

### Articles on greek wines

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## Good old Greece scores a great new triumph in New York

By *David Rosengarten*

Last week, the day after I returned from my two-week yummy-mama whirlwind tour of Japan, I had a commitment to be part of a Greek food-and-wine class at the prestigious De Gustibus cooking school at Macy's in New York City. Though it takes a few hours to make the adjustment from the joys of seaweed with dashi to the joys of sea bream with olive oil, I was confident that my full Hellenic sensibility would accompany me to the class, jet lag and all.

What I did worry about was the Hellenic form of modernity that I might find there.

My mind is open to more things than you can shake a Blackberry at--but when it comes to gastronomy, I'm a stickler for the old ways. Greece, possessor of such a splendid food-and-wine tradition, is undergoing ferment right now. On my trips to Greece last year, I kept trying the "new" kids on the plaka, with their Greek-based fusion-saturated experiments, and kept saying "I just want my spinach pie!" I toured the vineyards extensively and, happily, found a great deal of old Greek sensibility being preserved. However, the most traditional Greek wine--Retsina--is anathema to most modern Greek foodies, and wherever you go in the Greece wine lands today you're likely to see some Cabernet/Merlot 14-day wonder breaking out.

Holy Zeus. Just give me a portion of moussaka and a glass of Retsina and I'll be one happy Classicist.

At Macy's, I knew I'd be hosting, and cooking with, Jim Botsacos, who is Chef-Partner of Molyvos, one of New York's most popular Greek restaurants. I know Jim well, have been in Greece with him, have been going to his restaurant since its opening in 1997--and have always found this very talented chef to pay homage to his Greek background in his food. But.....not that much homage, unfortunately. His basic foods are great--I've always loved his Cretan Barley Rusk Salad--but his creative flights of fancy, in my tasting experience, have been booked on some airline other than Olympia.

My mind, on this day, was already scrambled with tofu. I needed a "Greek" experience to get my footing.

On the wine front, the selections had been made by my excellent friends Sofia Perpera and George Athanas, the Atlanta-based couple who have done so tremendously much to promote awareness of Greek wines in the U.S. And classicists though they are, I know that part of their program is to show wine geeks everywhere how "up-to-date" Greek wine is.

Let's cut to the chase: I should have been snoozing, worry-free, over the vast tracts of the Pacific ocean. Greece did show its modern face at this event--but it was a beautiful face, and it looked a hell of a lot like its grandparents.

There was something very new on the wine front, quite literally: George and Sofia brought a clutch of white wines from the brand-new 2006 vintage, wines making their debuts in the U.S. Greece has always had surprising white wine--far from the hot, baked, flabby whites you might infer as the issue of this warm-weather country. Mountain plantings are ubiquitous in Greece, and Greek grapes destined for white wine often

grow up in cool, hilly environments--yielding crisp, bright, tangy, light whites that are perfect for the seafood, lemon, herbs of Greek cuisine. But here's the new part: those in the Greek wine trade have realized the vital importance of getting these wines to overseas markets quickly! At De Gustibus, we reveled in four astonishingly fresh and refreshing whites that had been made just a few months earlier. The 2006 Vinho Verde from Portugal, one of the world's freshest whites, won't even get here until June.....and we're drinking 2006 Greek white in April. Bravo! I urge you, strongly, to find these white wines as soon as possible (bring these names to your best wine merchant), and work them into your spring/summer repertory:

2006 Emery Villaré

Rhodes

Grape Variety: Athiri

2006 Oenoforos Asproliithi

Patra

Grape Variety: Roditis

2006 Antonopoulos Moschofilero

Mantinia

Grape Variety: Moschofilero

2006 Gaia Thalassitis

Santorini

Grape Variety: Assyrtiko

And with what do you drink these bevs of summers? Well, I wouldn't put 'em with something heavy, or something sweet. They are light and bone-dry--and remarkably versatile with any foods that are themselves light and without sugar.

I was over-the-moon delighted to see this when the new generation of Jim Botsacos food started to appear during the class.

I knew it was coming. Just before we started cooking--I, of course, contributed a very traditional dish, an old-fashioned spinach-rice medley called (ital) spanakorizo (end ital (see recipe in The Rosengarten Report # 50) that Botsacos said tasted like his childhood--Jim and I had a heart-to-heart about Greek food theory. In his perception--which turned out to be right--he and I were both changing. He confessed that, in recent years, he has been pushing his "creative" food back to its Greek origins (I think great chefs all over the world, just now, are pushing their creative food back to its traditional origins--even Ferran Adria!). And he speculated that my hidebound palate is showing new signs of accepting innovation as long as it's logical innovation.

We went to the stoves--and Jim went to the head of the class. The food he presented was delicious, logical.....and utterly Greek in its underpinnings. The first dish was (ital) Tonos Lakerda (end ital), a kind of Greek gravlax made with raw tuna, lemon, dill and olive oil. Light, lovely--and knock-out fabulous with the light Greek whites. The second dish was (ital) Salata Me Kalamarackia Skharas (end ital), a busy but rewarding arrangement of Greek fava (the Santorini yellow split-pea purée), soaked barley rusk, and capers, topped by exquisitely flash-grilled pieces of squid. Again, we were in wine-and-food matching heaven with those pre-pubescent 2006 whites.

But the best was yet to be--for Botsacos then presented one of the very greatest "modern" Greek dishes I have ever tasted. Maybe it was one of the very greatest "modern" translations of a traditional food I have ever tasted. I don't know how to fit it into the pantheon of greatness just yet. It's too soon. But I can tell you this: the Muses sang when Jim pulled it from the oven, and it sounded like hip-hop.

The dish is (ital) Garides Sto Forno (end ital)--a deceptively simple-sounding thing, Shrimp from the Oven. Now that you're warned about the "deceptively simple" part, I am delighted to present this recipe to you in its entirety. Please don't be scared off by all the steps. Please do make it at your first opportunity:

### **GARIDES STO FOURNO**

(ital) Wild Head-On Prawns, Baked with Hot Pepper & Spiced Tomato Saltsa (end ital)

serves 6

Spiced Tomato Saltsa (recipe follows)

24 jumbo shrimp, head-on (see NOTE), peeled and deveined, tails intact

1 1/2 tbsps. Hot Pepper Mix (recipe follows)

coarse salt

Hot Pepper-Bread Crumb Mix (recipe follows)

6 tbsps. extra-virgin olive oil (plus extra for drizzling)

1. Pre-heat oven to 400 degrees F.
2. Place just enough of the Spiced Tomato Saltsa in the bottom of a 16x10x2 inch baking dish to cover the dish evenly. (You will have some Saltsa left over).
3. Season the prawns with the Hot Pepper Mix and salt to taste. Place them slightly shingled in 2 side-by-side lines in a single layer over the tomato saltsa in the baking dish. Sprinkle the Hot Pepper-Bread Crumb mix over the shrimp. Drizzle with olive oil and place in the pre-heated oven.
4. Bake for 15 to 20 minutes, or untilk the prawns are pinkish-white and the bread crumbs are golden brown. Remove from the oven, drizzle with a little extra olive oil, and divide the shrimp with sauce among 6 dinner plates. Serve immediately.

NOTE: It is essential to use very large shrimp for this recipe, with their heads on. Jim used U-10s--which means a pound of these babies adds up to no more than ten shrimp. You want that. He also used "wild," unfarmed shrimp--which is not absolutely essential, but makes the dish a little better if you can find excellent wild ones. Try your local fishmonger.....or refer to The Rosengarten Report # 44 for complete shrimp information, including mail-order shopping sources. Your best bet for finding shrimp like this is through a company called Farm-2-Market, at 800.477.2967. Or you can log on to: [www.f2m.com](http://www.f2m.com)

### **SPICED TOMATO SALTSA**

makes about 6 cups

1/2 cup olive oil

4 medium onions, halved and cut into thin half-moon shapes

coarse salt

freshly ground black pepper

1 1/2 tsps. ground cumin

1/2 cup sweet brown-red wine such as Mavrodaphne (Greek) or sweet Marsala (Sicilian)

a 32-ounce can of diced tomatoes with juice

6 whole allspice

6 whole cloves

2 cinnamon sticks, chopped into small pieces

2 tbsps. coriander seeds, smashed

3 tbsps. finely chopped fresh flat-leaf parsley

1. Heat the oil in a large, deep skillet with a lid over low heat. Add the onions along with a pinch of salt. Cover and cook, stirring frequently, for 20 to 25 minutes, or until the onions are very soft but not browned. Raise the heat to medium-high, uncover, and cook for 10 minutes, until the onions are lightly colored. Add the cumin and then the wine, and cook for 10 to 12 minutes, or until the pan is almost dry. Add the tomatoes and season with salt and pepper.

2. Combine the allspice, cloves, cinnamon sticks and coriander seeds in a piece of cheesecloth about 6 inches square to make a sachet. Gather up the ends and, using kitchen twine, tie the bag closed. Add the sachet to the simmering onion/tomato mixture. Cover and simmer for 20 minutes, or until the sauce is quite thick. Uncover, stir in the parsley, and season with salt and pepper to taste. Remove from heat and keep warm until ready to serve.

#### **HOT PEPPER MIX and HOT PEPPER-BREAD CRUMB MIX**

2 tbsps. Aleppo pepper (see NOTE)

1 1/2 tbsps. dried Greek oregano, crumbled (or you can use regular dried oregano)

1 tbsp. fennel seeds, toasted and crushed

1 tbsp. dried grated orange zest (it's easy to dry your own on the counter)

1 1/2 tsps. dried mint, crumbled

1 1/2 tsps. dried basil, crumbled

1 cup fresh bread crumbs

1/2 cup extra-virgin olive oil

1/4 cup chopped fresh flat-leaf parsley

1 garlic clove, minced

1. Combine the Aleppo pepper, oregano, fennel seeds, orange zest, mint, and basil in a mortar and pestle. When well-blended, measure out and reserve 3 tablespoons. This is the Hot Pepper Mix.

2. In a separate bowl, combine the bread crumbs with the olive oil, parsley, and garlic. Stir in the 3 tablespoons reserved Hot Pepper Mix. This mixture should resemble wet sand. If it doesn't, add olive oil,

about 1/2 teaspoon at a time. This is the Hot Pepper-Bread Crumb Mix.

3. Set aside until ready to use.

NOTE: Aleppo pepper can be found in Middle Eastern markets. Paula Wolfert says that if you can't find it, a combination of 3 parts sweet Hungarian paprika and 1 part ground, flavorful, mildly hot red pepper flakes will make an acceptable substitute.

Now, I have tried many a, many a classic Greek shrimp casserole--usually cooked with tomatoes and feta cheese--and I have had many a, many a disappointment. Botsacos somehow jumped in there, took what was best about this idea, kicked up the sauce seasoning, glammed up the crunchy topping, and, best of all, found a way for the shrimp to really pay off both in taste and texture.

It was more than a great dish to me: it was a signpost to the future. Especially with these fresh-style, rushed-to-America wines, this dish, and this moment, marked the dawn of a New era for me. No longer do I want to drink hemlock with inventive Greek Cuisine; I want to drink well-made Greek wines that perfectly match, and I want to remain as open as possible.

Especially when you've got a Jim Botsacos cookin' for you.

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