

# IKARIA



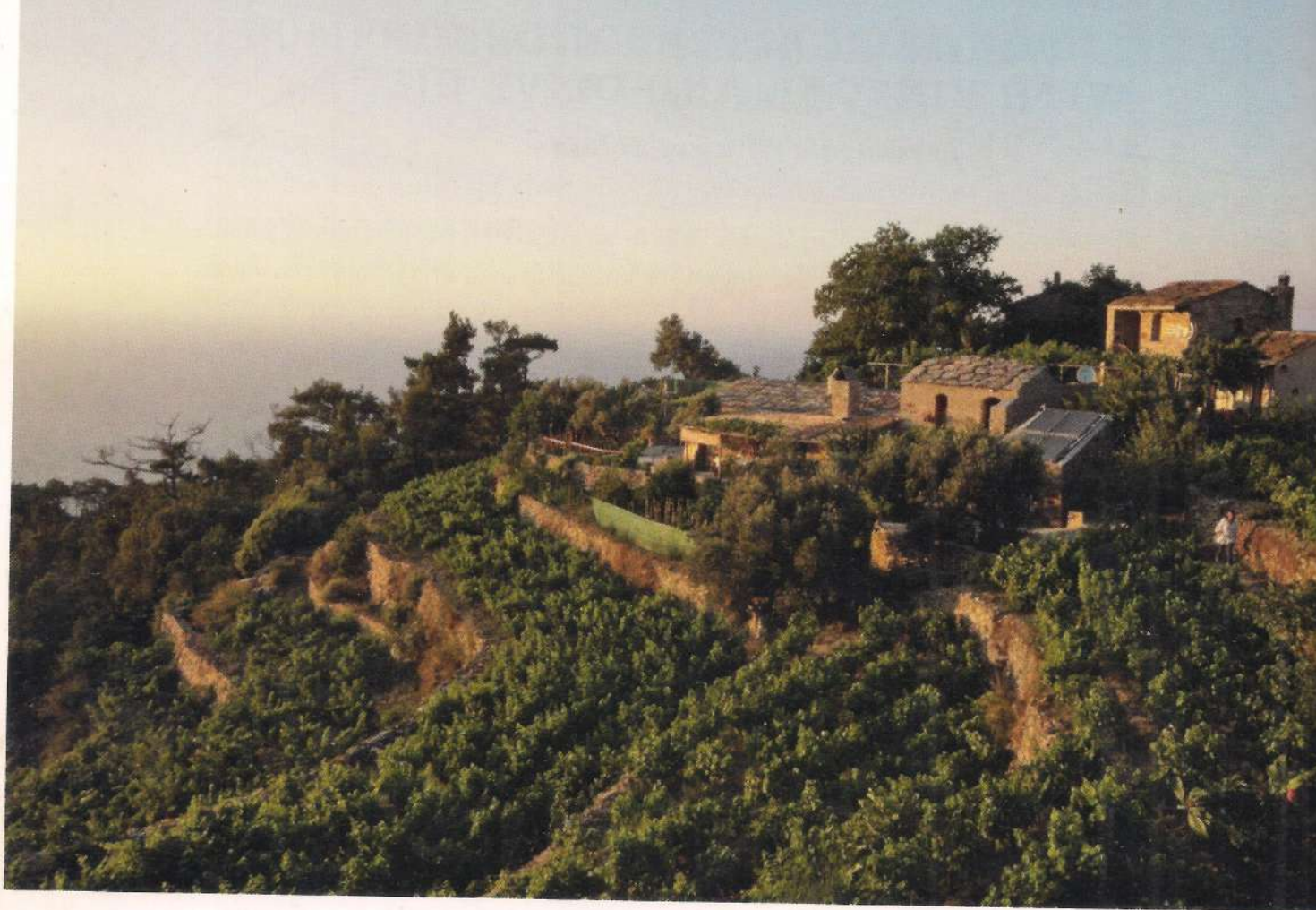
Lessons on Food, Life, and  
Longevity from the Greek Island  
Where People Forget to Die

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photography by VASSILIS STENOS







## IKARIA'S POTENT WINE

*Mezedes* are the ultimate convivial food, meant to be shared and enjoyed over a glass or two of wine or spirits. On Ikaria, the local wine is as unique as just about everything else.

The island has been known since antiquity for its wine, which was known as *Pramnios Oinos* in antiquity. (*Pramnos* is the name of a mountain peak on the island.) In Hellenistic and Roman times, the entire mountain range was a continuous vineyard and the wine was so prized that most of it was exported to Rome.

What set it apart was its strength. *Pramnios oinos*, which was produced from sun-dried grapes, was about 18% alcohol.

Today in Ikaria almost every family produces its own wine and they do so the ancient, traditional way: They let the grapes ripen on the vine and then lay them in the sun for about a week so that the sugar levels rise even more. Their juice is pressed in traditional stone presses and in many cases it is still stored the ancient way, in clay amphorae that are buried in the ground. Each clay vessel holds about 250 liters.

Even now, the wine in Ikaria is very strong, between 16% and 18% alcohol. In most wine-making regions, it is impossible to produce wines so strong in alcohol because normally the wine yeasts die when the alcohol level rises above 16%. But modern oenologists on Ikaria isolated a natural, indigenous yeast that can continue the fermentation process even when the alcohol content of the must rises above 16% alcohol. To this day, Ikarians still drink their strong wine the way the ancients did, by watering it down.

The main grape varieties on the island are the *Begleri*, a white variety; *Fokiano*, a red variety that was imported from Asia Minor about two centuries ago and flourishes on the island because the climatic conditions are similar; and, finally, the *Koundouro*, which is similar to a variety found all over the Aegean called *Mandilaria*. This grape is prized for its deep red color and is usually mixed with the more aromatic *Fokiano*. Muscat grapes, a few minor local varieties, and several international varieties have also been planted. There are three commercial vineyards: the *Afianes* estate, *Tsantiris*, and the *Karimalis* estate. *Afianes* exports his wines and I have seen them on menus as far away as New York City.





# SIMPLE ONION PIE

## *Kremmydopita*

I can't count the times I've enjoyed a bite of the simplest onion pie in the garden of my friend Eleni Karimali. This isn't exactly her recipe, but it's based on what she's told me she does, which is pretty much almost nothing save for sautéing a whole lot of coarsely chopped onions until they are sweet, and then spreading them between layers of phyllo. If you have a wood-burning oven, use it to bake this!

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### MAKES 8 TO 10 SERVINGS

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**12 tablespoons Greek extra virgin olive oil**

**8 large red onions, coarsely chopped (about 8 cups)**

**1 cup crumbled goat cheese or goat's milk feta cheese (optional)**

**Pinch of freshly grated nutmeg**

**Sea salt and freshly ground black pepper**

**Basic Homemade Phyllo Dough (page 103), at room temperature**

**Flour or cornstarch, for rolling out the phyllo dough**

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In a wide pot, heat 4 tablespoons of the olive oil over medium heat. Add the onions and cook, stirring occasionally, until they wilt and start to turn golden, about 30 minutes. Remove and set aside to cool slightly. Transfer to a bowl. Mix in the cheese (if using), nutmeg, and salt and pepper.

Position a rack in the center of the oven and preheat to 375°F (190°C). Lightly oil a 15-inch (39.5 cm) round pan or a rectangular roasting pan or rimmed baking sheet (16 x 12 inches [40 x 30 cm]).

Divide the phyllo dough into 4 equal-size balls. On a lightly floured surface, roll out the first dough ball, using the shape of your pan as the guide. For round pans, roll out to a circle about 18 inches in diameter; for rectangular pans roll out to a rectangle about 3 inches larger than the perimeter of the pan. Place the dough inside, leaving about 2 inches (5 cm) hanging over the edge. Brush with 2 tablespoons of olive oil. Repeat with the second piece of dough. Brush that, too, with olive oil.

Spread the filling evenly in the pan, over the second layer of phyllo. Repeat the rolling process for the third sheet, placing it over the filling, and pressing down gently. Brush generously with olive oil.

Finally, roll out the last piece of dough to a slightly smaller piece and place it over the surface of the pie. Join and fold in the bottom and top overhanging dough, rolling it decoratively around the perimeter of the pan to form a pretty rim. Brush the top of the pie generously with olive oil and score into serving pieces, taking care to not draw the knife all the way through to the bottom of the pan.

Bake until the pastry is golden and crisp and the pie pulls away from the edges of the pan, 40 to 50 minutes. Remove, cool in the pan, and serve.

# ELENI'S BAKED CHICKPEAS

## *Ta Revithia tis Elenis*

I just love this dish. For one, it's beautiful when cooked: The peppers and onions that top the chickpeas char slightly, and the simple combination of herbs, chickpeas, and vegetables is brilliant. It is my friend Eleni Karimali's recipe. She makes this for us and her pension guests every summer and she presents it dramatically, parading it from her wood-burning oven to our table in a large clay baking dish. We literally ooh and aah when she presents it. This is served on its own, as a main course, with good bread, a little feta cheese, maybe a dish of boiled greens or a salad. You can serve it right out of the oven or at room temperature.

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### MAKES 6 SERVINGS

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**1 pound dried chickpeas, soaked overnight**

**6 sprigs fresh thyme**

**2 sprigs fresh rosemary**

**3 bay leaves**

**Salt and freshly ground black pepper**

**3 large red onions, halved and sliced**

**3 garlic cloves, cut into slivers**

**1 red bell pepper, cut into ¼-inch (6-mm) rings**

**1 green bell pepper, cut into ¼-inch (6-mm) rings**

**1 yellow bell pepper, cut into ¼-inch (6-mm) rings**

**1 small carrot, halved lengthwise and cut lengthwise into thin (⅛-inch [3-mm]) strips**

**2 large firm-ripe tomatoes, cut crosswise into 6 slices**

**⅔ cup Greek extra virgin olive oil**

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Drain the chickpeas and place back in a large pot with enough fresh cold water to cover by 2 inches. Bring to a boil, then reduce to a simmer and cook until halfway to tender, about 1 hour. Reserving the cooking liquid, drain the chickpeas.

Meanwhile, preheat the oven to 325°F (160°C).

Place the drained chickpeas in an ovenproof clay or ceramic baking dish with a lid. Pour in enough of the reserved cooking liquid to come about two-thirds of the way up the beans. Add the herbs to the pan. Season with salt and black pepper.

Layering them in the following order, arrange the onions, garlic, bell peppers, carrot, and tomatoes over the chickpeas. Drizzle ⅓ cup of the olive oil over the contents of the baking dish. Cover the pan with its lid (or with parchment paper, then foil) and bake the chickpeas for 2 hours 30 minutes. Remove the cover and bake until very tender and the liquid is almost all gone and the vegetables on top are almost charred, another 30 minutes. Serve hot, warm, or at room temperature.



# ELENI KARIMALI'S NOODLES WITH YOGURT AND HERBS

## *Oi Hilopites tis Elenis me Yiaourti kai Myrodika*

The local homemade pasta variety, a flat, longish shape a little like fettuccine, is called *matsi*, perhaps after the Semitic matzoh. *Matsi*, either as a flat, eggless noodle or a square-shaped one, is found all over the eastern Aegean.

Our friend Eleni makes this delicious dish at the pension and winery she and her husband run in the village of Pygi. She makes all of her own pasta, and her small, cozy kitchen filled with wooden bowls, jars of preserves, and racks of dowels where strands of her fresh pasta hang to dry is one of my favorite places on the island. The herbs that she cuts for this dish come from the garden that surrounds her home. Use the freshest possible herbs for the best possible flavor, and try to source Greek yogurt from small producers (page 299).

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MAKES 4 TO 6 SERVINGS

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6 tablespoons Greek extra virgin olive oil  
1 large red onion, finely chopped  
2 garlic cloves, minced or very thinly sliced  
2 cups finely chopped mixed fresh herbs:  
marjoram, mint, oregano, wild fennel,  
parsley, thyme

Salt and freshly ground black pepper  
1 pound fettuccine or tagliatelle, preferably  
fresh  
2 cups plain Greek yogurt  
1 teaspoon grated lemon peel

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In a medium skillet, heat 2 tablespoons of the olive oil over medium heat. Add the onion and garlic and cook until soft, about 8 minutes.

In a small bowl, combine the herbs, onion-garlic mixture, and salt and pepper to taste.

Bring a large pot of well-salted water to a rolling boil and cook the pasta to desired doneness. Before draining, ladle out 2 cups of the pasta cooking water and whisk them into the yogurt, together with the remaining 4 tablespoons of olive oil and the lemon peel.

Drain the pasta and toss it together with the yogurt mixture and herbs. Season to taste with additional salt and pepper and serve hot.

Trim the fat from around the goat or lamb leg and, using a sharp paring knife make incisions about 1 inch (2.5 cm) deep all around the meat.

Preheat the oven to 375°F (190°C).

Using a mortar and pestle, pound the garlic, fresh oregano, lemon zest, 1 tablespoon of the olive oil, and pepper until the mixture becomes a paste. Season with salt.

Push a little of this mixture into each of the incisions around the meat.

Toss the potatoes in a large bowl with ½ cup of the olive oil, the dried oregano, rosemary, and salt and freshly ground black pepper.

Rub the outside of the meat with the remaining olive oil and season generously with salt and pepper. Place in the middle of a large roasting pan and spread the potatoes evenly around the pan. Pour in the wine.

Cover the pan with a lid (or with parchment paper, then a layer of foil to seal) and roast the meat and potatoes until tender, about 2 hours 30 minutes. Check occasionally for liquid content and turn the potatoes in the pan juices. Add water to the pan if the potatoes are very dry. Remove the lid (or parchment and foil) 15 to 20 minutes before the meat and potatoes are done, for them to brown nicely. Pour in the lemon juice and toss it with the potatoes.

Remove it from the oven and let it stand for 20 minutes before carving.







### SIPHONING OFF THE WINE

We are at our friend Kollia's for a meal, one of so many over the years. Wine waits on the table for the food to arrive, but we have no issue pouring some in anticipation. His wife, Argyro, is a great cook and the table is already laden with her cheese, her olives, boiled greens, and her bread. The wine, dark red and strong, edges slowly toward the bottom of a carafe and Kollia swings out of his chair, takes the bottle, and heads outside to the cellar to siphon off some more.

This is an old habit among wine-making Ikarians—the siphoning—that dates to the days, within my own living memory, when people kept their homemade wine in amphorae in the ground and served it from dried-out, swan-necked squashes. To transfer it required literally sucking it up through a small cut-off hose or straw only to then release it into the container. Now, wine is served in glass pitchers or bottles, but the trip to the siphon room, aka cellar, is still something men like to do. Needless to say, the more siphoners the merrier. There is no dearth of excuses for having to run to the cellar with a buddy or two to test and transfer the vino.

# GRAPE MOLASSES-CHOCOLATE CAKE

## *Petimezopita me Sokolata*

It's funny how recipes travel. *Petimezopita* is a cake I've been making for years, waiting anxiously every September for a supply of *petimezi* (grape molasses) from friends on Ikaria who make wine and go to the trouble to take the must, clarify it, and boil it down to syrup. One afternoon while I was visiting my friend Eleni, whose husband makes wine on a large and gorgeous estate in Pygi in the center of the island, she served us chocolate *petimezopita* cupcakes, of all things, and said, "You know, I used your recipe!" So, here is my recipe, reworked with Eleni's twist, to make something modern out of something utterly traditional and old-world.

The *petimezi* has a subtle sweetness, nowhere near as cloying as either honey or sugar. The result is a dense, dark cake that is moist and faintly reminiscent of the smell of grapes as they ferment.

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### MAKES 6 TO 8 CAKE SERVINGS OR 12 CUPCAKES

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1 cup water	¼ cup Greek <i>tsipouro</i> , ouzo, or grappa
1 cinnamon stick	1 teaspoon baking soda
5 whole cloves	5 to 6 cups all-purpose flour
1 cup Greek extra virgin olive oil	1 cup dark chocolate chips
6 tablespoons brown sugar	2 tablespoons granulated sugar
1½ cups <i>petimezi</i> (grape molasses)	½ cup sesame seeds
Grated peel and juice of 2 large oranges	

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Preheat the oven to 350°F (175°C). Lightly oil a 12-inch (30-cm) springform pan or 12 cups of a muffin tin.

In a small pot, combine the water, cinnamon stick, and cloves and bring to a boil over medium heat. Turn off the heat and let the spices steep for 15 minutes. Strain.

In a stand mixer fitted with the whisk attachment, whip the olive oil and brown sugar together until fluffy. Add the spice water, *petimezi*, orange peel, and *tsipouro* (or ouzo or grappa). Mix well.

Dissolve the baking soda in the orange juice and stir into the *petimezi* mixture.

Sift 5 cups of the flour into a medium bowl.

Gently whisk the flour into the *petimezi* mixture. If the batter is loose, add a little more flour. Stir in the chocolate chips, if using.

Scrape the batter into the springform or muffin cups. Toss the granulated sugar and sesame seeds together and sprinkle over the cake. Bake until a toothpick inserted in the center comes out clean, 50 minutes for the cake, 40 to 45 minutes for the cupcakes.

Serve the cake as is, or with a bit of *petimezi* or chocolate syrup drizzled over or around it. Serve the cupcakes, if making, the same way. *Petimezopita* is delicious with vanilla ice cream, too.

