Thessaly, must be made from an equal combination of Xinomavro, and two local varieties, Krassato and Stavroto. This Rapsani is amazingly rich and purple, given its age and its provenance! Very pretty nose, though a little on the international side: vanilla and spice, with hints of candy and licorice. I love the palate, though: plump and lush, with lots of red berries, but kept lively and quaffable by great acidity. I think this wine--made by Tsantalis, whose Naoussa I also love--will age well for 5-7 years, picking up complexity as it goes.

2003 Kir-Yianni Yianakahori . They're back! Naoussa winner Kir-Yianni, to no one's surprise, also makes great un-traditional Xinomavro. This one, officially designated a vin de pays d'Imathia , is grown at Yianakahori, right in the Naoussa region--but includes (gasp!) Merlot, 40% of it, as well as Xinomavro. And damn it all if it doesn't add up to a splendid wine! Medium-ruby, quite light at the rim. Lovely Xino nose, buffered by riper red fruit: cherries, raspberries, hints of mint and and pepper and spice. Suave, polished wine on the palate--big enough to create a sensuous feel in your mouth, but local enough to taste "European," even "Greek." Lively, zingy palate with moderate astringency...and a tasty finish that plunges into earth and chocolate. I also like very much the Kir-Yianni wine called Paranga, which is a blend of Xinomavro and Agiorgitiko--but, oddly enough, it's not quite as expressive as the Merlot blend.

2000 Tatsis Goumenissa . Goumenissa, northeast of Naoussa, in the Macedonian prefecture of Kilkis, has an interesting governmental requirement: its Xinomavro must be blended with at least 20% Negoska, a local variety that's softer, plummier, richer than Xinomavro. It works...and remains Greek-tasting! This medium-garnet wine, which is 35% Negoska,

has a gorgeous Xino nose: tomato, jam, cigar box and chocolate. The palate's light, dry, graceful, full of life and old-world complexity. Considerable astringency, but great for light grilled food.

2004 Alpha Xinomavro . If you'll be reading about any Macedonian wineries in international wine publications, it's likely that this'll be the one that gets the ink. A really crack winemaker--Angelos Iatridis--has landed at this gorgeous, high-tech, high-budget estate dedicated to putting the region of Amyndeon, about 25 miles west from Naoussa, near the northwest corner of Greece, on the wine-lover's map. Happily, all of his international-style equipment and barrels are used on local grapes that have benefitted from a very cool growing season--adding up to big wines that don't seem outsized, plush wines with lots of acidity that don't go over the top. My favorite of their reds is the 100% Xinomavro, particularly this one from 2004 (I find the 2003 to be a tad more alcoholic). It's a bright and bouncy ruby, not particularly dark, with a spicy, red-fruit and tomato nose, carrying some earthy-minerally-gamy components. Gorgeous flavor explosions on the palate: white pepper and cedar, big-time, persisting through a long finish. Like the Kir-Yianni wines, this very modern charmer manages to be local in character--light-ish, zingily acidic, dry, nicely astringent--but with a filled-in suggestion that will appeal to international palates. By the way, Alpha's most highly touted red is their Alpha Estate, made from 60% Syrah; I like it, but not as much as their straight Xinomavros. Go for the Estate if you love vanilla and spice.

2003 Voyatzi Estate Red . And here it is...the dreaded Cabernet! At first, the nose of this wine turned me off: too much alcohol, like a young Port with its brandy not yet absorbed. But that quality blew off....and, on the palate, this blend of 65% Xino, 20% Merlot and 15% Cabernet Sauvignon, made in Velvendos, 25 miles south of Naoussa, turned out to be a model for varietal miscegenation! I shouldn't be surprised. Winemaker Yiannis Voyatzi trained in Bordeaux, and labored for years as production director for the huge, pan-Hellenic Boutari winery; no one's in a better theoretical position to bring together the best of France and the best of Greece. The palate is comely: rich, luscious fruit, cherry-like, elegant, with lovely fruit sweetness, good acidity, only moderate tannin...and no alcohol burn at all. Happily, the

young Xino character remains completely intact, with no intrusion whatsoever of vegetal Cab/Merlot flavors; instead, the French grapes really seem to support the Greek fruit.

2004 Pavlou-Kagas Kappa Popolka . I know this is a mouthful--but it is to drink as well as pronounce! Like Alpha, Pavlou-Kagas is another Amyndeon-area winery...and, like Alpha, one that likes blending Xinomavro with Syrah (there's 15% of the latter in this wine). The Kappa Popolka is not as famous as the Alpha Syrah--but I like it better. Medium ruby-garnet. Plummy, red-currant nose with hints of herbs and tobacco. Dead-on Syrah-like black pepper emerges on the palate--which is graceful, medium-weight, local in feel, with just a little more body than old-fashioned Xinos. Not austere dry, but fairly astringent. Lots of local character, but with a flavorful and even welcome tweak.

Go for Xinomavro!!!....But There Are Other Vinous Treasures from the Ancient Land of Wine

I've been paying extra attention to Greek wine for about three years now...and I can't believe the sheer quantity of grape varieties, producers, and wine types (scores of them, maybe more) that have raised my eyebrows. Here are just a few highlights you need to know about now:

Grape Varieties

Moschofilero This white-wine grape (pronounced mos-ko-FEE-lair-o), grown principally in the Mantinia region in the Peloponnese, could be the break-out Greek white variety; it's already getting some play at non-Greek restaurants in the U.S. It is more like Riesling than anything else: light, floral, low in alcohol, sometimes a touch off-dry, great for food. I love it. Domaine Tselepos in Mantinia--which also makes a terrific dry Gewurztraminer--is my favorite Moschofilero source. Another good one is made nearby at the organic, very impressive Domaine Spiropoulos. Look for the youngest possible vintage.

Assyrtico Another great white-wine grape with huge international potential. This one is grown on Santorini, and the textbooks say that the earthy, stony, volcanic soil comes through in this dry, super-acidic wine. In

reality, I found three types of Santorini Assyrtico. The most useful type--which really matches the description--is not available in the U.S., because it's too inexpensive! I had to trek up to the Santorini co-op to find a few \$6 bottles of this fish-lovin' stuff. The second type breaks my heart--it is made by rich, big-deal wineries seeking to be loved overseas. You know what that means: less dry, less acidic, much richer in body, much more alcoholic. Be careful. However, the saving grace is the third type--for many of the best wineries also make a barrel-fermented Santorini and, somehow or other, sometimes end up with a wine that can age for a decade into earthy sublimity, ending up like a good white Rioja or aged white Bordeaux with great balance. Here's a tip for right now: get your hands on a case of 2004 Boutari Kallisti fast, for it is going to age into a roasted-pistachio, curry-leaf miracle (and it costs only \$16 a bottle).

Kotsifali Skip this paragraph if what you like in red wine is color, more color, then extract, and more extract. Kotsifali is a winemaker's nightmare grown principally on the eastern end of Crete--but, when it's right, produces a fabulous old-world kind of wine, light in color but rich in complexity. A few years back, I tasted the 2001 Vin de Crete, and the 2000 Mirambelo, both from Creta Olympias, and loved them; unfortunately, they may not be available any longer. This year, I tasted a simple one in Greece--at \$7 a bottle!--that also rang my chimes: the earthy, tarry 2004 Kretikos Boutari, so graceful for food. Don't expect Kotsifali to become an international sensation...but do stock up on it for house red, especially if you like the taste of aged red wine.

Mavrotragano At the opposite end of the red-wine spectrum is Mavrotragano--an old, old, almost-forgotten Santorini variety that, resuscitated, creates, according to Konstantinos Lazarakis, "a new breed of Greek red: deep, dense in color, concentrated, 'old-viney' on the nose but without a single hot note, while the palate is rich and coated with graceful tannins." This is the kind of dark red wine I like! I went right to the source, the Domaine Sigalas on Santorini where, in the mid-1990s, Paris Sigalas began his experiments with Mavrotragano. I tasted several vintages with him--and flipped over the 2003, with its absolutely wild nose of berries, plums, herbs, eucalyptus, sweaty saddle, and, of all things, grapes. This may be hard to find, but is worth the effort.

Producers

Gaia Wines The last time I covered Greek wines, in the August 18, 2003 Rosengarten Report, I flipped over the wines of Gaia (pronounced YA-ya!), a company based in Nemea in the Peloponnese. I have since dined with the winemaker, Yiannis Paraskevopoulos, in Greece, and maintain my position that he may be the country's best winemaker. Everything he turns out has incredible harmony and polish. I love his Santorini whites (called Thalassitis), his Notios labels, his Agiorgitikos, and, best of all, his incredible barrel-aged Retsina, called Ritinitis (the only "serious" retsina in Greece.)

Domaine Skouras I visited this Nemea-area winery in August, and couldn't believe what I was tasting: George Skouras, who founded his winery in 1986 near Argos, is one of the most artistic, individualistic winemakers I've ever met. This guy makes wine like a three-star chef makes food; his creativity, both aesthetic and technical, knows no bounds. Skouras' most famous wine is the incredibly expensive Megas Oenos, a combination of Agiorgitiko and Cabernet Sauvignon; oddly, it's one of my least favorite wines in his stable. But I freaked out this summer tasting his Chardonnay (yes!), his Viognier, his Viognier Eclectique, his Merlot, his Saint George Nemea, and his Grande Cuvée Nemea.

Domaine Gerovassiliou Another modern winemaker in Greece who inspires general adulation is Evangelos Gerovassiliou, owner of this highly regarded domaine just southwest of Thessaloniki; insiders speak of the "Gerovassiliou Midas Touch." I am not quite as enthused as everyone else, for Gerovassiliou wines often sacrifice their Greek souls on the pillar of international fashion--especially the big, rich, kind-of-sweet dry white wines. But after a long tasting at the winery, I realized that I love one of the Gerovassiliou wines: the Avaton, a quirky blend of Santorini's "lost" variety Mavrotagano, local Mavroudi, and Limnio (from an Aegean island not far away). Fermented in large oak barrels, aged in barriques, the wine is dark-purple, but wildly complex (minerals and game), and usually very graceful. Both the 2004 and 2005 were highly appealing to me.

Mercouri Estate This 19th-century winery, re-launched in the late 1980s, is located in Ilia, on the northwest side of the Peloponnese. I didn't visit, but I tasted their wines in Athens--and could see the star quality (though the winery has nothing to do with Greece's most famous film star, Melina

Mercouri). They make beautiful, elegant, dry red wines from the local variety Mavrodaphne (usually used only for sweet wines!), and Refosco, an Italian variety first planted here in the 19th century (and now known locally as "Mercoureiko!"). But my favorite wine of all was the 2003 Antares, an incredibly suave, complex blend of Avgoustiatis, a little-known Ionian grape, and the Rhone Valley's Mourvedre.

Meden Agan Just a word for a small, lovely producer of a wine called Papantonis in the region of Nemea. I particularly like the way this Agiorgitiko wine ages, becoming soft and complex with time; last winter, in New York, I tasted a spectacularly truffler-y 1995.

Wine Types

Rosé Holy partial maceration! I'm now of the opinion that Greece is the producer of the most exciting European rosés you can find in the U.S.! Sure, rosé tastes great in the south of France--but for some reason, it rarely tastes as fresh or interesting when it arrives here. Not so for Greek rosés! I tasted a gaggle of 2005s this year, both there and here, and was dazzled by what I found--fresh wines, terrifically fruity, but terrifically dry and refreshing at the same time. My advice: wait until the 2006s start to arrive, then pounce! The two wineries with the best rosé track record in my book are Kir-Yianni (in the north, using Xinomavro grapes), and Semeli (in the south, using Agiorgitiko grapes).

Vinsanto I know, I know: Tuscany. The Tuscans have grabbed the Vinsanto franchise (re-tooling it as Vin Santo)--but the Santorinians swear that the wine type began with them. History is on Santorini's side--for the production method there goes back to at least 700 BC, and the name goes back at least until the Middle Ages. Frankly, I don't care who owns it...but I do know that the fairly thin, austere, often surprisingly dry Tuscan stuff can be a big, over-hyped disappointment...while the Santorini stuff is one of the wine discoveries of the decade, a rich, brown elixir that lives on the border between rich, sweet-Sherry kind of wine and rich, late-harvest Riesling kind of wine. Find a bottle from the stellar Vinsanto producer Sigalas, on Santorini, and you will be amazed.

GREEK FOOD

When it comes to food, the "surprises" are not new ideas from creative new chefs. Nor, for the most part, are they "hidden" regional dishes that I had the good fortune to ferret out in 2006. They are traditional foods, to be sure--but traditional foods that should have been on my Greek list years ago, and somehow failed to make it. Why? In some cases, it's because Greek restaurants in America have failed to offer them; in more cases, it's because Greek restaurants in America have failed to promote them! In parallel fashion, many of the following foods, I discovered upon a return to my office, are in my collection of Greek cookbooks--yet, for a multitude of reasons, these were the page-turners, the recipes I passed by, the ones that didn't "read" well enough to get made. The real food surprise of my 2006 trips was tasting, on the spot, these recipes that had been moldering for years in my library--and discovering that the old cliché about Greek food, which touts the supreme goodness in simplicity, is even truer than I thought before. Some of these recipes--like the miraculous spanakorizo on p. --seem to me like alchemy; simply by mixing the right things together, in the right proportions, one arrives, mysteriously, on a higher plane of dining satisfaction.

#1/Fresh, Salted Sardines

OK--"place salt over fresh sardines and serve sardines 12 hours later." Would that recipe appeal to you? It may still be unappealing, because when these guys say "fresh"...they mean "fresh." But whether this dish is reproduceable or not in the U.S., I shall never, ever forget my sardine experiences this summer on the island of Lesbos. Some Greek friends had said, "Oh...you're going to Lesbos in August. These are the world's greatest sardines!" But I took that as pro forma local pride--until Apostolos, the gourmet Athens psychiatrist with a mother in Lesbos, personally took me to the fish taverna O Mimes on the Gulf of Kolloni, the body of water in Lesbos that has all the sardine fame. "And best of all," Apostolos said, "are the raw ones."

Didn't ring a bell. I had no idea that a recipe for sardeles paste , or freshly salted sardines, was sitting on my bookshelf at home in *The Foods of Greece*, by Aglaia Kremezi (Stewart, Tabori & Chang, 1993), one of my favorite Greek cookbooks. Didn't matter. Out they came, a platter of them, head-off, skin-off, but otherwise intact, with greyish-brownish-purplish flesh challenging the diner. After you bone the little sucker with your knife, you pop the two filets in your mouth--which I did at 4 or 5 restaurants on Lesbos, but never with the same result as at O Mimes. Wow. To a sashimi-lover like me, this was heaven--the firmness of the chew, the richness of the flesh, the curious mingling of salty-marine flavors and sweet-bloody-meaty flavors, far more flavorful than "meaty" red tuna. But none of it "fishy" in the least, as one expects sardines to be. Ideal ouzo food.

The "secret" here, of course, is that these sardines had been caught in the Gulf of Kolloni that morning. You can try this at home, if you can find super-fresh whole, raw sardines. Arrange them in a single layer in some kind of basket or pan that has grooves in the bottom, then cover them entirely with coarse salt. If there's room, stack another layer of sardines on top (some like to divide layers with grape leaves), and cover with salt again. Place a plate over all and weight it heavily. Place the whole contraption over a bowl, or pan, to catch the juices that will run off. Keep in the refrigerator. The ideal salting time is 12 hours--so if you've started at 8 AM, you can serve them for dinner (as they did at O Mimes). Some aficionados like to keep them longer, up to a week--but the best ones I had in Lesbos were same-day sardines. Traditionally on Lesbos, the chef removes the skin before serving.

Of course, this trail will lead further. Aglaia Kremezi speaks in her book of the sardeles vareliou that you can find in the markets of Athens--freshly salted sardines aged in wooden barrels. She says the taste is different, but still excellent. Next time in Greece!

#2/ Tomato Fritters from Santorini

I had read that the volcanic island of Santorini (see p.) produces, in

season, the world's most intense-tasting tomatoes--but I hadn't read (my bad, once again) that the favorite local treatment for them is deep-fried tomato fritters!

First things first--the astonishing raw material. The tomato species grown here is in the cherry-tomato family--but a slightly crenellated cherry tomato, with a very thick skin. Many believe that the tomatoes made a late appearance on Santorini--around 1850 or so, after Greek sailors travelling through the Suez Canal had tasted this variety in Egypt and decided to bring seeds back home. The synergy of the species and the black-rock Santorini soil was, and is, magic.

You can get some of this extraordinary taste by buying Santorini tomato paste, Santorini sun-dried tomatoes, or, the best non-fresh alternative of all, Santorini cherry tomatoes in a can or jar.

I visited Santorini in March, when there were no fresh tomatoes to be had--but an excellent caterer, working with canned Santorini tomatoes, made the famous fritters for me, and they were outstanding. They will become an important addition to my arsenal of Greek dinner party appetizer possibilities. And they work very well with fresh non-Santorini cherry tomatoes--which are now available, in pretty sweet and delicious condition, virtually year-round in the U.S.

To make the fritters, you take about a pound of fresh cherry tomatoes, halve them, seed them, and place the seeded halves in the work bowl of a food processor. Pulse 3 or 4 times to get them minced, but stop far short of a purée. Pour the tomatoes into a sieve, salt them, and let drain for an hour. In a bowl, mix the drained tomatoes with a finely minced large onion, 3 finely minced scallions, a tablespoon or two of finely minced mint leaves, 2 tablespoons of flour and a teaspoon of baking powder. Season to taste with salt and pepper. The batter should be a little runny, but quite thick; add a little more flour if it needs to firm up.

Shape the fritters as you would potato pancakes, and drop them in a wide pot of pure olive oil heated to 340 degrees. Fry until lightly browned on both sides, about 4 minutes all together. Transfer to paper towels, and serve immediately.

#3/Real Octopus

This was THE gastronomic revelation of my trips to Greece. The bad news is that you have to go to Greece to experience it. The good news is...holy Zeus, what you have waiting for you!

I've been pro-octopus for a long time, of course. Even when it was just the standard sushi-bar rubber-ball I was tasting, I still loved the idea of it, the purple-ness of it, the tentacle-ness. Then, decades ago, I started reading about all the methods that Old World chefs have to soften octopus--stewing it with a wine cork, smashing it on the ground, etc. As time went by, I started tasting "tender" octopus in Greek and Spanish restaurants in the U.S.--much creamier than the Pennsey Pinkies at sushi bars, much more palatable. I assumed I had ascended to the highest plane of octopus consumption.

Athens, 2006. My Greek friend George says "Do you like tender octopus?" Well, that was a no-brainer...or so I thought. "Sure...creamy and tender...much better than the sushi bar bounce." George looked at me, a bit surprised, cryptic as the Sphinx. "Wait until we get to Lesbos."

A few days later, the prophecy came true--for now I can't wait to get to Lesbos again! All over the island, at open-air restaurants facing the sea, whole, salted octopuses are splayed wide, tied to posts, facing the sun. I'm not sure what the average "hang time" is, but when they come down they go directly onto the grill. A few minutes later, they land on a platter, which gets covered for a few minutes, rendering a dark-brown juice, insanely flavorful, the essence of octopus, which glazes the chunks as they arrive at the table.

The texture is like nothing else I've ever had. No, it's not creamy--but it's not rubbery, either. Forgive the cannibalistic image--but the best description concerns that little puff of flesh between your thumb and forefinger. What would it chew like if you bit it off? I hope you never find out--but you can get the answer, I think, by sampling sun-dried octopus in Greece.

"Do you also like it when it's creamy and tender?" I asked one of the chefs. "That means it has been boiled," he said. "That's what a bad chef does to bad octopus. Octopus should be tenderized with sun and salt--never with water!"

#4/Fava

Four little letters, but so much confusion. On my 2006 trips, I got it all cleared up in my mind...and I ate some damned good fava at the same time!

Here's the problem: when foodie Americans say "fava," they mean the broad, heavily encased fresh beans that come inside long, thick, dark-green pods. They are a prime ingredient in upscale restaurants, and--because we always associate these beans with the Mediterranean--finding "fava" on a Greek menu would call to mind those beans. Indeed, on a check of my trendy/modern Greek cookbooks, the "fava" recipes I found all called for these darlings of the foodies.

However...what we call "fava" is not what they call "fava" in Greece. Yes, this kind of fresh bean is used there...but it is known as "koukia." Nevertheless, you see the word "fava" over and over again on menus in Greece. To what can it refer?

To something entirely different, it turns out. "Fava," on a Greek menu, refers to a room-temperature purée of dried, golden-yellow split peas. First-course mezedakia assortments all over Greece contain platters of fava, for which dried split peas have been boiled, puréed, topped with a little oil and lemon juice, and served as a room-temperature spread.

Last March, I discovered the source of the fava purée tradition, and the source of the best split peas--Santorini, whose dried peas in packages are used all over Greece. The purée is another one of those "too-simple-to-notice" dishes that don't jump out of cookbooks--but, when served, are absolutely splendid and soulful.

And...fava is ridiculously easy to prepare. Using Santorini split peas (see sidebar), or regular yellow split peas, wash and rinse a pound or so, then boil them, with a finely minced onion, in a quart of salted water until they become very soft (about an hour). Purée them one way or another (an immersion blender works well), then let them cool to room temperature. Taste for seasoning, spread on platter, drizzle with extra-virgin olive oil and fresh lemon juice, and top with finely chopped raw red onion.

NOTE: Sometimes in Santorini, the dish gets a little more complicated. Fava "pantremeni" is also served at room temperature--but it is flavored with dried oregano and red-wine vinegar, then topped with a cinnamon-flavored tomato sauce.

I'm so delighted that we've come to the point where we can even talk about "the best Greek restaurant in America!". For decades, the category was moribund. As you know, I'm all for old-fashioned Greek cooking--but what we were getting in Greek-American restaurants up to the 1990s was just old cooking, tired cooking, classics without much soul. The old-fashioned cooking in Greece, as I recently discovered, is infinitely better

Then, a new kind of Greek restaurant landed on the American scene--led by Milos, which had been operating quietly in Montreal for 20 years before invading New York City in the late 1990s. "A-HA!" we all said. "There is something better in America!" The standard Aegean cliché decor was transmogrified into something new, hip, elegant, and still very Greek. The focus was on quality--obsessive quality, evident in everything from the olive oil to the yogurt. And the spotlight fell on fish--simple fish, gorgeous fish, flown in daily from Greece, priced like hell but tasting like heaven. In the wake of Milos's huge success (it's still my favorite restaurant in New York City), others picked up on the formula, some of whom had worked at Milos. The "Milos diaspora" has led to a new generation of Greek seafood restaurants across America that have restored lustre to the ancient Hellenic gold.

But then the story takes a predictable turn. In the early 2000s, long before most Americans really knew what Greek food was, a whole new crop of very upscale Greek restaurants appeared on the scene to "re-interpret" Greek food, to fusion it up. My reaction was generally the same as it is in all restaurants that engage in "ethnic dirtying"--can I just get the real thing, please?

Nevertheless, in any cuisine, every once in a great while a creative chef comes along who does the updating right. He has the ethnic food in his blood, in his soul--so his modern food will always be grounded in it. He knows how to bring in refinements, new ideas, without obliterating the real taste and feel of his ethnic cuisine. His food is delicious, startling--and vastly comforting all at the same time.

That man has now arrived on the Greek scene in America. His name is Pano Karatassos, and he's the chef-owner of Kyma, in Atlanta, Georgia.

Atlanta? Greek in Atlanta? Why? I don't know--but I do know that Panos' father laid roots down here decades ago, and went on to build the biggest restaurant empire in the city.

Kyma is something else again. It is one driveway back from a wide, New Jersey-fied commercial road in Buckhead--but it is the fancy place that people drive up to in their BMWs. The staff is elegant, polished, excited to the gills about the food they're serving. And they should be--for this is mind-blowing modern Greek food, exactly what a world-class chef would invent if he wanted to escalate taverna food into something far more "serious." All your old favorites are here--served in exquisite tiny portions, amuse-bouches-style, sometimes with twists that are exciting, never intrusive. Texturally, Karatassos is putting a three-star touch on this food--continually coming up with velvety textures, fluffy textures, unctuous textures, textures that make me swoon. Flavors are massaged as well; Karatassos may combine ingredients in a new way (like his nutty scallops resting on a puddle of traditional Santorini fava), or he may add flavors you don't expect (I loved his long-cooked, shredded lamb mixed with barley and scallions, ennobled by an avgolemono foam made from Meyer lemons!). Generally, he is fearless with sour, and fearless with olive oil--two excesses that are very Greek, and very delicious.

Is this the best Greek restaurant in America? I haven't been to them all, so I can't say for sure. But I can tell you that if you make it to Milos in New York City, and Kyma in Atlanta...you are most definitely up to date.

Milos
W. 55 St
New York, NY

212.

Kyma

Piedmont Rd.
Atlanta, Georgia
404.262.0702 (please check)

#5/Greek Pasta

A few quirky Greek restaurants in New York have served pasta dishes over the years--but it happened infrequently enough that I always assumed the restaurateurs were just trying to court the Italo-crazed New York diners.

I was wrong. Pasta is much loved in Greece--and, though it's not on restaurant menus with the frequency that it is in Italy, it's a staple of Greek home cookin'. Moreover, there are some--such as Greek food authority Diane Kochilas, in her landmark book *The Food and Wine of Greece* (St. Martin's Press, 1990)--who argue that pasta is Greek ("there is no doubt that the earliest recorded word for noodle in the Mediterranean is Greek"), and find all kinds of Greek antecedents for well-known Italian pasta types.

Bragging rights aside, the most pertinent question is this: is Greek pasta good? And the answer is...sometimes it's great!

I discovered this in March, at a fantastic restaurant in Thessaloniki called Seven Seas--where I feasted on one of the great shellfish-with-linguine dishes of my life. As we were oohing and ahhhing, someone at the table explained that the chef likes to cook the linguine in shrimp-shell water! Aha! It all started to make sense--since Kochilas notes that Greeks "traditionally boil (pasta) in broth or sauce."

For me, this is the start of a big investigation: Greek pastas available in the U.S., traditional Greek fresh pastas, traditional Greek pasta dishes. For now, however, I'm making this adjustment in my kitchen: the next lobster fra diavolo gets lobster shells in the pasta water!

#6/Caper Leaves

Santorini is one heck of a place, as you'll read on p. --with more famous local specialties per square inch than any place I know of in Greece. I had already heard about Santorini capers--but another big find on my March visit was Santorini caper leaves, pickled and preserved in jars! I fell in love with them immediately--because they supply a great way of getting caper flavor into a dish, without the caper flavor running amok. In other words, they are more subtle and delicate than capers--but with the same kind of pressing flavor. For me, this makes them ideal for a Santorini pasta specialty--tossed, of course, with olive oil, garlic, cherry tomatoes and caper leaves!

Unfortunately, an exhaustive search has failed to turn up any imports of this product into the U.S., but I'm letting you know about the leaves so you can search with me. They must be coming soon! In the Greek neighborhood of Astoria, Queens, we did find a jar of caper leaves from Cyprus--but they simply weren't as good. They were pickled, just like the Santorini ones--but too pickled, too sour, and without the caper-y depth.

#7/Baked Eggplant (not "Stuffed Eggplant!")

Now, you would have to have had your head under a rock to have failed to notice the vast array of stuffed-vegetable dishes in the Greek repertoire. This is abundantly clear wherever Greek food is served. Greek chefs love to pull together various combinations of rice, herbs and meat--and stuff these mixtures inside tomatoes, peppers, zucchini, before initiating a flavor-enhancing bake.

So what did I "discover" on my recent trips to Greece?

Well, I kept viewing the rows of stuffed vegetables in open kitchens, and kept seeing one I hadn't seen before: stuffed eggplant. But these babies were "stuffed" in an unusual way. They were smallish eggplants, quite round, cut in half the long way, topped with ground lamb, followed by a layer of custard which had puffed and browned in the oven. In other words--these were like single-portion mini-moussakas!

So, after having my resistance broken down, I told a waiter in Lesvos that I wanted to try the "stuffed eggplant." Confusion broke across his face. He told me there was no stuffed eggplant. My Greek friend went inside to investigate. How dare I call that dish stuffed eggplant! This is known as "baked eggplant"--and, believe me, I'd never want to be known as a category collapser!

The baked eggplant, then and later, was fantastic--even more eggplant-dominant than a tray of moussaka, which I think is a positive tweak. The recipe was in none of my Greek cookbooks--so what could I do but try to reproduce it at home? You will find the happy result, which is anything but half-baked, on this page.

Baked Eggplant **(Individual Eggplants Stuffed with Lamb and Béchamel)**

I like these mini-moussakas best as a main-course offering, just 5-10 minutes out of the oven; serve two to each diner, along with rice or roasted potatoes on the side.

makes four baked eggplant halves, good for two people as a main course

for the eggplant

2 round-ish eggplants, each one 10 to 12 ounces

for the lamb stuffing

2 teaspoons fruity olive oil
1 small onion, about 2-3 ounces, minced
1 medium-large garlic clove, minced
1/2 lb. ground lamb
1 tablespoon all-purpose flour
1/4 cup crushed tomatoes
2 tablespoons red wine
1 tablespoon red-wine vinegar
1/2 teaspoon ground cinnamon

for the béchamel

2 tablespoons unsalted butter
3 tablespoons flour
1 1/2 cups milk, heated
1/8 teaspoon freshly grated nutmeg
2 extra-large egg yolks

assembly

1 tablespoon olive oil
salt
3 tablespoons grated Kyfaloteri cheese (or Pecorino Romano)

1. Wash eggplants, and puncture each one about a dozen times with a fork. Place eggplants on rack in 350-degree oven. Bake until the eggplants feel fairly soft inside, about one hour. It is important that when you remove them from the oven, they are not completely soft and collapsed; they should still be holding their shape. Let them rest until cool enough to handle. Keep the oven at 350 degrees.

2. Prepare lamb stuffing: Place the 2 teaspoons of olive oil in a heavy, medium-large sauté pan over medium heat. Add the onions and garlic to the pan, stirring to coat the vegetables with oil. Sauté until onions begin to soften, about 4-5 minutes. Spread the ground lamb out on the counter in a thin layer, and sprinkle the top of that layer with flour, distributing the flour evenly. Turn heat under the sauté pan to high, break the lamb into clumps, and sauté the lamb until it starts to brown a bit, about 2-3 minutes. Immediately add tomatoes, wine, wine vinegar and cinnamon to the mixture. Stir well. Turn heat down to low, cover, and simmer for 5 minutes. Season to taste with salt. Turn off heat and let lamb mixture rest; you will have about 1 cup.

3. Prepare the béchamel: Place the butter in a heavy, medium-sized saucepan over medium heat. When it melts, stir in the 3 tablespoons of flour well; this will create a sticky mass. Begin pouring in small amounts of the heated milk, whisking heavily as you go. Keep pouring and whisking, increasing the flow of milk as the roux "takes" the milk addition. After 2 minutes or so, you should have a smooth, fairly thick white sauce. Add the grated nutmeg, and season to taste with salt and black pepper. Whisk well. Place the egg yolks in a mixing bowl and beat them well. Going very slowly

at first, begin pouring the cooked béchamel into the beaten eggs, increasing the flow as you go; after a minute or so, the béchamel should be smoothly blended, rich with eggs, and slightly yellow. Cover and reserve. You will have about 1 1/2 cups.

4. When ready to cook, carefully remove the stem from one of the eggplants. Cut the eggplant in two, length-wise. Working with a small, sharp, pointy knife, cut away about 80% of the soft eggplant flesh, leaving a thin wall of eggplant just inside the black-purple skin. The key point is at the root end, where you must leave about 1/3" inch of cooked eggplant across the narrow top. Repeat with the second half of the eggplant, then repeat the entire process with the other eggplant. Reserve eggplant flesh for another use.

5. Place the 4 scooped-out eggplant halves in a baking dish, ideally one that just fits the four; the perfect configuration has them lying on their skin sides, wide open in the dish, but each eggplant half propping up the walls of its neighbors so the béchamel to come won't overflow.

6. To assemble, divide the tablespoon of olive oil among the eggplant shells, rubbing it evenly over the cut surfaces. Sprinkle with salt to taste. Place 1/4 cup of the lamb mixture in each shell, spreading it out evenly across the bottoms of the shells. Top the lamb in each shell with at least 3-4 tablespoons of béchamel, more if the eggplant will hold it (firm eggplant sides leaning against each other in the baking pan help). Try to bring the béchamel up to the upper lip of each cut eggplant half, so the shells seem "filled."

7. Cover the baking dish with aluminum foil, and place it in the hot oven. Bake for 45 minutes, or until the béchamel has become a fairly firm custard. Remove from oven, peel back foil, and evenly divide grated cheese among the eggplant halves, sprinkling it on top of each one. With your fingers, push the grated cheese into the wiggly custard below. Cover baking dish again with foil, and return to oven for 30 minutes.

8. Remove from oven, and let rest for 10 minutes before serving.

NOTE: These baked eggplant halves can be re-heated the next day in a puddle of tomato sauce--which you can splash over the eggplant before serving.

#8/Briam

Pointing can get you pretty far in Greece. Once again surveying the possibilities in an open restaurant kitchen, I pointed at a big baking pan that featured Mediterranean vegetables in a gauzy, slightly oily, tomato-tinged sauce. In just a few moments, I was wolfing down what seemed to me the Greek equivalent of ratatouille, absolutely delicious. I shook it off as a fortuitous special-of-the-day find at one taverna...until I kept seeing its cousins in tavernas all over Greece. This was briam --what Diane Kochilas calls "the best of taverna fare and home kitchen fare...a general all-round classic in the meatless cuisine of the Greeks."

The ones I had stood out for several reasons. First of all, there was the olive oil content--not light--for this dish is part of what the Greeks call *lathera*, which literally means "oily." Indeed, the Greeks and Turks each consider stewed-in-oil-vegetables to be a separate category of their cuisines. Tastes have lightened, of course--but *lathera* dishes still deliver an unctuous (and some would argue healthy!) payload of olive oil.

The second outstanding feature, for me, was the distinct ratio of vegetables in the dish. As in ratatouille, you do find tomatoes, peppers and eggplant. But these players give stage to briam's stars--zucchini and potatoes! With the long cooking, both of these melt into unaccustomed lushness, backed up by their redder and/or more acidic vegetable partners. Again, a simple juxtaposition--but a magical one!

My Greek cookbook library yielded an intriguing array of briam recipes--for briam was in almost every book. The Greek Cookbook, by Sophia Skoura, translated by Helen Georges (Crown, 1967), carries a briam recipe that expands the field to include okra. Flavors of Greece, by Rosemary Baron (William Morrow, 1991) puts a crunchy, cheese-and-bread-crumbs topping on the dish. But the most alluring briam recipe of all is in The Greek Vegetarian, by Diane Kochilas (St. Martin's Press, 1996)--which builds a casserole carefully, in great detail, leading to a communal bake in the oven that you can practically smell. (This recipe also calls for fresh marjoram, one of my favorite fresh herbs in the world!)

If you're improvising, keep in mind that briam can be made like the simplest ratatouilles . Sauté some onions and garlic in olive oil, then throw in your vegetables--cut and timed so that they reach melt-down at about the same moment. Keep in mind that tomatoes shouldn't dominate--a cup or so of chopped tomatoes should service 6 pounds or so of other vegetables.

#9/Rice with Spinach

I've been loving Greek food for a good 35 years now, and have eaten at all kinds of Greek steam-table restaurants in the U.S. But until last March, and my Greek soul-food meal at the old, old Athens steam-table restaurant called Stoa Vaggelis, I had never seen or tasted one of the staples of Greek home cooking: spanakorizo , or rice cooked with spinach into a moist stew, far from a fluffy pilaf. In fact, it's not just spinach that gets treated this way in Greece: in home kitchens across the country, particularly on the traditional meat-less days, Wednesday and Friday, you will find a variety of vegetables stewed together with rice, from cabbages, to leeks, to any of the wild greens usually described by the catch-all term horta .

When I got home, I checked my Greek cookbooks--and found that the spinach dish had been there all along. I was one of those complacent Americans, I guess, passing up this dish because I thought it didn't sound special enough. Was I ever wrong! The version I had at Stoa Vaggelis was exceptional, with an uncannily perfect combination of spinach flavor, dill flavor and lemon flavor, yielding a total much greater than the sum of its parts. Working from memory, I set out to re-create this Hellenic symmetry at home--and, allowing myself a big pat on the back, discovered that the combo's even better when it hasn't sat on the steam table for a few hours. I literally couldn't stop eating what I had made.

I'm telling you--this is one simple-sounding, old-fashioned dish that will change your life.

Spanakorizo

(Greek Spinach Casserole with Rice and Fresh Dill)

You can serve this simple dish very simply, as a side dish to roast lamb (or roast most anything). But some Greeks like to get a little fancier with it--topping it with a dollop of yogurt, or curls of shaved feta, or even a sunny-side-up fried egg. If you choose the latter route, you might consider serving the whole she-bang as a first course.

1/3 cup olive oil
1 medium onion (about 6 ounces), minced
12 ounces fresh spinach, washed and coarsely chopped
1 cup chopped fresh dill leaves
1/2 cup long-grain rice
1 1/4 cups chicken stock
2 tablespoons freshly squeezed lemon juice

1. Place the olive oil in a heavy, medium-large pot over medium heat. Add the minced onion, and cook, stirring occasionally, until the onion is starting to soften, about 4-5 minutes. Add the spinach and 2/3 cup of the dill. Stir well to coat the greens with the olive oil. Cover, and cook the spinach until volume is considerably reduced, about 3 minutes.
2. Add rice and chicken stock to spinach, stirring well. Season broth to taste with salt. Cover, turn heat to medium-low, and cook for 20 minutes more.
3. After 20 minutes, check to make sure the rice is cooked. If not, cover and cook until the rice is done. When it's finished, if there's excess liquid, turn heat to medium-high and boil it away, uncovered, for a few moments. Just before serving, add the remaining 1/3 cup of dill, and the lemon juice. Stir well, check for seasoning, and serve.

#10/Frappé

Finally, there is the most jaw-dropping alimentary surprise that I encountered in all my Greek travels: a cold coffee drink.

Let me break it to you slowly. I hate cold coffee drinks. I watch my friends and colleagues go crazy about cappumochacino whatever at you know where, and I think to myself: whatever happened to just a good, honest shot of espresso?

So when I was on the way into Athens from the airport on my first visit this year, and a few writers in the car more knowledgeable about Greece than I were bubbling with excitement over the prospect of getting a frappé as soon as possible, I was unmoved. "You mean they've got the Seattle place in Greece?" I asked. "This has got nothing to do with the Seattle place," they answered. "Don't you know about frappé? It's a Greek thing, invented way before the Seattle boys could boil water. It is phenomenal, like the best cold coffee drink in the world."

I can't be sure what my exact response was, but I think it took the rough form of "yeah, right." Maybe just "right," extended over a few seconds and beats to emphasis how wrong it all was. And I think I went to sleep.

My friends, of course, would not allow me to wallow much longer in my ignorance. The first chance they got, there it was, shoved under my nose, a tall glass of dark-tan liquid, with a slightly-less-dark foam on top. A straw was sticking out, but I avoided it, sipping tentatively at the foam. And then my eyes bugged out of my freakin' head.

"Holy shit!" quoth I (another rough approximation). "This is amazing!" And it was. That foam, so velvety, so creamy, so light, had more intense, bitter coffee taste in it than a triple shot of espresso in Naples; I simply couldn't believe the combo of coffee-maniac integrity, and kid-like deliciousness.

So I learned what I could about this jolting miracle. It was invented in Greece, in the 1950s, at a trade show in Thessaloniki, considerably before the Seattle guys opened their first lemonade stand. In fact--I'm thinking that all that frappucino whatever crap has its genesis in Greece (not an unusual distinction, of course, for almost anything in Western civilization). It is made very simply--by shaking together instant coffee, ice, water, and, if desired, milk and sugar. Some old-timers shake it in a cocktail shaker, working up the foam with elbow grease; others concoct it, one frappé at a time, in a blender.

The coffee itself, in Greece, is bizarre--because it is almost always a special Greek spray-dried instant coffee made by Nescafe, which is considerably stronger than the Nescafe made for the American market. The

milk is optional--but I've discovered that, for me, this is the rare occasion when the coffee flavor is so intense I welcome a little dairying. Same goes for sugar; you can order your frappé without, but most frappé aficionados go for metrios , which means medium-sweet.

Interestingly, the French name of the leads Greek coffee-drinkers--supposedly Greeks drink four times more coffee per person than the average individual consumption in the rest of the world!--to order "frappé" when they're on the road, particularly in France. But, of course, they are met with blank stares everywhere--for this is truly a Greek phenomenon!

And now the best news of all: Greek Nescafé is available in the U.S.!!! You can order it by (JESSICA PLEASE). I recently whipped my Greek Nescafé into one of the best frappés I've ever tasted, a mirror facsimile of what they make in Greece. Don't miss this one!

Frappé (Cold Greek Coffee Drink)

Still enamored with the Vita-Prep blender that I told you about in Issue 48, I of course made my frappé with that incredible machine. But you can do it well with any powerful blender you have. And feel free to move the proportions of milk and sugar up or down--but please do try my proportions first before tinkering. I suspect you'll discover it ain't broke.

makes one 8-ounce drink

4 teaspoons Nespresso Classic Frappé Instant Coffee

4 teaspoons sugar

2 tablespoons whole milk

1/2 cup crushed ice (no extra water needed)

1. Place all ingredients in the jar of a powerful blender. Blend on high speed until the ice is crushed, and a velvety foam forms on top (about 60 seconds in the Vita-Prep). Pour immediately into a tall, thin, festive glass with just above 8-ounce capacity. If you wait a few minutes, the foamy top will become even more prominent.

NOTE: You can also make frappé without a blender, as many still do in Greece--using just a cocktail shaker, which somehow works up a terrific

foam. The ingredients and proportions are a little different for this one: place in a shaker (in this order) 1/4 cup cold water, 2 tablespoons cold milk, 5 teaspoons Nespresso Classic Frappé Instant Coffee, 4 teaspoons sugar, and 4 ice cubes from a standard ice-cube tray. Shake it until you break it: after about a minute, the ice will break down somewhat, and you'll have a rich foam. Pour into a glass and give the foam a few minutes to rise. For fanatics only: www.nescafe.gr will sell you a frappé shaker made in Greece! The frappé it makes is not any better than what you can make in your own cocktail shaker--but it is fun to look at the frappé photos on the box while you're shaking!

GREEK TRAVEL

Athens

____ Most travellers to Greece arrive first in Athens--and most travellers, I imagine, assume that the best food of all is in the big city. Surprise: it's not--at least not at the dozens of places I've visited in recent years. Oh, of course, Athens is the city where you will find the highest concentration of big-deal, fancy, creative restaurants, tempting you with their versions of Greek fusion, whatever that is. But the one I visited last March says it all for me. Varoulka has the big reputation, the big Michelin star, the terrace dining with a view of the Acropolis, etc.--so how come in a long tasting menu I couldn't find a single thing that really interested me or satisfied me, from the boring sea bass carpaccio to the bland grouper cheek soup with squid ink?

I realized pretty soon that my general gastro-travel principle--seek

local, seek rustic--is even more important in Greece than it is in other major European foodie countries, like France, Italy or Spain. What you want in Greece is tavernas --sometimes translated by the Greeks as "taverns," but more accurately translated as "bistros." This is where you can get the real stuff, stuff with the potential to go leagues beyond the tired moussaka they serve in the Greek neighborhood near your house. The problem is that Greece, too, is teeming with touristy tavernas, as well as mediocre tavernas. Especially in the big city, it takes some work to dig out the gold--which is indisputably there, waiting to be mined by the savvy diner.

If you're going to Athens, clip and save. I've done the work for you.

My favorite place to eat in the whole Athens area is Taverna To Trigono, a restaurant you might not even see if you were cruising by in a car. It is in the completely un-touristed town of Kalyvia, east of Athens, about a 15-minute drive from the Athens airport; if you go, chances are enormous you'll be the only American there. You'll find To Trigono--the "triangle"--at the town's main intersection, where a gas station sits right across the road from the restaurant. Pay that no mind. When you walk into the restaurant, you'll see my excitement straight away: whole lambs from the mountains of Lesvos being hauled in over the cooks' shoulders, butchered on the spot, set up on rotating spits, and cooked to a turn (as they say). It's like being in a combination of a meat market and a restaurant: this is the place to go lamb-wild, in a lamb-wild country.

First things first, however. When you sit down (and do that outside, if the weather's fair), order as many meze as you think you can handle. To Trigono has all the greatest hits, of course--but the ones I especially loved on my two visits here were the fried peppers, both green and red, and a creamy, spicy feta dip called tirokafteri . Be sure to have the Greek salad, with excellent, almost smoky feta, and lots of grilled bread. And this is the place to hit the ouzo at the meal's beginning, then continue with the very good Retsina that's grown right in this area.

OK. Time for meat. You can play this two ways. One option is to make your meal a carnivorous degustation--especially if you want an organ recital. Exquisitely seasoned lamb's head is a hit, as well as kokoretsi , the spit-roasted tangle of innards that the Greeks love so much (this one is particularly deep and liver-y--I adore it!!). More mainstream options include the roast lamb off the spit, crunchy skin and all, and the meaty,

tender veal chops. And, if you're meat-foraging, don't miss my second-favorite meat option at To Trigono, the grilled louganika , or sausage--an almost kielbasa-like affair from Mani, in the southern Peloponnese, touched with the extra seasonings that usually push grilled Greek sausage beyond grilled Italian sausage in flavor. This encased miracle, which I've now ordered twice at To Trigono, is the juiciest sausage I've had in the whole country.

But you might want to skip all of that--because another strategy at To Trigono is to keep your appetite edge for what is undoubtedly the greatest platter of lamb chops I have ever tasted in my life.

Long, thin, many-layered lamb chops (with striations of meat, fat, meat, fat), cooked simply on the grill--the Greeks call them pidakia --are popular all over Greece. And I have tried them all over Greece, because they're usually among the world's great bites. I give you this background, because I don't want you to take my words lightly: nothing I've tasted in Greece compares to the pidakia at To Trigono.

Why do they stand out? The deep, sweet, lamb-y flavor, colliding with the generous salt seasoning, is only part of the story. The pay-off is the extraordinary texture. These wonders, though not burned, are impossibly crisp and crusted from the grill, almost loud to chew--until you get inside, when the warm, lip-smearing juices start to flow. Never have I experienced such a spectacular collision of exterior/interior elements. The pidakia are served on platters, with maybe a dozen chops to the platter: the next time I go, I'm ordering one or two platters for myself!

Another great carnivorous taverna experience, also in the suburbs of Athens, is a much prettier spot, with much prettier appointments, the perfect venue for a warm, emotional Grecian evening. Taverna Kritikos (a reference to the Cretan origins of the owners) is in quiet Kantza, right near ancient vineyards and olive trees. The terrace, a spectacular place to sit in clement weather, is under a profusion of soft white pines, creating a country-kind-of-fantasy, not more than 15 miles from the city. And when you peek into this kitchen, glimpsing grandma with lambs hanging all around her, you know you've absolutely come to the right place.

The menu path is the same here, as it is at so many Greek restaurants: lots of meze first, then significant proteins. The first-course stand-outs at

my August meal were the terrific fava spread, the fluffy and ultra-garlicky skordalia, the rich beets, and the killer tomatoes with feta. Kritikos, like Trigono, serves great lamb chops--but the Kritikos chops, of course, are not quite up to the staggering level of the Trigono chops. However, there are compensations--for the non-lamb meat offerings at Kritikos are extraordinary. I was swept away by the beefy, juicy, thin-cut tenderloins of veal, and by the best T-bone steak I've ever tasted in Greece. Follow up with a dessert of fried-dough disks, that are as empty and light as they are perfectly flavored and sugared.

So enough with the suburbs, you're saying. If you're wondering where to eat in town--well, that's when you have to put up your tourist deflection shield.

My concierge in March directed me towards one restaurant, in a surprisingly quiet neighborhood not far from the big downtown action, that Athenian friends later identified as "touristy." (Could it be the old photos on the stone walls, the slanted wood-beam ceiling, and the "soulful" guitar player?) Nevertheless, I had a few delicious warm meze at Palia Taverna that I think you might want to know about--perhaps as a start-up before an evening of restaurant-hopping. The eggplant with split peas in a terra cotta crock is magnificent: in an inspired combo, a base of fava (puréed split peas) is topped with fat, sweet pieces of sautéed, skin-on eggplant and chunks of roasted tomato, the whole sprinkled with raw onions and herbs. I was equally dizzy about the spicy beef stew in red wine sauce (tasting almost New Mexican with its cumin addition), and the fantastic "village" sausages, crunchy and squirty, brought in from Metsovo, in the north, the town that's the general inspiration for this country-style restaurant. Other choices from the menu were not nearly as good--and you should never expect anything creative here, or even anything cooked to order! But I'd be happy to come back to this place for selected items on a cold winter night...just as long as they don't start playing "New York, New York" again.

If you want similar food in a less touristy setting, you must wander into a little arcade, near the great Athens meat market, where nary a tourist is ever found. Taverna Stoa Vaggelis, a short walk beyond a small zoo's worth of caged birds, is a traditional Athenian steam-table restaurant; you walk up to the counter, listen to the man tell you about what's in front of you, then start pointing like crazy. It is the kind of Greek food I learned to love in the 1960s at a long-gone New York theatre-district institution called

Molfeta's; the surprises here are that such a restaurant still exists (it's more like 1930s than 1960s), and that the quality is so astonishingly high. Any braised lamb dish, or long-cooked lamb dish with egg-lemon sauce, is exactly what you should order--as well as the astonishing pile of rice cooked with spinach, dill, olive oil and lemon (see my recipe for this treat on p.). And yes, those are barrels of Retsina over your head, and, yes, you should have them pour you a pitcher or three. Go for lunch; the steam table's usually depleted by 4PM.

If it's seafood you crave--an excellent craving to have in Greece--a good, simple option nearby is Ouzeria Naxos, in the trendy Psyri neighborhood. Owned and run by people from the island of Naxos, this ouzo-rich taverna serves a great Naxos spin on Greek salad: warm potatoes are in the mix. But the real attraction is the fried seafood (shrimp and squid are great), and the open-air grill outside the restaurant that puts a major-league char on octopus.

Of course, if you really want to get serious about fish in Athens, you must leave downtown and go the port area west of the city--the grimy, touristy, far-from-charming Piraeus neighborhood. But fear not: I know a restaurant, right along the water, that not only has excellent food, but also offers an almost-romantic view of the setting sun, in an almost-upscale environment.

The place is called T'Agirovoli Tou Sotiri, and there is considerable charm in its white walls, white brick columns, blond woods and open-air front room. But wait until you taste what comes out of its kitchen, particularly for starters. The first thing that wowed me was a small bowl of fresh sea urchin--the sweet, nutty, orange-tinged organs floating in a cool, urchin broth seasoned with lemon juice and olive oil. This matches any uni high I've ever had in a sushi bar. More meze followed, much of it with a seafood spin. Fantastic grilled octopus. The best red mullet ever (barbouni in Greek)--and that includes rouget in France and triglie in Italy--with a really crisp battered exterior, and juicy flesh oozing impossible sweetness and depth. Most amazing of all: lumps of smoked eel, fatty and buttery beyond belief, with the loveliest, gentlest smoke imaginable. Don't skip the vegetable mezedakia, either; in August, this place served me some of the very best tomatoes of my trip. The only thing that didn't flip me out was the main-course grilled fish. I tried two or three different kinds, and all of them were very good--but not much more than that. To improve your odds, tell

them you don't like your fish overcooked. As I was to discover later, Athens is not the best place in Greece to enjoy fish.

And where will you stay in Athens? Believe it or not, one of my favorite hotels in all of Greece...is at the Athens airport! The French-owned Sofitel Athens Airport is part of a new generation of airport hotels (like the Kempinski in Mumbai) that give travelers easy-access location, plus genuine luxury. Gym, swimming pool, high-thread-count sheets, very professional and attentive concierges, you name it. And...as an added bonus...their sunny, airy, ground-floor restaurant, Mesoghaïa, though it has a somewhat creative Mediterranean menu, serves one of the best moussakas I have ever tasted in my life! This refined but wonderful version comes in a round casserole for one, with crusty layers above creamy ones, anchored by a tender, gooey mass of richly flavored lamb--a wonderful dinner if you're in transit, and don't feel like the 30-minute drive to downtown. Of course, if your schedule dictates only one meal in the Athens area--the Sofitel puts you in shouting distance of those lamb chops at To Trigono in Kalyvia! The taxi ride's about 6 bucks...

Cool New Store in Downtown Athens

Greek groceries, like Indian groceries, usually have that dusty, hoary, patina of age about them. I like that quality--but the shiny, bright, modern-marketing appearance of the new To Mavromedious (?????) makes it stand out from the crowd. Located near the old meat market, this well-stocked shop positions itself as the "grocery store of the Mediterranean diet"--with lots of good olive oils, vinegars, regional Greek specialties, as well as barrels of Greek wine in the back from which you may sample. Worth a visit.

Thessaloniki

Talk about surprises. Perhaps the greatest one of all for me in 2006 was the city of Thessaloniki.

I didn't really want to go. I knew it was Greece's second largest city, and was set in the north, but had heard little else--so I assumed it was some kind of cinder-block industrial place, with little of the southern charm

suffusing Athens and the Greek islands.

Wow. Was I ever wrong.

I was brought there to use the city as a base for wine excursions in Macedonia, the old name for the region in which Thessaloniki lies. I flew in from Athens on a late Saturday afternoon--and immediately had my head spun around. This historic city, set on a beautiful bay that runs in from the Aegean Sea, struck me as a combo of exotic Greek island, trendy Riviera, intellectual Oxford with a dominating university, and sizzling South Beach, Miami, all at the same time. And the time was 4PM! Over the next few days I observed that the buzz, except for a few post-sunrise hours, never subsides in this town. The bars, cafés and restaurants along the harbor are always hopping, and pedestrians--mostly youthful, joyful, beautiful people--continually cram the streets, whether along the water or back a bit at the grand Aristotelou Square. When you take your eyes off the people, you can also start taking in the city that gave birth to Alexander the Great--and note the layers of history in the Byzantine churches, Roman arches, Ottoman mosques, not to mention the house in which Kemal Ataturk, the founder of modern Turkey, was born in 1881. Indeed, Thessaloniki remained part of the Ottoman empire until 1912--which is one reason people give for its "edge" in the gastronomy department.

What? That too? Yes indeed. When I told Athenians--friends, fellow diners, taxi drivers--that I was heading for Thessaloniki, they all said, "Ah. Good food there." When I could see a kind of shame in their faces, I pursued those conversations--and must report that every single Athens resident with whom I discussed the subject said "yes, the food is better in Thessaloniki."

Who knew?

Excited as hell, I walked from my hotel--the large, comfortable, serviceable but just-short-of-luxury Makedonia Palace, set right on the water--to the last vegetable stalls of Saturday market day near Aristotelou Square. The eggplants may have been gone, but at an intersection of the covered market, in a grimy tunnel, with posters and graffiti all over the old walls, and a mesh screen descending from the high ceiling (holding festive pin lights), the few tables of O Athontis lazily sprawl across the alleyway. Nearby, there is a window in the wall, beyond which a very skillful man is

grilling up some of the liveliest, friendliest, most mirthful food I've ever had in Greece.

The waiter slammed some butcher paper on the table when our group of eight sat down, and we were off. The genre here is meat--crusty, gorgeously seasoned, juicy meat that dribbles its fat all over the tabletop paper because the meat's not served on plates. You won't notice the lack of china after your first bottle of Retsina (we consumed five, for the record, just warming up for dinner reservations elsewhere). There was bifteck , which my Greek friends translated as "hamburgers"--addictive clumps of mixed, sweet meat, with a light and loose grind and deep reservoirs of juice. There was louganika , that superstar sausage again, this northern one in a less-cured vein, thinner than the others, but ridiculously squirty, and with the faint, alluring taste of sheepy age. And there was souvlaki , amazing cubes of pork, charred on the outside, medium rare-juicy on the inside, impossibly tender, shot through with yummy fat and aged-meat flavor. The waiters throw down a big bowl of cabbage and carrot salad to go with all this (the more northern vegetables seem so right), and the soft, warm bread keeps coming. A wooden sign hanging off the kitchen says "Stomahologos"--and when I found out the translation, I realized how wise these Greeks really are: "The Stomach Doctor."

But we had bigger fish to fry--any size, actually, and any cooking method, for Thessaloniki is the best place I've found in Greece for eating fish.

The first place that netted me is a fish taverna on the road to the Haldiki-area wineries, an afternoon's excursion eastward from Thessaloniki. The restaurant O Beis, right on the beach in the town of Marmaras, has rooms for rent, too--but I'd rather rent a table for a few hours, madly munching their fried fish in the sun-drenched dining room. Tiny, crispy fish called marides , creamy inside, were excellent, as were the shellfish-y tasting koutsomura , kind of like small rouget. Big fried squid, splayed, with tentacles attached, were very tender and sweet, and perfectly fried as well. Then we discovered that the grill was as proficient as the deep-fryer: grilled langoustines were salty-sweet, shockingly fresh, and the whole grilled melanouria , a medium-sized fish to share, was one of the best whole fish I had in Greece this year: tender, moist, flaky, with gorgeous crisp skin on the outside.

Much closer to town, but still not in it, is a very fine seafood restaurant called Vrahos, also right on the sea; it has been around since 1932 in a lightly trafficked residential Thessaloniki neighborhood. Many things about this place reminded me of Milos, in New York: the upscale setting, the care and quality put into meze (which included, on my visit, fried zucchini, grilled octopus, and fantastic grilled squid). Alas, the whole fish we tried--especially a dried-out fagri --were less impressive than the same fish cooked in New York! But I would gladly come to Vrahos again for its shellfish specialties--particularly the karavida , which, essentially, are scampi of the gods.

When I found out that on our last night we were going to one of the seafood restaurants along the raucous harbor strip in downtown Thessaloniki, I was concerned; I didn't intuit that the town's best dining would be found here. When I looked at the menu of Seven Seas, my foodie radar issued an even more alarming warning--for I could see signs of the dreaded International Creativity on this menu. Surprise, dude--Seven Seas turned out to be one of the best restaurants of the year in Greece, a good reason alone to hike north to Thessaloniki.

OK. It is packed with trendoids, very noisy, and its oh-so-cool whiteness could be taken as a lazy substitute for design. No matter. This is a place dedicated to finding, preserving at peak, and serving you the best of local seafood. Thessaloniki oysters? Didn't know they existed--but these Belon-type babies were metallic as hell, and absurdly fresh. Raw clams, too, were a revelation--some of the briniest and most appealing I've tasted in Europe. Before leaving the mollusks, we wolfed down the incredible broiled scallops, walnut-sized, all browned and crunchy on top, sitting in their shells in a puddle of great local olive oil. But soon we were on to the crustaceans, consuming killer fried langoustine tails--probably the greatest deep-frying of my trips--followed up by fried salt cod puffs served with astonishing skordalia.

Yes, at this point in the meal you will be confronted by some internationalisms. Fear them not, say I. Someone ordered the tuna carpaccio, and it was outstanding tuna carpaccio. The array of imaginative salads looks scary--until you dive in, and find wonderfully handled ingredient combos, such as the red-leaf lettuce with beets, oranges, red onions...and smoked herring, which gives it all a local taste!

In any case, you can get back on track with the terrific, mom-like stewed dishes: outstanding octopus in a tomato-red pepper-red wine sauce with mashed potatoes on the side, or ultra-comforting salt cod chunks in a white, creamy, lemon-dill sauce.

And then there's pasta. Please consider the source of the following remarks. I grew up in Brooklyn, where linguine with red shellfish sauce was mother's milk to me. I have searched all over southern Italy to find the best of that genre. So imagine my surprise, sitting in a trendy restaurant in Thessaloniki, when one of the best variations on the theme I've tasted anywhere came steaming out of the kitchen on huge platters. It's the Pasta with Fresh Sea Food that you want, and on the night I had it it was made from shrimp. I cannot remember the time that the soul of crustacean had infused the sauce, the pasta itself, the goddamned room, to an extent greater than this one did. Perfectly slithery linguine, perfect sauce ratio. I'm still reeling from the sheer improbability of such a thing happening in Macedonian Greece.

Of course, eating your way through Macedonia is not entirely about seafood. Away from the coast, there's meat in them thar hills--the same hills that produce some of the finest red wines in Greece.

It's not likely you'll drive a few hours west of Thessaloniki, in the direction of Albania, to visit the fairly remote wine region of Naoussa. But, as you've read on p. , it is my favorite red-wine region in Greece, and you may want to check it out before the rest of the world discovers it. If you do, I have one very comfortable country inn where you can rest your head--and one terrific country-like restaurant where you can distend your stomach.

The inn, called Hotel Esperides, is on a main country road through the region--and though it may not be a luxury hotel, the stone hearth, comfortable furniture, accommodating owners and busy bric-a-brac environment add up to a warm welcome on a cold night. If you stay, there's one great advantage--you can drive into the town of Naoussa, a small wine capital, to a charming square, where a rustically decorated restaurant presents terrific soul food of the region. At Naouseiko you can find hasapiko , or pork with celery and leeks; Macedonian meatballs, known as boubaria in the local dialect; flogera , or stew, of pastourma , a pastrami-like meat with Turkish connections; game from the forests of Vermion; fantastic roast zygouri , or one-year-old lamb; and some of the traditional savory pies of

Macedonia (pita) with various fillings. Drink the local red wine, made from Xinomavro (see p.)...and you will sleep happily.

The Peloponnese

I had never been to this huge peninsula until my August, 2006 visit--and even then, I didn't penetrate too far, travelling only about 2 hours southwest of Athens into the heart of the Peloponnese's wine country. But I was dazzled by what I saw--particularly by the astonishing geological variety, even in just this one corner, of the land that once included Sparta. Without question, particularly in the summertime--when you can visit the theatre festival at Epidaurus--I would urge any Athens visitor to get out of town, cross the Corinth canal, and drive into the achingly beautiful Peloponnese.

My destination was two wine areas, both in the northeast corner of the peninsula: Mantinia and Nemea (you can read about the wines of each on p. in this issue). However, probably owing to the brevity of my visit, I didn't find too much gold-standard gastronomy here. The most exciting restaurant meal was in the Mantinia region, at a funky taverna called Kokkina Pitharia in the bustling little mountain town of Vitina; this is a great place to explore the local touch with a wide variety of meats and off-beat meats, such as rabbit and kid. My only complaint was with the chef's occasional flamboyant flights, which turned a few dishes into creations resembling the sweet-and-sour dishes of Chinese-American restaurants; order as simply as possible. And though I found no restaurants in Nemea (which is a ruggedly gorgeous place to make wine), I did stumble upon a fantastic lodging possibility for wine travelers. One of the region's best wineries is the Semeli Winery, owned by a wealthy Greek engineer and his lovely English wife. Just this summer, they converted a good deal of the winery's extra space into half a dozen very chi-chi, high-end rooms and suites--a fantastic place to stay, called Domaine Helios, if you're looking for a very quiet vacation up in the hills. The prices are moderate, and--though I shouldn't be telling you this--Mrs. Kokotos is one helluva cook; if she's at the estate when you're there, and if she has the time, and if you identify yourself well in advance as a member of Rosengarten's Table, she may just be able to lay on a spread for you like the glorious one I experienced for lunch one sparkling afternoon this summer.

I saved the best for last, however, the one Peloponnese place within two hours of Athens that you must get to--because the vastly appealing port town of Nafplion, of which I had barely heard before, took me completely by surprise. Does Greece hold no end of wonders?

For starters, this is no unimportant town, historically speaking. In classic legend, it was founded by one of the original Argonauts (not Jason, but one of his buds). In more modern times...it was the first capital of the new Greece nation, which was founded in 1822! They all saw the same thing I did: a gorgeous harbor, with dramatic hills rising right behind it (they were thinking defense, I'm thinking digital camera). Today, the port area is a maze of upscale boutiques and cafés--set in old, character-filled buildings, only their ground-floor areas touched by the 21st century. Just off the huge and dramatic square, with its glossy polished stone floor, lies a creaky old Greek Orthodox church, with a hazy, mystical interior and no dearth of attendant black-robed priests--right near a great shop to buy jeans and sneakers. The past and the present co-exist, beautifully. Well-heeled Greek and Italian tourists have discovered this place, and the waterside tables teem with Riviera-like activity. Unfortunately, these tables--mostly at fish restaurants with refrigerated displays of tonight's specials--don't seem to hold particularly distinguished food; I ate at three of these restaurants, and couldn't find one to tell you about. Avoid, especially, the ubiquitous, and ubiquitously high-priced, spaghetti with lobster. However, I can tell you that I loved every one of those meals, tolerating the so-so meze and fish, but positively soaking in the electric atmosphere. This is one of those places where travel clichés come to brilliant life. "Oh my God," you say to yourself; "THIS is Greece."

So much do I love this surprising town, in fact, that I urge you to come anyway--despite the fact that I found no outstanding hotel, either. However, there's much to recommend about the absurdly low-priced Marianna Pension, virtually hewn out of the cliff that hovers over the town. The rooms with windows give you incredible views of Nafplion's roofs; unfortunately, the rooms themselves are rather, well, Spartan. The best room of all, which actually has stone walls--has no windows. So what matters to you most--the room or the view? Your call.

Santorini

I'd heard so much hype about the volcanic island of Santorini that I was not really prepped for major positive surprises on my first visit there in March. In fact, most of my surprises were negative--or, as my Greek friends say, "Santorini is so over." Over-building. Over-touristing. Over-pricing. But don't lose heart, no matter what you hear; through it all, the surprise is that Santorini's still one of the most heart-stopping island destinations on earth, and well worth any visit that's done right.

How can you do it right? For one thing, you can make sure that you arrive by boat--for when you sail for the first time into the caldera, the half-sunken volcano crater that is the island of Santorini, you may not even notice the jostle of other tourists trying to have the same primal experience. The combination of towering red-rock cliffs, alabaster buildings that seem carved out of the hillside, and the insanely blue sea--under which lies a volcano that blew its top 3500 years ago--create an unforgettable impression. Another good plan is to come off-season-ish: April, May, September and October are much, much less chaotic than June, July and August. I'm not sure I'd recommend coming when I did, in March--unless you're into brutal desolation; the wind was roaring menacingly, as in Homer, my bones were chilled, and the old rock in the sea was almost lonely. However, if you're seeking a place to bunker down and write a novel--a winter rental in Santorini might be just the ticket!

Whenever you come, you will have a choice of villages to visit all over the island--some tee-shirt-shopped to a tee, some better preserved. I urge you, if you have time for only one, to make it up to the caldera-fronting village at the north end of the island called Oia (pronounced EE-uh). Paradoxically, this is the most famous village of all--the photos of white churches looming over the sea, and of the spectacular caldera sunset, are mostly from Oia. But because it's on a narrow ridge high up on a cliff, its winding, inaccessible streets do not create a perfect place for commerce. It is, instead, perfect for a series of rooftop cafes where an incredible party breaks out every night as the sun goes down.

It's also perfect for little hotels, stacked on top of each other on the hillside, somewhat in the manner of Positano. Just keep in mind that they can be difficult to get to. Your car will be useless, resting in a town-top parking lot while you work your way down the narrow steps to your hotel.

Happily, most hotels provide donkeys for carrying your luggage.

The most renowned hotel in Oia is the Katikies Hotel, which has recently added the Katikies Suites and the Villa Katikies; it all adds up to a maze that's very Santorini. But I found another hotel that's a little more local in feel, almost like you're living in a house in the town--albeit a supremely comfortable house, with modern amenities and antique furnishings. Tony Mosiman is an ex-pat from Kansas City who bought an old house in Oia, and has built it into the grand 1864--The Sea Captain's House...just two large suites sleeping two each, one cavernous suite sleeping five, and a clutch of other spaces, such as a fine pebble courtyard, and a dining room where guests sit at the same table taking "lazy breakfast." Tony's a great innkeeper, and will arrange anything for you--from a catered lunch of Santorini specialties (we enjoyed this upon arrival), to a private catamaran cruise at sunset on the caldera. The word is out, and booking is extremely difficult--so start early! But I can lend you a hand: Tony has kindly agreed to give special consideration to members of Rosengarten's Table. This will not get you a last-minute reservation in high season, but it could help for those lovely shoulder months--and, if you get a room, Tony will greet you with a complimentary bottle of Santorini's great white wine.

Eating in Santorini? Unfortunately--despite my knowledge of Santorini specialties cooked for me by private chefs there (see pgs.)--I'm not in a good position to tell you the best public places. During my visit in March, many restaurants were still hibernating--and the few that were open all corroborated the Santorini horror stories (touristy, touristy). But I have two ideas for you. Judging from breakfast at 1864--The Sea Captain's House, I think Tony has his gastronomic act together; during the summer, he and partner Panayiotis Vasilopoulos run Ambrosia, a fancy place which does have a very good reputation. I looked at the menu and found it a little creative, but it didn't spell PREVENT; I'll be checking it out next time on Santorini. However, the place you must go to--because three different Santorini-knowledgeable friends told me it's their Santorini favorite--is a simple spot on the beach at Amoudi Bay, just down the hill from Oia, called Sunset (I wonder why?). It was closed for the winter when I visited--but this is the Greek-island fantasy spot, I've been told, for ouzo, meze, and terrific grilled fish pulled right out of the water.

Lesvos

I've saved the biggest surprise for last. Though it doesn't get the buzz that many other Greek islands get--Santorini, Corfu, Mykonos and Crete are the ones would-be travelers dream about the most--Lesvos is my favorite Greek island, and one of the greatest food destinations in Greece.

If non-Greeks know this place at all, they know it as the ancient home of Sappho (pronounced sap-FO), the poetess considered by many to be the first lesbian noticed by history. When she lived on the island, it was known as Lesbos--hence the adjective "Lesbian," borrowed by English speakers to describe "Sapphic" females. But the tourist board of Lesbos got nervous, about a decade ago, when annual gay conferences on the island fixed Lesbos in the international tourist's mind as "the gay place;" the feckless PR people didn't want others to stay away. So, capitaliziing on the fact that the Greek letter "B" is actually pronounced like a "V," they changed the official English name of the island to "Lesvos," and the adjective describing the place to "Lesvian." Some Greeks opt out of the controversy entirely by calling the island Mytilini--which is actually the name of Lesvos' largest town.

Believe you me...they could call this place Hell, and I'd still be powerless to resist coming here.

Lesvos is a large island, in the northeast corner of the Aegean, just 90 minutes from Turkey by ferry (you can see Turkey very prominently from the beaches on Lesvo's north shore). It is a topographically varied island, with sheer mountains and dramatic valleys in the north, as well as flat marshlands on the southern flanks. But the most important feature to me, the gastronomic traveler, is the large gulf that protrudes into the island on its south-central side, the Gulf of Kolloni--for this plankton-rich body of water is home to some of the world's tastiest shellfish, and small fin-fish, with round-the-calendar seasons for Kolloni specialties furnishing non-ending temptations.

Most visitors to Lesvos go straight to Mytilini, on the island's east coast, and stay there. It's a fine Greek island town, with a very busy port. But if you've come to Lesvos to eat--by all means get in a taxi, or rent a car, and make a bee-line to the town of Skala Kollonis, at the head of the central

gulf, about an hour from Mytilini. There, in the atmospheric, very lively but very un-touristy town square, you will find one of the best psarotavernas (fish tavernas) in Greece--O Mimis, which, in summer, is sprawled out across one corner of the square, its tables filled with local families, and visiting Greek families who wish they were local.

I haven't yet visited in winter, when the famous scallops and oysters are dredged from the gulf. But I wouldn't trade my summer visit for anything--for August is sardine season. And Kolloni sardines, as per reputation, are the finest I've ever tasted. I was expecting to find them grilled, of course, and I did, and they were sweet, salty, rich, vibrantly fresh, all-around wonderful. But, at O Mimos, the big surprise was that they were superseded by the very local August specialty of raw, salted sardines--one of the most outstanding bites of my 2006 Greek trips (see full description on p.).

The wonders didn't stop with sardines. Among the great meze were long, super-flavorful local string beans stewed in olive oil, buttery fried cheese, crunchy octopus cakes, sublime shrimp in a lemon sauce, and firm, cured slices of charupa , a local fish. Then came the stream of fried and grilled fish: fried sardines (of course); little koutsomura ; the large-head, wide-mouth fish called kephalos bafa , with ropy flesh; and the sublime grilled show-stopper covios .

If you like fish, do not miss this meal.

If you're planning to stay on Lesbos, I would highly recommend another spot, the southwest corner of the island--where the magical town of Eressos provides a gorgeous, laid-back backdrop for a summertime Greek island idyll. Eressos is right on the beach--literally, with wooden boards and buildings built on top of the sand. Along this stretch, highly animated at night, the cafés and restaurants offer open-air tables, with lounge-y chairs and sofas, surrounded by reed-y, woven walls that suggest nothing so much as the South Pacific; the holiday atmosphere is intense. After a few breakfasts, frappés, lunches, ouzos and dinners, you start recognizing your "neighbors," and start feeling part of "the community." To boot, there's pretty good food along here--particularly at the beachfront restaurant Ouzeri Soulatso, where I tasted simply the greatest grilled octopus of my whole cephalopodic-lovin' life (see p. for description).

Now, some of my Greek friends like to rent out simple rooms one street back from the beach, and vacation here for a week or two. But if you're looking for a little bit more "resort" in your vacation, and if you've got the bucks, Eressos provides: about 15 minutes from the town (on foot) is a rather large and modern resort called Aeolian Village. I give this place only a B-minus or so as a beach resort, since it's kind of plain, and the staff can be brain-dead. But it's a perfectly comfortable place to rest your head, and those of your children, after a day at the beach, not to mention some serious beverage consumption on the Eressos "boardwalk."

I have only one more thing you need to do on Lesbos, but it is absolutely essential. Pick out a beautiful late afternoon (not hard to do in August), and drive to the northwest shore in time for the sunset. Reserve an open-air table at To Petri, the only restaurant in the small village of Petri, not far from the much larger, much more touristy village of Molyvos (where many mediocre restaurants can be found). Only locals know about To Petri, which is perched on the side of a mountain, far above the very visible sea. Come hungry--for you will be dazzled, stomach-fed and soul-fed, by the food that this rustic mom-and-pop kitchen turns out.

This is the kitchen that time forgot. The dolmas, made from just-picked grape leaves, are the freshest and finest I've ever had, by far. Stuffing's a specialty here, it seems, as both the stuffed zucchini and stuffed cabbage in avgolemono are off the charts--not to mention the stuffed squid, with its haunting orange-rind flavor. Other meze also astonish: flaky zucchini pie, juicy cumin-scented sausage, smoky eggplant spread, and the zingiest tzatziki in memory. But this is a meat restaurant, above all--and I was absolutely knocked out by their takes on the classic casseroles (some of the fluffiest pastitsio and moussaka ever), by the pork and zucchini stew, by the moist long-cooked lamb in a clay pot, and, especially, by the haunch of lamb long-roasted with an earthy, unforgettable rice-and-liver stuffing.

If I had to pick out the one defining meal of my recent Grecian journeys, this one--with the sun slipping into the wine-dark sea, with local ouzo flowing like a cascade, with my new Lesvian friends debating the merits of Plato and the true nature of Sappho, and with the kitchen serenely turning something astonishingly old into something astonishingly new--would have to be it.

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To Petri