

Christina Xenos

Talks to TNH about Food and Her Greek Heritage

By Eleni Sakellis

LOS ANGELES – Christina Xenos is a professional chef, cookbook author, recipe developer, and journalist based in Los Angeles. Her company, Sweet Greek Personal Chef Services, offers full personal chef and culinary services, cooking classes, and Greek-themed pop-up dining experiences, which have been featured in Food & Wine magazine among other media outlets. Xenos took time out of her busy schedule to talk to The National Herald about food, her Greek heritage, and her upcoming projects.

TNH: Did you always have an interest in food and cooking?
Christina Xenos: I've always loved to eat, and like most Greek children, I first learned how to cook by trailing my yayas around the kitchen. My mom also used to take me down to the church every summer so I could help the women of the community make all the spanakopita, tropita, doimathes, koulourakia, kourembedes, and baklava for our annual festival. I learned so much from them. I also always loved watching Julia Child and Lidia Bastianich on television, so I was interested in all kinds of cooking from a young age.

really important for me that people eat well, which is why I like to cook for them. I also think it's important that people know how and have the confidence to cook for themselves, which is why I teach cooking classes both in Greek food and other types of cuisine. I still enjoy my pop-ups the most, as they allow me to cook dishes from Greece that are delicious and seldom found in the United States.

As far as challenges, as with any business, dealing with a market that is constantly changing keeps me on my toes. I work very closely with my clients offering them a completely bespoke service. I tailor everything I make for them to their taste preferences and dietary needs. I'm constantly testing recipes to conform to their specific nutritional requirements. Sometimes potential clients ask me for meal delivery. I find that model of mass production very impersonal, as I would be making the same menu for many different people with that model. That's not the type of service I want to offer and not why I got into the business. So I really like to keep it personal and honor why I'm in this business.

TNH: Your Greek heritage clearly influences your work, what are some of your favorite family and food memories?

CX: Like all Greek families, all of our celebrations revolved around food, massive spreads of it filling tables for everyone to eat. Outside of that, I think some of my favorite food memories are during the time I spent visiting my yiajia in Greece. We would always have meze and raki out for our family and friends

who would stop by early in the evening, and then more people would stop by and more food would appear and the whole parea would laugh and talk into the night.

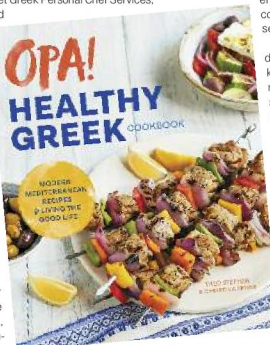
A much earlier memory was when I was really young and my parents were having a big dinner party. My mom's friend brought over a bowl of taramosalata. I had never tasted it before, and almost ate the whole bowl before my mother told me what it was made of. Knowing I was eating fish eggs really grossed me out at the time, but I kept eating it, and it's still one of my favorite dishes to make and eat today.

“ I love sharing traditional and contemporary Greek flavors and dishes with people. ”

TNH: What is the most rewarding aspect of your work?

CX: I love sharing traditional and contemporary Greek flavors and dishes with people. In Los Angeles, we have a fraction of the Greek restaurants that New York and Chicago have. So I love being a voice for Greek food in the city. I was also invited as a member of Les Dames d'Escoffier to cook at the James Beard House with Chef Argiro Barbarigou for a dinner featuring cuisine from the southern Aegean Islands. It was such an honor to work with her.

Overall, I find it extremely rewarding to work with my clients on a personal basis. Whether they don't have time to cook yet want to eat well, or have just had a baby and need hearty meals to sustain



Christina Xenos

Shares Her Spanakopita Recipe with TNH

Chef Christina Xenos graciously shared her spanakopita recipe with The National Herald. The recipe includes fresh herbs and real Greek feta cheese as well as tips to ensure your spanakopita is not soggy. The recipe is also available online: <https://mysweetgreek.com/recipes/spanakopita-greek-spinach-pie/>.

Spanakopita, Greek Spinach Pie with Feta

- 2 pounds fresh or frozen spinach
- 3 bunches scallions
- 3/4 pound (12 oz.) feta cheese
- 8 oz. cream cheese (optional)
- 1-2 cups shredded fetafotiri, or another shredded hard salty cheese like pecorino romano
- Assorted chopped fresh herbs (1/3 cup each of chopped dill, mint and flat leaf parsley)
- 2 tablespoons Cream of Wheat or Farina (optional)
- 2 eggs beaten, plus 1 egg yolk for egg wash
- 1 box phyllo dough (1 pound)
- 1 to 1-1/2 sticks butter, or 1 1/2 cup extra virgin olive oil for brushing phyllo
- 2 teaspoons extra virgin olive oil
- black pepper (a few shakes)

Instructions

1. Make the filling:
2. For fresh spinach: In a large pan, wilt the spinach – you will likely have to work in batches – for about 4 minutes. Pour into a colander or, better yet, a salad spinner to drain any excess water. Roughly chop. If using frozen spinach, defrost spinach and squeeze out all excess moisture. Using a kitchen cloth or a cheese cloth helps.
3. Chop the scallions. In a large pan, saute them in 2 tbs. Kalamata olive oil for about 4 minutes. Add the spinach and combine. Cooking the scallions is optional. It will mellow out the flavor, so if you like a more sharp scallion flavor, omit this step and just put the chopped scallions in a bowl. If you substitute onions or leeks for scallions, you must cook them.
4. Transfer mixture to a large bowl and add the cheese, herbs, black pepper, 2 beaten eggs, and Cream of Wheat (optional). **Mix well (I like to use my hands). The mix should be stable at this point. If it's watery add some more Cream of Wheat, and/or cheese. Set aside the filling.**
1. Phyllo crust/assembling the pie:
2. Preheat oven to 400 degrees.
3. Melt 1 stick of butter in a pan or in the microwave. If using olive oil, pour out 1 1/2 cup in a bowl.
4. Make sure the box of phyllo is at room temperature. When you're ready to use it, unwrap it so it is in one rectangular pile.
5. Dip your pastry brush in the melted butter or extra virgin and brush a 9 x 12-inch baking pan with butter or olive oil. Pick up

one leaf of phyllo and lay it in the pan. Brush phyllo with butter. Repeat layering the phyllo buttering each individual leaf. Layer about 10-12 leaves on the bottom.



6. Add the filling on top of the phyllo leaves. Evenly distribute it across the pan. Then start making your top crust by adding a leaf of phyllo, buttering it and adding another on top. Repeat the process for about 15 leaves.
7. Make sure to butter your top piece of phyllo. Score the pie with your knife you should be able to divide the pie evenly into 12 square pieces.
8. After you've scored it, beat the egg yolk with 1/2 tbs. water. Brush it over the top of the pie.
9. Bake pie until top is brown, about 45 minutes, to an hour.

Notes

The trick for good spanakopita is to make sure the filling is not too soggy. Make sure you thoroughly drain your spinach. Scoring your spanakopita after you've assembled it (prior to baking it) vents the pie, which also helps it from getting soggy. You can use olive oil instead of butter (or a mix) to brush on the phyllo. Make a few spanakopitas at a time and freeze them to easily bake off at a later time. All you have to do is make the pie up until you finish assembling it. Then wrap it in plastic wrap and freeze it. Once you are ready to bake it, take it out of the freezer, apply the egg wash on the top, and pop it into the oven and bake directly from frozen. You don't need to defrost it or anything, you just have to cook it for a bit longer.

TNH: Tell us a bit about your background, where in Greece is the family from?

CX: My family roots are from Crete, Milos, and Sparta. My grandparents ended up in Chicago after they immigrated to the United States. My parents met there, and I grew up in Dayton, Ohio. I graduated with a degree in Journalism from Ohio University's Scripps School of Journalism and worked in publishing both as a book editor and as an online editor for a magazine for 15 years before I was able to finally go to culinary school, and launch my personal chef business. I love that I have the background in journalism and publishing because it really helped when my writing partner and I started to plan and write Opa! The Healthy Greek Cookbook.

TNH: How long did it take to put together Sweet Greek Personal Chef Services and what were some of the challenges you faced?

CX: When I was in culinary school one of my friends told me to check out EatWith.com. It's a website that offers culinary experiences all over the world. I soon signed on as a chef with them and started throwing Greek-themed pop-up dinners for anyone who wanted to buy a ticket. After hosting for a year, I decided that I really enjoyed cooking for people, so I started my business: Sweet Greek Personal Chef Services. I cook all types of cuisine for my regular clients on a weekly basis. I also cook for private parties and offer cooking classes both in my clients' homes and in larger spaces for bigger groups. It's

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them during the first few months after, or have autoimmune disorders or cancer, it's really humbling to provide people with this service.

TNH: What are some of your favorite recipes to cook at home and/or for your clients?

CK: I'm very simple when I'm cooking for myself, which is essentially how Greek cuisine is. My husband and I walk down to our local farmers market in Hollywood every Sunday to shop all the fresh produce. I always pick up a few varieties of vegetables, and then pick up some fish from our fishmonger. We always have a nice dinner together on Sundays. Then the rest of the week I'm usually recipe developing and testing, so I'm always making something different. However, some of my favorite dishes to make both for us and my clients are kolokithokeftedes, chicken kapama, spanakopita, keftedes, youvetsi, and avgolemono soup, which is probably why all those recipes are in the cookbook. When I'm having people over, I also love marinating lamb and chicken and cooking it on our rotisserie.

TNH: Your cookbook was published in 2017, what was the experience like working on it from idea to publication?

CK: When my co-author Theo Stephan and I started working on Opal The Healthy Greek Cookbook, we knew we wanted to write a cookbook that reflected how people approach Greek food today, which has evolved over the years. We wanted to write a book that honored, but was a little different than all the traditional Greek cookbooks we have in our library. So while there are some very traditional recipes for pastitsio, spanakopita, and roasted leg of lamb, we also offer new approaches to dishes with recipes for avocado skordalia, feta crab cakes, and swordfish souvlaki that embody the spirit of Greek cooking and ingredients with a contemporary taste.

TNH: Are there any upcoming projects you are working on that you would like to share with TNH's readers?

CK: I'm working on taking my cooking classes and pop-up dinners on the road. I'm from Ohio and my husband is from New York, so I'm hoping to have an event or two when we're visiting over the holidays this year. Other than that, I'm working on filming more cooking videos for my Instagram TV (IGTV) and YouTube channels, and really working on giving people the confidence and knowledge to cook Greek food.

TNH: Is there another cookbook in the works?

CK: I've been fortunate enough to travel back to Greece for large blocks of time for the last few years and I'm constantly researching and logging recipes. This year, we were able to travel to Thessaloniki, Milos, and Sifnos. I collected inspiration and recipes from everywhere and keep adding the recipes to my arsenal. So, yes, I have a new book outlined, and am working on finding the right publisher for it. I was also fortunate enough to visit the saffron cooperative in Kozani this year to talk with the team there for a small independent cookbook project and magazine feature that I'm working on with my friend Emily Sandor. Greece is the third largest producer of saffron in the world, and the quality and integrity of the saffron from Greece is much better (in most cases) than what you can source outside of it. We're hoping that will be ready to go by early next year.

More information about Christina Xenos is available online: <http://xtnax.com> and about My Sweet Greek: <https://mysweetgreek.com/>.



Introducing Yanni's Olive Grove and its Innovative Olive Food Products

By Sofia Prodromou

Yanni's Olive Grove is a family company located in Nea Tenedos, Chalkidiki, Greece, producing early harvest Extra Virgin Olive Oil and olive food products from Chalkidiki olive tree varieties.

The company is on the list of the Top 100 (olive oil producing) Societies of the world and has garnered over 46 top international quality and high polyphenol awards.

HARVEST AND PROCESSING:

According to the instructions of the International Olive Oil Council (IOOC), the harvest is performed only by hand and the fruits are transported within a few hours of picking in ventilated plastic crates to the separator. They are then sorted and immediately transported either to the oil mill or to the processing location if they are to be olive snacks.

The Extra Virgin Olive Oil extraction process takes place at a low temperature and the storage is in zero oxygen and controlled temperature conditions. The bottling is done with nitrogen, ensuring maximum quality.

Yanni's Olive Grove produces a series of innovative olive snack which consists of Greek olives mixed with dried fruits. These products were recently launched in the North America market and are distinguished by a natural sweet taste combined with the ultimate healthiness because of the absence of sugar, preservatives, and salt. It is also liquid free and with its high energy value but low calorie count from fat, it has a shelf-life of 12 months. It is ideal for diabetics, vegans, and people with heart disease.

PRACTICES AND BELIEFS:

The fundamental belief of Yanni's Olive Grove is their dedication to the creation of the highest quality olive food products, which is ensured by the continuous improvement of the production process, which is under the care of the renowned American Farm School.

Yanni's produces the Protected Designation of Origin Chalkidiki Extra Virgin Olive Oil, which is the only Greek Extra Virgin Olive Oil certified as early harvest.

Production entails a green integrated management system, a unique high-tech cultivation system named Gaia Sense which was applied for the first time in Europe to Yanni's olive groves as a pilot olive tree cultivator and with a unique QR Code traceability system.



The company achieves maximum environmental protection through packaging, recycling, and waste management in combination with the production of products of the highest product quality.

Yanni's Olive Grove supports pioneering scientific research on the benefits of Extra Virgin Olive on humans. The scientists evaluate the effects of different kinds of Extra Virgin Olive Oil on amnesiac patients diagnosed with MCI, which leads to Alzheimer's disease, in collaboration with Prof. M. Tsolaki (Alzheimer Helles Association and the 1st Department of Neurology, AHEPA General Hospital Medical School, Aristotle University), Prof. A. Pantazaki and E. Tzekaki M.Sc. (Laboratory of Biochemistry, Aristotle University of Thessaloniki) and Prof. P. Magiatis (Department of Pharmacognosy and Natural Products Chemistry of National and Kapodistrian University of Athens).

The final Extra Virgin Olive Oil product based on this study's results is named YANNI'S MIC-OIL and will be launched in January 2020.

For more information visit www.yannisolivegrove.gr.

Sofia Prodromou, BS in Food Chemistry and Oenology at Aristotle University of Thessaloniki, represents the Prodromou Family, owner of Yanni's Olive Grove Company

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