



A TASTE OF **GREEK** SUMMER

An East Bay author shares a feast from her childhood.

by **DOROTHY CALIMERIS** photography **JAMES CARRIERE**





I had the great fortune of growing up in a Greek village. But, before you conjure up images of a small seaside town on the Mediterranean, shift your imagination to the San Joaquin Valley. My grandparents emigrated in the 1920s from Chania, Crete, to Manteca, where they settled on 40 acres of fertile land. They immediately busied themselves and their nine children with the task of re-creating the comforts of home. In their case, that started with a large mulberry tree that became the social hub of the farm, where the whole extended family would gather weekly for feasts, Greek dancing to the music of my grandfather's band, and drunken singing of *mandinathes*, or Greek folk songs.

In time, they built a clay oven for baking bread, a press for making olive oil, and a dairy for making *yagourti* (yogurt) and *mezithra* (an aged ricotta-like cheese). All of this came together against the backdrop of the wonderful, lush produce growing in the hot valley sun.

They had walnut and almond trees; bee boxes for honey; lemon, orange, and citrus trees; and figs, strawberries, tomatoes, *adzuria* (Greek cucumbers), grapes, and fresh grape leaves. The grapes were for eating (my grandmother had been known to gain five pounds when they were in season), the grape leaves were for stuffing, and the less palatable grapes were turned into a wine that would just about make your hair fall out.

They had sweet, tender peaches and apricots dripping with juice; all kinds of squashes, which provided the family with delicate blossoms to stuff or fry; and melons—casaba, watermelon, and Crenshaw. My grandfather loved melons sliced in wedges, sprinkled with salt, and

eaten with a fork and knife.

All of us city slickers would drive out on the weekend. My mother, father, and brother and I lived in Oakland, as did some of my cousins. Every visit was a Greek festival. As soon as we were out of the car, all of the kids would run wild the entire day, eating as we went, until our parents loaded us, dirty, well fed, and exhausted, back into our massive cars of the '60s and '70s—with backseats big enough to double as sleeping berths.

It's no surprise that I grew up to be a chef, caterer, and food writer. My life's work has everything to do with trying to re-create the time I spent at our farm. The simple, pure, and delicious food. The feasting and celebrating the outdoors. Greece, like Manteca, has very hot summers that drive everyone outside for a cool breeze and some grilled food. This article, including a menu of recipes inspired by those childhood feasts, is a sneak peek into the material I've compiled for a book I am writing in











an attempt to recapture that time.

The menu begins with a grilled tomato flatbread, served hot with skordalia, a kind of Greek aioli with potatoes, and tzatziki, a cool and creamy cucumber yogurt dip. The entrée is a Mediterranean mixed grill of lemon fennel chicken, lamb chops prepared like my father used to make them, and sweet jumbo prawns in a chunky tomato, feta, and ouzo sauce. Gigantes, a gratin of white beans with a cheesy topping, and a classic *horiatiki* (of the village) salad round out the menu. Dessert is a buttery crisp phyllo shell with a hint of cinnamon, filled with creamy yogurt and warm honeyed apricots. Don't let the menu daunt you. Most of it can be done ahead, leaving only last-minute grilling.

Wine at the farm was always a glass of my grandfather's homemade red, often harsh and served in a water glass. Luckily, Greek wine has come a long way in recent years. After extensive research (I e-mailed my cousins), I have the following recommendations: Kritikos makes a good Cabernet and the occasional good Merlot. Estate Hatzimichalis (in the Atalanti valley) makes delicious reds. Both brands sell for about

\$20 a bottle.

Or, if you can stand it, try to be thoroughly Greek and serve icy cold retsina with the mixed grill. It is an acquired taste (being made from tree resin), so proceed at your own risk. When the retsina is very cold, it is a good accompaniment to the flavors of the grill. My dessert wine recommendation is a personal favorite, a Cypriot wine called St. John Commandaria. Its label boasts that it is "a delicious sweet wine of nobility" and "the oldest individually named wine in the world." It is sweet, with the aroma of port and the flavor of figs.

So, head outside and enjoy the first rush of warm weather while savoring the flavors of my childhood. Serve wine in a water glass, and raise it in a toast to *kali orexi*—healthy appetite!

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GREEK BBQ RECIPES

GRILLED TOMATO BREAD

This is a flatbread that I like to cook on the grill and serve with skordalia (potato garlic dip) and tzatziki (yogurt cucumber dip) for guests to enjoy while we grill the meats.

- 1/2 cup sun-dried tomatoes
- 1/2 cup boiling water
- 2 teaspoons dry yeast
- 2 cups warm water
- 1 tablespoon honey
- 2 tablespoons extra virgin olive oil
- 3 tablespoons finely chopped green onions
- 1 teaspoon dried Greek oregano or other high-quality dried oregano
- 1 teaspoon cumin seeds, slightly crushed
- 1 teaspoon salt
- 5–6 cups all-purpose unbleached flour
- 3 tablespoons olive oil to brush on cooked bread
- Sea salt to taste

Directions: Combine the sun-dried tomatoes and the boiling water, and set aside for about 30 minutes. Once the tomatoes have softened, chop them finely, and set aside.

In a large bowl, combine the yeast, warm water, and honey, and set aside for about 15 minutes until the yeast is foamy and has doubled in size. Add the chopped sun-dried tomatoes, olive oil, green onions, oregano, cumin seeds, and salt. Stir to combine. Add 5 cups of flour, turn the mixture out onto a flour board, and knead, adding more flour as necessary, until you have a smooth elastic ball. At this point, you could put the dough in a large plastic sealable bag and store in the refrigerator overnight. If you don't need to keep the dough overnight, place it in a lightly oiled bowl, cover with a dishcloth, and let it rest about an hour, or until almost doubled in size.

Return the dough to a lightly floured board and cut into 6 even

pieces. Take one piece of dough and flatten with your hands until it is about 5 inches in diameter, place the flattened piece of dough on a lightly floured cookie sheet, and shape the remaining pieces of dough. If dough was refrigerated, let disks set for 30–40 minutes before grilling.

When ready to cook, place the rounds on a medium-hot grill, grill on one side approximately 3 minutes or until you have grill marks on the bottom, flip the rounds, and grill the other side for another 3 minutes or so. Once the bread is cooked, brush with olive oil, sprinkle with sea salt, cut into wedges, and serve.

Serves 6–8 as an appetizer.

SKORDALIA

Leave it to the Greeks to serve mashed garlic potatoes on bread. Skordalia appears throughout Greece with ground almonds in some recipes and

toasted bread crumbs in others. But not in my family. Our recipe is pure potatoes, garlic, and oil. We typically serve it warm, freshly made. If that's not possible, and you make it ahead and chill it, be sure it comes to room temperature before you serve it. How much garlic you put in this dish is up to you, but true skordalia is very garlicky. Think of it as aioli with potatoes mashed in. The egg yolk helps with the texture. But, if you're uncomfortable adding a raw egg, you can leave it out.

- 1 pound Idaho or russet potatoes, peeled and cut into large pieces
- 2 teaspoons salt
- 3 cloves garlic, 1 clove left whole, 2 cloves minced
- 1/2 cup white wine vinegar
- 1/2 cup extra virgin olive oil
- 1 egg yolk
- Salt and pepper to taste
- Extra virgin olive oil to drizzle on top

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Directions: Place the potatoes in a large pot, cover them with water, and add the salt and 1 whole garlic clove. Bring to a boil, and cook until potatoes are tender. Drain the potatoes, and place them in a large bowl. Add the white wine vinegar and the 2 minced garlic cloves. With a handheld mixer, whip the potatoes, whip in the olive oil and egg yolk, and beat on high speed until the potatoes are light and fluffy. Season to taste with salt and pepper, and top with a generous drizzle of extra virgin olive oil.

You can serve this immediately or store it in the refrigerator in an airtight container until you're ready to serve.

Makes about 2 1/2 cups.

TZATZIKI

Tzatziki is often runny and disappointing in this country. True tzatziki is creamy, rich, and refreshing. In addition to being a great dip, it's wonderful dolloped on top of grilled lemon fennel chicken or grilled lamb chops.

Greek-style yogurt is pretty much everywhere now, but if you can't find it, buy a quart of plain whole milk yogurt, line a strainer with cheesecloth, and place the lined strainer over a bowl to catch the whey as it drips off. Spoon the yogurt into the lined strainer and allow to drain for several hours—overnight is even better if you have the time. If you are straining your yogurt overnight, it is best to refrigerate it.

- 1 medium-size cucumber, peeled, seeded, and shredded
- 1 teaspoon salt
- 2 cups strained whole milk Greek yogurt
- 1 clove garlic, minced
- 1 green onion, minced
- 1 bunch fresh mint leaves, not stems, chopped
- Salt and pepper to taste
- Extra virgin olive oil for drizzling

Directions: Place the shredded cucumber in a strainer and sprinkle with salt, toss to combine. Set the strainer over a bowl to catch the

drippings, and leave the cucumbers to drain for about 30 minutes. After 30 minutes, tap the strainer to knock off any extra moisture.

Combine all ingredients except the olive oil in a medium-size bowl. Cover and chill until ready to serve. When ready to serve, spoon into a serving bowl, and top with a drizzle of olive oil.

Makes about 2 1/2 cups.

GREEK MIXED GRILL

Whenever we all got together to eat at the farm, it truly was a feast, and there were often several types of meats to choose from. For this menu, I have chosen a selection of lamb, chicken, and prawns. Any one of these items makes a fine entrée, but when you have them all together, you can be pretty sure that everyone's tastes are accommodated.

Lemon Fennel Chicken

The grilled leftovers, if you have any, make a wonderful next-day lunch when combined with leftover *horiatiki* salad.

- 6 chicken breasts, boned and skinned
- 2 smallish bulbs of fennel, trimmed of branches and stems, 1 bulb sliced and the other finely chopped
- 1 lemon, thinly sliced
- 3 cloves of garlic, minced
- 1/3 cup finely chopped red onion
- Juice and zest of two lemons
- 1 tablespoon honey
- 1/3 cup olive oil
- 1 teaspoon salt and pepper to taste

Directions: Place the chicken breasts in a large plastic sealable bag, and set aside. In another bag, place the sliced fennel and sliced lemon, and set aside.

In a blender, combine the chopped fennel, garlic, red onion, juice and zest of 2 lemons, honey, olive oil, salt, and pepper. Blend to combine. Pour about 1/4 cup of the marinade over the fennel and lemon slices, seal the bag, and set aside to marinate. Pour the remaining marinade over the chicken, seal, and refrigerate to marinate for at least 2 hours or overnight.

When ready to grill, place the lemon and fennel slices on the grill for



about a minute a side or until marked, reserving the marinade. Arrange on a platter. Remove the chicken from its marinade and discard the marinade, place the chicken on a hot grill, and grill about 10 minutes a side. Turn and grill the other side. Place chicken on the platter lined with fennel and lemon, cover with foil, and allow to rest 10 minutes before serving. When ready to serve, remove the foil from the chicken and spoon the reserved marinade from the fennel and lemon, not from the chicken, on top.

Serves 6.

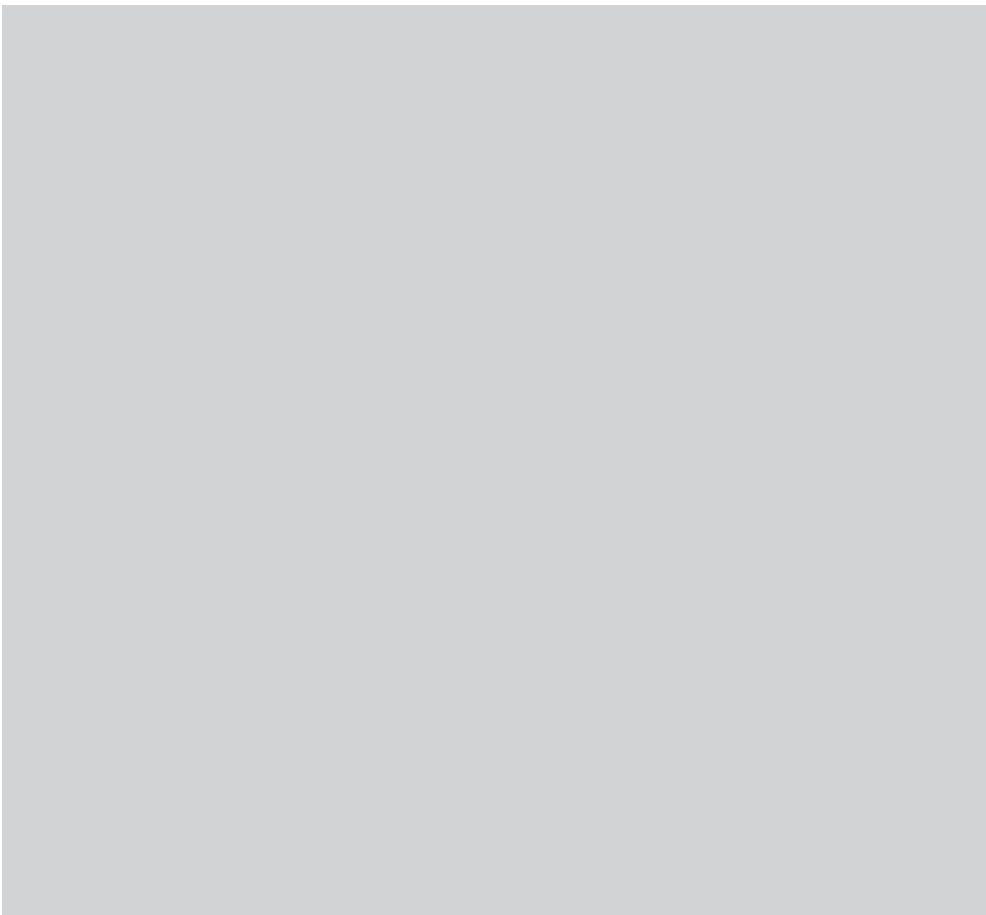
Dad's Lamb Chops

My father didn't cook unless it was over a grill. I never once saw him at the stove. But whether the food was to be grilled or cooked in the house, it was his job to season the meats. His particular specialty was lamb, and his secret was the red wine vinegar. The only vinegar we ever had in our house was Rattos red wine vinegar. My mother used to go to downtown Oakland with her empty gallon jug so Rattos's would fill it for her. She would

then drop 6 garlic cloves in the vinegar, where they would stay, infusing it with their deliciousness until it was time for a new jug. My father never salted his marinades; he would leave the seasoning of salt and pepper until after the meat was grilled.

- 12 loin or rib lamb chops trimmed of excess fat
- 1/2 cup good-quality garlic-infused red wine vinegar (Rattos still sells red wine vinegar)
- 1/3 cup extra virgin olive oil
- 1 tablespoon Greek oregano or other high-quality dried oregano
- 3 cloves garlic, crushed
- 1 red onion, coarsely chopped
- 2 lemons, cut in half
- Salt and pepper to taste
- Extra dried oregano to sprinkle on top (optional)

Directions: Place the lamb chops in a flat nonreactive pan in a single layer. In a medium bowl, combine the vinegar, olive oil, oregano, garlic, and red onion. Pour over the chops, and move the chops around in the



marinade until completely covered. Cover with plastic wrap, and let marinate overnight.

When ready to grill, remove the chops from the marinade, and pat dry with a paper towel. Discard the marinade. Grill the lamb over a hot grill about 7–8 minutes a side, depending on how rare or well done you like your lamb. While the lamb is still hot, generously squeeze the juice of 2 lemons over the chops, and season to taste with salt and pepper. Cover chops with foil, and let rest about 10 minutes before serving.

Serves 6.

Grilled Prawns With Ouzo

Tomato, prawns, ouzo, and feta just go together. Prawns cooked this way are especially good served on the grilled tomato flatbread with a dollop of skordalia and a handful of baby spinach leaves. Grilling the prawns in the shell renders a sweeter, more delectable shrimp.

- 1 basket cherry tomatoes, cut in half
 - 1 tablespoon balsamic vinegar
 - 2 tablespoons chopped Italian parsley
 - 1/3 cup extra virgin olive oil
 - 1 tablespoon ouzo (optional)
 - 1 pound large prawns with shells on, deveined
 - 3 ounces finely crumbled feta
- Salt and pepper to taste

Directions: Combine the cherry tomatoes, balsamic vinegar, parsley, olive oil, and ouzo together in a large bowl. Set aside or refrigerate until ready to serve.

Place the prawns on a hot grill in their shells, cook until the side on the grill turns pink, turn, and cook the other side (they will cook quickly). Place the hot grilled prawns into the bowl with the tomato mixture, add the crumbled feta, and season to taste with salt and pepper. The dish can be served right away or allowed to cool to room temperature to serve. Since the shells have been split prior to cooking, the prawns should slip off evenly. In any case, this is a fun, messy dish to eat, so provide lots of napkins.

GIGANTES

Gigantes are giant white beans that are baked in a tomato sauce. They come out of the oven soft, fragrant, and, in this case, with a crunchy topping of bread crumbs and *mezithra* cheese (a kind of aged ricotta). With a glass of hearty red wine and a wedge of bread, they are a meal on their own. It's hard to find true gigantes and even harder to find them in a can. However, I do run across them from time to time at specialty markets and health

food stores. If you cannot find canned gigantes, you can substitute any large white bean. Dried gigantes are often available, but prepping the beans is very time consuming.

- 1/4 cup olive oil
- 1 small onion, chopped
- 2 cloves garlic, minced
- 1 small bulb fennel, trimmed of stalks and stem, chopped
- 1 tablespoon honey
- 2 cups crushed tomatoes
- 1/3 cup red wine
- 2 teaspoons Greek oregano or other good oregano
- Salt and pepper to taste
- 1 small piece cinnamon stick
- 2 15-ounce cans of gigantes or other large white beans, drained
- 1 cup fresh bread crumbs
- 1/2 cup shredded or crumbled mezithra or parmesan cheese
- 2 tablespoons butter, melted

Directions: In a large sauté pan, heat the oil and add the onion, garlic, and fennel, and sauté until the vegetables are beginning to caramelize. Add the honey, and stir to combine. Add the tomatoes, red wine, and oregano. Taste the sauce, adding salt and pepper to taste. Add the cinnamon stick, and simmer the sauce, stirring occasionally for 15–20 minutes. Remove the cinnamon stick. Heat the oven to 375°F, and brush a 4-quart baking dish with olive oil. Combine the beans with the sauce, and spoon into the prepared baking dish.


In a small bowl, combine the bread crumbs, cheese, and butter. Cover the beans with an even layer of the topping. Place in the oven and cook 25–35 minutes or until the topping is evenly browned. Serve.

Serves 6.

HORIATIKI SALAD

All over Greece you will see *horiatiki* salad on the menu. The name simply refers to the salad of the *horio* or village. It can contain anything and changes seasonally, but most often it contains feta, cucumbers, and tomatoes. I love arranging the ingredients individually on a large plate, rather than tossing it. Serving it this way, you get to taste the distinct flavors of the ingredients and enjoy their various colors and shapes.

- 2 cucumbers, ideally English or hothouse variety

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- 4 large ripe tomatoes, cut in wedges or slices
 - 1 small red onion, thinly sliced
 - 1 red pepper, seeded and sliced thin
 - 1/2 pound feta, cubed
 - 1/2 cup pitted kalamata olives
 - 1/2 cup olive oil
 - 2 tablespoons red wine vinegar
 - Salt and pepper to taste
 - 2 tablespoons fresh oregano leaves
 - 1/4 cup torn mint leaves
 - 1 tablespoon finely chopped Italian parsley

Directions: If using English or hothouse cucumbers, peel and seed the cucumbers, and then slice into 1/4-inch slices. If using some other variety of cucumber, like Japanese or Lebanese, you can leave the (washed) skins on. Seeding is always a good idea when possible because it makes the dish more enjoyable.

On a medium decorative platter, arrange the cucumbers, tomatoes, red onion, red pepper, feta, and olives. Drizzle the olive oil and vinegar over the salad. Season to taste with salt and pepper. You can allow the salad to sit like this at room temperature for about an hour to bring out the flavors. When ready to serve, sprinkle with the chopped herbs.

Serves 6–8.

HONEYED APRICOTS IN PHYLLO CUPS

This dessert is not authentically Greek, but it is composed of authentically Greek ingredients. Crisp, lightly sweet phyllo cups with a hint of cinnamon hold thick creamy yogurt and are topped with slightly warmed apricot halves. It's crisp, cool, sweet, and warm all at once. The good news is that this can all be prepared ahead, it just needs last-minute assembly. This dessert is wonderful with any seasonal fruit.

For the Phyllo Cups

Phyllo cups are very delicate, so I always make extras to compensate for any broken cups.

- 1 stick butter, melted
- 1 teaspoon cinnamon
- 1/2 cup sugar
- 1/2 pound of phyllo

Directions: Heat the oven to 375°F, and place the rack in the middle of the oven. Butter 8 wells of a cupcake tin. Combine the cinnamon and sugar in a small bowl. Carefully unwrap the phyllo and lay flat on a cookie sheet. Cover the phyllo with plastic wrap to keep it from drying while you're working. Place one sheet of phyllo



on your workstation. Brush it with melted butter, and sprinkle it with the cinnamon sugar. Top with another sheet of phyllo, brush it with butter, and top it with cinnamon sugar, too. Stack the phyllo this way until you have 4 layers. Cut the sheet into 8 even squares. Place a square of phyllo into one of the cupcake wells, pressing it in, crinkling it a bit at the bottom to give it extra strength. Press the remaining 7 squares in the pan. Roll up the phyllo, rewrap, and store in the freezer for another use. Bake the phyllo for about 15–20 minutes or until golden brown. Allow to cool for about 5 minutes in the pan before carefully removing to a cooling rack to cool completely. The phyllo shells can be made a day ahead and stored overnight at room temperature in an airtight container. If the shells get a bit soft, crisp them for 5 minutes in a warm oven.

For the Yogurt and Apricots

- 2 tablespoons butter
- 16 ripe apricots, pitted
- 1/4 cup orange blossom (or other favorite) honey
- 1 tablespoon orange zest
- Touch of freshly grated nutmeg
- 2 cups whole milk Greek yogurt

Directions: In a large sauté pan, melt the butter and let it brown lightly. Add the apricots and honey and sauté for about 3 minutes only to warm the apricots. Remove from the heat and stir in the orange zest and nutmeg. You can make this earlier and give it a quick reheat.

When ready, place a generous dollop of yogurt in each phyllo shell, spoon the apricots over the yogurt, and serve. ■