

Gourmet Greek?

Yes, it does exist.

Beverley Doole
meets two chefs
rescuing their
country's food
reputation

Tomato gazpacho with basil ice cream and silverside croutons? The chef may well have trained with Ferran Adrià, and I may be at a Greek gourmet festival, but that sounds just too weird. A martini glass arrives, an elegant vessel for the equally refined chilled soup and dollop of green ice cream. To my relief, three crispy fried whitebait lie beside it – an error in translation, not in ingredients.

Chef Christoforos Peskias is known to spring surprises – the menu of 48, his much acclaimed restaurant in Athens, features tomato sorbet, cucumber foam and feta jelly, his take on a Greek salad – but he plays it safe at Sani Gourmet, the annual food festival near Thessaloniki in northern Greece. He is on a mission to rescue the reputation of Greek food and for him it's simple: "There's tourist food, and there's local food, and the local food is much better."

"Greece has a bad reputation because of bad touristy places. In resorts like Faliraki people get drunk, fall out of clubs at 4am and don't care what they eat. They keep buying greasy kebabs. Restaurants compete for tourists on price, they try to

I sample the Karamolegos version of Greek salad – no slab of feta topped with dusty herbs here



make a year's living in a five-month season, but you can't eat proper food for €6. However, in the Greek home there is a food tradition, in the countryside people eat good food. They have the ingredients, the *horta* [local greens], the tomatoes, the lamb, the olive oil."

It is those ingredients that Peskias keeps coming back to, serving them up with a modern twist. His slow-cooked lamb is so tender that I don't need to use a knife. And when he says slow-cooked, he means it: 60 hours at 65°C in an air-tight oven bag, along with thyme, rosemary, bay and garlic. The meat is then topped with a mixture of vinegar, garlic and sugar and flash-grilled to caramelise.

The flavours shout "Greece" but the creative flair is something most tourists would not find on their travels. This is the gap that Peskias and chefs at Sani Gourmet are trying to bridge.

Chrysanthos Karamolegos is an unlikely Messiah, yet his innovative restaurants in Santorini, Athens and Sani have established him as one of the top chefs in Greece. He shuns publicity – throughout the three days of the gourmet festival he plays hard-to-get with journalists, preferring to let his food do the talking. I glimpse him at work in NTomata, his friendly, open restaurant on Sani marina, where he strides by in his white chef's jacket and black Nike track pants.

Out of his kitchen comes platter after platter of the freshest seafood, skilfully marinated meat, crisp and perfectly dressed salads. All feature traditional Greek ingredients: sardine fillets are fried in tempura batter and sesame seeds, served with fig vinaigrette and pickled lemons. Grilled langoustine sit on top of a creamy risotto that's absorbed the flavours of ouzo, lemon and basil.

And finally, after three days in Greece, I sample my first Greek salad, or Karamolegos's interpretation of it. No slab of feta topped with dusty herbs here. Tomato, cucumber and onion – the usual suspects – are sliced and combined with pieces of toasted pita bread, fresh herbs and cracked coriander seed. On top goes a creamy feta-cheese dressing, finished off with a dollop of olive tapenade. Yes, the classic ingre-

A recipe for choriatiki

Greek salad with feta dressing and grilled pita bread

Ingredients

Serves four as a mezze

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4 tomatoes cut into quarters

1/3 cucumber finely sliced

1/2 spring onion finely chopped

A few sprigs of parsley, coarsely chopped

A few leaves of mint,

coarsely chopped
1 tsp cracked coriander seeds

2 pieces pita bread cut into quarters and grilled or toasted

Salt & pepper

1 tsp black olive tapenade

Dressing

50g Greek feta cheese

1 tbsp finely grated parmesan

1 tbsp red wine vinegar

Juice of 1/2 lemon

2 tsp condensed milk

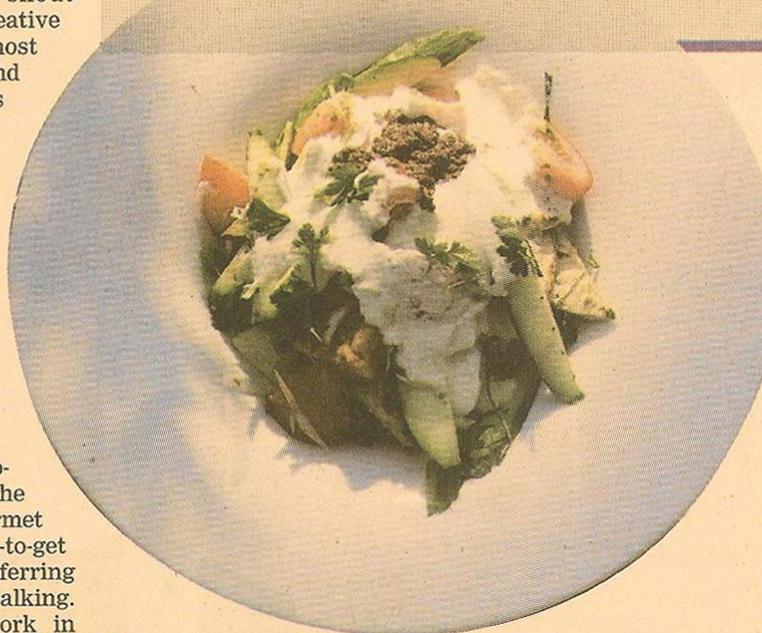
2 tbsp olive oil

2 tbsp sunflower oil

Method

● For the dressing, pulse the first five ingredients in a blender until the feta has softened. Then slowly add the oils. If it is too thick, whisk in some plain yoghurt.

● Assemble just before serving. Place the tomato, cucumber, spring onion and toasted pita slices in a deep plate, sprinkle on the parsley, mint and coriander, and season with salt and pepper. Spoon on the dressing and top with tapenade.



dients are all there, but presented with wit and flair.

In Britain this man could be a celebrity chef, with cook books, TV shows and frying-pan endorsements. In Greece he is a cook, pouring his energy into creating good, simple, fresh food that is a million miles away from the oily moussaka and tired taramasalata of disappointing holiday meze. With this new generation of chefs, Greece should be regarded as a place to come for the food as well as the beaches and ancient ruins.

Peskias has advice for tourists who want to eat well: "Ask a local for a good place to eat. Get off the main street. Avoid the tourist traps." (The same could be said for eating in Paris or Rome.)

For him, improving the standard of Greek food isn't about striving for a Michelin star, although he admits it would be good for business. "I have doubts about the system. It's too old-fashioned in its choices. I don't have

tablecloths in my restaurant and I don't want them. Our food is different. People don't want to eat food that is too academic.

"I don't want to eat foie gras and French-style food in Greece. I want to eat the fresh ingredients. Just good food like the Greeks eat."

Sample Sani

The 2008 Sani Gourmet will be from May 17 to 24. Sani Resort, 630 77 Kassandra, Halkidiki, Greece. Tel: +30 237-409 9400 www.saniresort.gr

48, Armatolou Street and Klefton Street 48, Ambelokipi, Athens Tel: +30 210 641 1082, www.48therestaurant.com

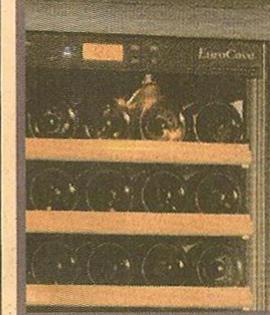
NTomata, Sani Marina, Kassandra, Halkidiki. Tel: +31 237-409 9465 www.saniresort.gr

Apla, Harilaou Trikoupi 135, Athens, tel: +30 210 620 3102; and Apla, Ekalis 39, Nea Eritrea, Athens. Tel: +30 210 320 3109

Beverley Doole travelled to Sani Resort with Seasons in Style, tel: +44 (0)1244-202 000, www.seasonsinstyle.co.uk

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