

Going Greek

NICOLETTA LOUCA MARRIES HER LOVE OF FOOD WITH HER GREEK-CYPRIOU HERITAGE AND PASSES IT ON TO THOSE WILLING TO 'GIVE IT A GO'.

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OPPOSITE PAGE A recipe taught to Nicoletta by her mother, 'Ricotta roll', dusted with sugar. THIS PAGE Nicoletta and her group of students after the informative and fun class.

You can find Nicoletta (Niki) Louca at the Yering Station Farmer's Market chatting breezily to her customers about her passion for traditional Greek Cypriot cookery. From here she sells her homemade Greek dips, Eliopitta (olive bread) and baklava made the Cypriot way from almonds. She also stocks nuts from a recipe handed down by her late father. "When we were kids the whole house was filled with the aroma of roasting salted peanuts. We would run around the house crying 'when will they be ready, Baba?'"

When I started making them I was going to call them Dad's Nuts but thought people might have a chuckle over that one. So I called them Greek Nuts instead." Niki is full of charm and incredibly cheeky.

A few years ago Matt Preston was scouring Melbourne for a great souvlaki. Niki emailed him, "You won't find a good one outside a traditional Greek kitchen."

Preston challenged her to cook him one if she was that cocky. The next thing she knew this food God, was on her doorstep with a slightly embarrassed photographer in tow.

Preston soon ate his words alongside Niki's souvlaki. She had every right to be cocky. The photographer agreed and ate two. Preston was so impressed he featured Niki's recipe in Age Epicure. "The souvlaki test did give me the confidence to start running my own business, the Balwyn Larder," said Niki. "After all I had always been interested in food." As a travel agent for twenty years Niki ate her way around the world. "Gelato in Italy, apple strudel in Vienna, pasta in Italy and an unforgettable ploughman's lunch in England."

But it is only in the last eighteen months that she found her new calling which marries her love of food with her Greek/Cypriot heritage. "My friends were always asking me how to cook traditional food and I would show them and their friends. Then I thought why not turn my passion into a business. And so My Greek Kitchen was born."

Niki offers a range of classes all held in her lavish home in Templestowe. These include Mezedes (starters) Kyria (mains) Ospria (legumes), Glyka (sweets), Hands on Greek Pittes and Greek BBQ and cooking with a wood fired oven. She has a large wood fire oven in her backyard.

There is nothing pretentious about Niki or her classes. She'll start the demonstration then throw you an apron saying, "Here have a go."



“ There is the gathering of people, the discussions about food, the handing down of traditions. And the glorious tastings. ”

FROM Left: Laughs are part of every one Nicoletta's classes. Tools of the trade. Fresh out of the oven is large Pitta.

The guided classes allow all attends to 'have a go'. Nicoletta expertly handling the Feta and Leek Pitta (Greek for Pie). Ready for lunch the Feta Pitta.

“How long do you cook the spanakopita?” asked one guest. “Till they are brown” chuckled Niki. “How much sugar do you put in?” asked another. “Until it’s sweet enough. I’ve yet to meet a Greek who measures anything.”

Niki does handout recipes so you have all the necessary information for when you get home but what she is teaching is that cookery should be a joyous, communal and instinctive pleasure. And her recipes work.

One of my classmates Helen, told me how she made a tray of baklava. “Then my son and his rowing team walked in. They devoured the lot and demanded to know who had made it.” Helen was chuffed to tell them she had made it herself.

What Niki is unwittingly passing on, is her family’s rich culinary history. Her parents were refugees from Cyprus after the Turkish invasion of 1975. “They came to Australia because they wanted to flee far away. Plus when you have a mother who is one of nine and a father who was one of five we had relatives almost everywhere. My mother had a sister who lived in Box Hill.”

In Australia they continued many of their farming practices of food production despite living in suburbia. The dictum was everything had to be homemade, homegrown and not processed.

Niki’s mother even built an oven in the backyard out

of mud. “It didn’t survive too many showers but at least she tried” said Niki.

Her mother also still grows the mint that goes into Niki’s cooking, drying it in the sun and rolling it until it is fine and devoid of any harsh stalks.

As a child Niki recalls getting up at 4 o’clock in the morning. “The men would drive off into the country to buy gallons of milk. The women would cook them a big breakfast for when they returned and scrub down the benches and get the huge pots ready.”

When they returned they would boil the milk up on a bonfire to make haloumi cheese. They would sit chatting while the milk boiled but it wasn’t about gossip or news. “It was about the family’s history of food. How Uncle so-and-so would wait two minutes from when it boiled or how a certain Aunty added more mint.”

Such gatherings kept the old ways alive. And it is this tradition that Niki passes on. There is the gathering of people, the discussions about food, the handing down of traditions. And the glorious tastings.

This is a way of life often lost in our nuclear families where too often cookery becomes a lonely and tiring occupation of dishing out the required meat and hopefully five veg, in the quickest most pre-prepared manner possible.

Niki, who worked 12-14 hour days as a travel agent, and often 16 hour shifts when she owned Balwyn Larder

shows some understanding of this plight.

“When I sit down at 8.30 at night I will still have a saucepan of chicken bones on the boil and I will make lots of stock and then freeze it,” she said.

“Next night’s meal might be as simple as rice (risotto) cooked in stock with some excellent haloumi cheese grated on top. Or a simple meal of good bread, dips and wine with some pan-fried Cypriot sausages. Good food doesn’t have to be time-consuming.”

The trick she says is not to think, “what will I have for tea tonight. But to pull something out of the freezer in the morning and be thinking during the day ‘what will I do with it?’”

Recently she and her friend Vivien bottled tomato sauce simmering the bottles in a 44-gallon drum overnight on a makeshift backyard fireplace they created from old bricks. They made 100 bottles each with of course some extras for extended family members. “Then it became a simple matter to make a pasta dish or a home-made pizza using the sauce,” said Niki.

Inspired by such a sauce an uncle recently decided he would make pizza in his wood-fired oven. He rang around for some suggestions about what to put on it and before he knew it he had 40 extended family members in his back yard with plenty of food for all. “Greeks won’t say what shall I bring,” said Niki “It is I will bring.”

Niki’s extended family, many of who live within

walking distance from one another, celebrate Christmas, Easter and major name days together. A recent visit from an overseas uncle meant daily gatherings over home-cooked meals. Her children attend the main gatherings. Her daughter Izabella is in Year 11 and her son Andreas at university. “Special family feasts are non-negotiable,” said Niki. This has meant links forged with each new generation. The kids now hold monthly Cousins’ Night where they head off for a meal together. “My son recently came back from a holiday and his friends told me he cooked them schnitzel. Not bought ones but made from dipping the chicken in egg wash and then in breadcrumbs. My son Andreas was named after my father. I would like to think that our food traditions will live on into the next generation.”

As well as meeting Niki at the Yering Station Farmer’s Market on the 3rd Sunday of each month she will also be running Greek cookery sessions at the Electrolux Cooking School at the Queen Victoria Market in their Spring program.

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This is as well as the cooking classes in her own home. www.mygreekkitchen.com.au