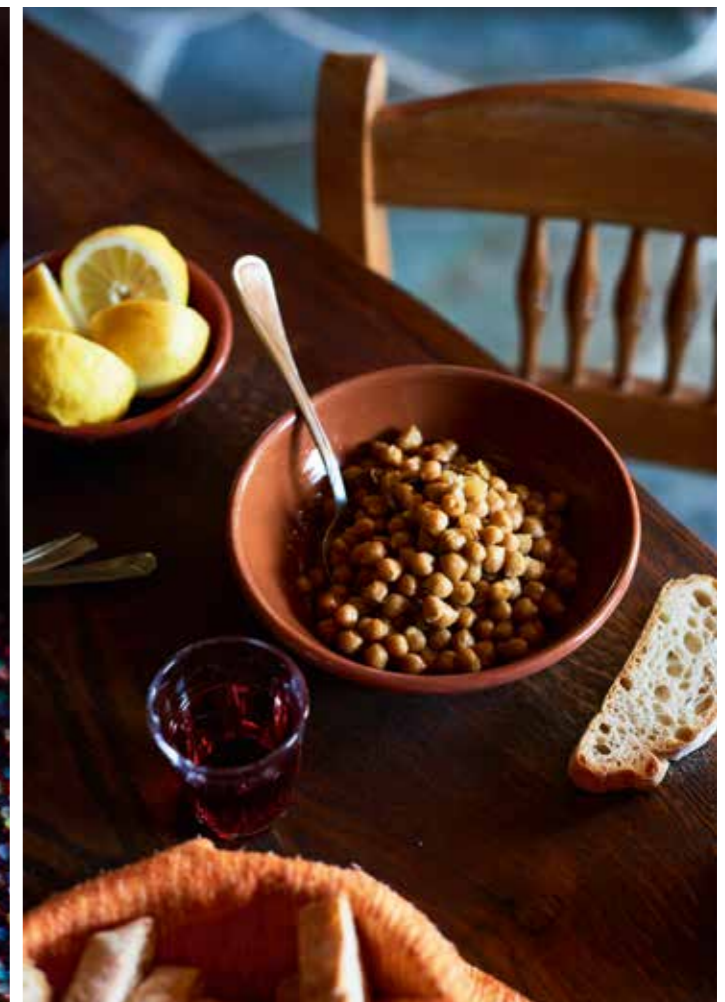


# SECOND NATURE

The island of Sifnos holds food at the heart of its landscape and culture. The birthplace of Greece's first celebrity chef, it's a place where locals embrace culinary rituals that have been kept alive for centuries

WORDS: ELLA BUCHAN. PHOTOGRAPHS: ISSY CROKER





## SUNDAY LUNCH IS A TWO-DAY AFFAIR ON SIFNOS, A SMALL, JAGGED TRIANGLE IN GREECE'S WESTERN CYCLADES.

From left: George Narlis preparing Sunday lunch; a traditional skepastaria pot; ingredients for making revithada. Previous pages, from left: George picks onions for the meal; local vilita greens with pistachios

Preparations begin on Saturday afternoon when revithada, a traditional chickpea stew, is readied for the oven.

At Narlis Farm, near Apollonia, on the island's eastern side, the weekly ritual is just beginning. I follow a long, dusty driveway towards a low stone outbuilding, where owners George and Dina Narlis welcome me with hugs and tiny cups of robust Greek coffee. The interior is warmed and scented by an oven fed with olive wood, and a long wooden table is set with starkly few ingredients: a bowl of chickpeas, a heap of small, pinkish onions, a glass of olive oil and two dried bay leaves.

Aside from water and salt, this is all that goes into the stew — and it's this simplicity that, in George's opinion, makes Sifnian food so famously delicious. The island is just 9.3 miles long by 4.7 miles wide and has fewer than 3,000 residents. Yet it has a weighty culinary reputation, even by the standards of its location; the South Aegean region,

encompassing the Cyclades and Dodecanese islands, has been named one of two European Regions of Gastronomy for 2019.

For George, who was born here on his grandfather's farm in the 1950s and now runs cooking classes for locals and tourists, it comes down to tradition and ingredients. "With very nice produce, it's difficult to make bad food," he shrugs.

It rains so rarely here, George explains, that most crops are dry-farmed from seeds that require little water. From plums to potatoes, tomatoes to watermelon, each ingredient tastes distilled to its essence, like something a chef might create with syringes and spherification.

Dina lays out a spread: there's a thick, earthy paste of yellow split peas, homemade manoura (cheese made with goat's and sheep's milk, matured with the sediment from red-wine barrels), pickled vine leaves and golden chips with a crack of black pepper. We eat as George prepares the stew, pouring the chickpeas (which have been soaked overnight) into a skepastaria, a squat, treacle-brown ceramic dish used only for revithada.

George pauses as people start trickling in, each carrying their own pots of stew to be cooked in the Narlis' oven. Communal cooking stretches back centuries here; not everyone



Clockwise from top left: doorway in the village of Artemonas; preparing sweet treats at Theodorou; Panagia Poulati, one of the island's seven azure-domed churches, in the village of Kastro; freshly made amygdalota

has an oven like this, and sharing means they can save on wood, although George says he wouldn't charge them if they stayed to chat. "People used to bring food and share," he says, wistfully. "They don't stay anymore."

George slices onions straight into the pot, then adds salt, bay leaves, olive oil and water before replacing the lid. Dina sets it alongside the half-dozen villagers' pots at the edge of the oven, which has now reached 450C, before George shuffles them in, one by one, using a long stick. He swiftly clangs the cast-iron door shut and seals the edges with damp, plum-coloured rags. That's it; everything will bake overnight, ready to eat tomorrow lunchtime.

The couple repeat this process every weekend, as do many Sifnians. "It's second nature," says Dina. "And it's very tasty."

"This is the best food in Greece," adds George. "Why? We don't use heavy spices. We need to understand the ingredients — the chickpeas — not the strong flavours of the spices."

The story of revithada is interwoven with the island's tradition of pottery, which stretches back to 3000BC. Potters' workshops were traditionally located on the coast so they could sell their wares, made from renowned local clay, to traders arriving by boat. The potters would leave for their workshops on a Monday and return home each Saturday expecting to be fed. Their wives learned to make the simple chickpea dish "so they could have a day off", says George; baking overnight meant not having to cook on Sundays.

In Kastro, where medieval walls rise above the bluffs on Sifnos' east coast, I try another slow-baked dish, this time at Leonidas taverna. The mastelo — lamb with wine and dill, cooked overnight in a clay pot — is served with buttery potatoes and a rich, sticky-sweet jam of capers, onions and vinegar.

From the restaurant's terrace, food is visible everywhere, etched into the landscape and incorporated into the architecture. The hillsides are carved into deep, flat terraces, taming the island's steep slopes for cultivation. Wild caper bushes burst from the cracks of a stone wall, just steps from the table. Wild mint and sage bushes grow in the shadows of olive, fig and almond trees.

There are squat windmills, cube-shaped beehives from which thyme honey is harvested in August, and old 'pigeon houses' with intricate triangular holes in the lofts, where birds were once bred for eating. The island's sugar-cube homes have deep gutters to collect rainwater and are topped with chimneys resembling cooking pots, spun from Sifnian clay.

### The flavour of Sifnos

The island's wider culinary fame is down to one man, Nikolaos Tselementes, a Sifnian chef who, in the 1930s, authored the groundbreaking *Odigos Mageirikis* ('Cooking Guide'). The tome is so universally beloved that 'Tselementes' has become shorthand for 'cookbook', and almost every household in the country has a copy.

Having honed his skills in Austria and the US, Tselementes introduced cream and butter to Greek kitchens, paving the way for dishes such as moussaka, with its wobbly layers of bechamel sauce. If this sits uneasily with the simple cuisine of Sifnos it doesn't seem to matter here. Tselementes placed the island on the culinary map, and his legacy is palpable.

Giorgos Samoilis, who moved from Athens to become head chef at Omega3, on the island's south coast, admits the association was a key factor for him. "The most famous Greek chef came from here," he says. The chic, open-sided seafood spot sits mere steps from the shortbread-hued sand of Platis Gialos beach and is considered one of the best modern restaurants on the island.

The menu is a sea-sprayed love letter to Sifnian produce. I taste delicately grainy sea urchin with bottarga (cured grey mullet roe) in tangy tomato water, and orzo with salty-sweet crayfish and ouzo sauce. A small brown biscuit, made with manoura and topped with herring and tomato, delivers an addictive hit of umami.

Giorgos sources most of his fruit and veg from Narlis Farm, to which I return to finally try those slow-cooked chickpeas. The room is thick with a herby, meaty scent, similar to that of a lamb or beef stew. Which is it, I wonder? "Revithada!" says George, white teeth flashing across his tanned face in a grin.

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## ISLAND SPECIALITIES

### Paros

Its cuisine has some similarities to that of nearby Sifnos, but one of Paros' specialities is karavoli (giant snails) simmered with garlic, fried or served in onion stew. They're celebrated during the Festival of the Karavolas, held every year on the first Saturday after 15 August.

### Symi

The speciality on this Dodecanese island is tiny red shrimp, fried and served with chilli flakes or just a sprinkle of salt and a crack of pepper. There's no need to peel them — the shells are so soft and delicate, you can eat the whole thing.

### Crete

Olive oil is a key ingredient in Greek cuisine — and Crete's is considered among the best. The hilly groves around Heraklion and Chania mostly yield Koroneiki olives, producing a vividly green and delicately fruity oil.

### Chios

Sweet, herby liqueur mastiha is sipped and savoured throughout Greece, but its main ingredient — mastic, a pine-scented amber resin — is harvested only in southern Chios.

### Santorini

It may be known for its beauty, but Santorini has a cuisine to match, including ntomatokeftedes — fritters of tomatoes, peppers, onion and herbs — and Santorini pudding, made with semolina and milk, often with added chocolate and wine sauce.

The scent lingers. It's the onions, which have risen to form a slightly blackened, caramelised lid over the chickpeas; it's the smokiness from the olive wood; and, perhaps, it's Sifnos itself. "It won't be so tasty at home," George tells me, with mock sympathy. He ladles out portions into bowls and adds a squeeze of lemon. The flavours are deep and savoury, nutty and subtly fragrant.

It's also delicious. "It has to be!" says George. "If I'm eating this all my life..." He never gets bored of revithada. In fact, he's mildly outraged at the suggestion. "Every weekend, it's like the first time. People in Sifnos say: 'It's Sunday tomorrow. Chickpeas!'"

Dina tops up our wine glasses; it's a pale ruby blend with earthy, sour cherry notes, made right here on the island.

Later, as I rise to leave, she brings over a saucer of shimmering pink jam, made with rose petals. I'm offered more wine. Maybe I'd like a Greek coffee? Perhaps this is what really makes dining here so special: the hospitality. Pretty much everywhere I go on Sifnos, I'm offered food, drink and an invitation to return.

### Never say goodbye

At Apostolidis ceramics workshop, on a hilly perch just outside the bay of Kamares, third-generation potter Giannis Apostolidis cobbles together a spread of manoura, salted cherry tomatoes and halved apricots, freshly plucked from his tree. He brandishes a plastic bottle filled with homemade raki — a clear, grape-based spirit. His ginger cat, Mimis, presses against my legs as I peer at the shelves of unglazed cooking pots, mugs and plates, made with clay sourced just outside the door. The potter hops around barefoot, brushing his wavy black hair from his face as he fetches more cheese, more bread and more raki for us to dine on. When it's time to leave, he asks me to visit again when — not if — I'm back.

Farewells aren't popular on Sifnos. People prefer to make plans instead. I end a visit to Tsikali dairy, where Nikos Fratziskaros makes manoura, with an armful of cheeses and an invitation to visit his restaurant and farm in Vathi, on the island's southeastern coast.

At Theodorou, a lavender-shuttered sweet shop tucked down a narrow path in the elegant village of Artemonas, I browse shelves of Turkish delight, pasteli (bars of sesame and honey) and tubs of 'submarine', a water, sugar and glucose goo, served in glasses of cold water. Two days later, I'm back by invitation to watch owner Vasilodimos Theodorou make amygdalota — fragrant almond sweets that are prepared with lemon syrup, then rolled into sausage shapes by hands doused in rosewater.

Just across the street, Zoi and Alberto Bourdeth operate a supper club. They're mainly based in Athens, but their hearts are in Sifnos, where they serve flavourful,



### Slow-roasted goat

Artist and chef **Alberto Bourdeth's** take on traditional mastello (slow-roasted lamb or goat) adds extra herbs and spices for bright, fragrant flavours

**SERVES: 4-6** **TAKES: 5 HRS**

#### INGREDIENTS

2kg goat (or lamb) leg  
3 tsp brown sugar

#### FOR THE MARINADE

3 garlic cloves, finely chopped  
2 spring onions, sliced  
2-3 tbsp rosemary, finely chopped  
2 tbsp sage, finely chopped  
16 tbsp flat leaf parsley, finely chopped  
16 tbsp dill, finely chopped  
¼ tsp curry powder  
1 tsp oregano, finely chopped  
2 lemons, pitted and cubed  
150ml extra virgin olive oil

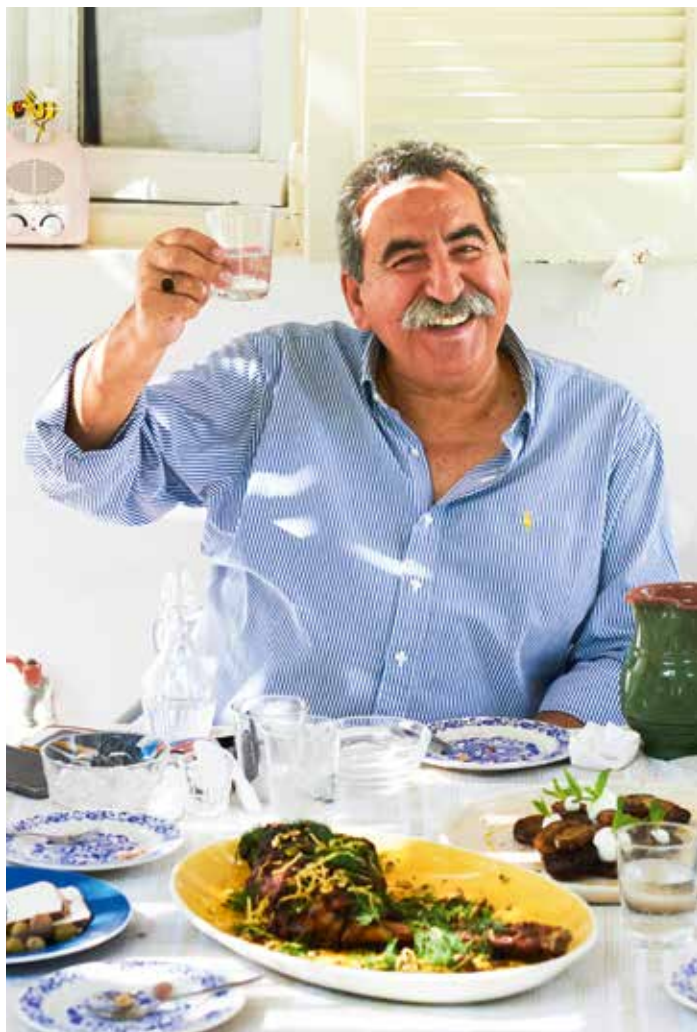
#### FOR THE GARNISH

1 tbsp extra virgin olive oil  
100g pistachios, shelled  
1 tsp black sesame seeds  
1 tsp smoked sea salt

5 tbsp dill, roughly chopped, to serve  
peel of 2-3 lemons, sliced, to serve

#### METHOD

- Heat oven to 200C, fan 180C, gas 6. Combine all the ingredients for the marinade in a large bowl and season with salt and pepper.
- Put the meat in a large, deep baking dish and rub it with the marinade. Pour in 250ml water, then cover and bake for around 3 hrs 45 mins, basting at intervals and adding extra water if needed.
- Uncover the dish and bake for a further 25 mins, then sprinkle with the brown sugar and bake for a final 25 mins. Remove from the oven and leave to rest.
- To make the garnish, tip the olive oil, pistachios, black sesame seeds and smoked salt into a hot frying pan and stir until golden (around 5 mins).
- Place the meat on a platter and pour over any remaining juices from the pan. To serve, top with the pistachio garnish and sprinkle with the dill and lemon peel.



artfully presented dishes to friends, family and — since word spread a few years ago — paying guests.

I join them for a late lunch. Zoi's parents and neighbours are gathered around the outdoor table, shaded by a bamboo gazebo. Her father, Kostas, takes on the role of raki-pourer, constantly topping up glasses and bellowing "Yamas!" ("Cheers!") with a twitch of his handlebar moustache.

Alberto dishes up a beef tartare with onion, mint, dill and wild capers, served alongside manoura crisps. His slow-roasted goat leg, zingy with lemon and local herbs, is so heavenly it silences the group. There are also vlita greens from the garden, blanched and prepared with lemon, olive oil and salt; they taste like sage leaves, only more delicate. "They're kind to your mouth", as Zoi puts it.

The day has softened into dusk when I leave (after a final course of pistachio crumble with thick yoghurt, washed down with a few more rakis), and my belly is still full when I wake the next morning before dawn. My head is thrumming, too; I blame the Sifnian hospitality.

Here, there's only one way to cure a hangover: drown it in the sea. Terraces jut below my hotel room like a staircase for

giants — or perhaps for Greek gods. My mortal legs trace a narrower path, one that staggers steeply to the water.

I stumble past low stone walls, where wild capers sprout between rocks. Honeybees form a hazy cloud around thyme bushes, bright with dinky purple flowers. The first strains of sun warm my skin as I skirt past Panagia Poulati, one of the island's seven azure-domed churches, each of which has an annual feast day that revolves, unsurprisingly, around food: the celebrations see cauldrons filled with revithada and mastelo, from which each guest ladles a portion.

Just around the corner, I finally reach the small beach, a jumbled pile of smooth, giant rocks. The water, clear as raki, quickly tickles and tingles my headache away.

I float for a while, wondering when I'll next swim in this spot, taste Alberto's cooking or savour another bowl of that magic chickpea stew. And I understand why Sifnians hate goodbyes. I'll obviously be back. ●

Above, from left: Kostas raises a glass; fried manoura with cherry tomatoes and thyme flowers, served at Zoi and Alberto's home

## ESSENTIALS

### GETTING THERE

Aegean Airlines flies to Athens from Heathrow, Manchester and Edinburgh, while British Airways and EasyJet fly to Athens from Heathrow and Manchester. Seajets runs a ferry service between Sifnos and Athens' Piraeus port. [aegeanair.com](http://aegeanair.com) [ba.com](http://ba.com) [easyjet.com](http://easyjet.com) [seajets.gr](http://seajets.gr)

### WHERE TO STAY

Verina Astra, on the east coast, offers rooms overlooking the Aegean, and serves delicious, locally sourced food at its restaurant. Doubles from £115, B&B. [verinahotelsifnos.com](http://verinahotelsifnos.com)

### HOW TO DO IT

Expedia has three nights at Verina Astra from £350 per person, including Aegean flights from Heathrow, based on two sharing. [expedia.co.uk](http://expedia.co.uk)

### MORE INFO

[discovergreece.com/en](http://discovergreece.com/en)  
[visitgreece.gr](http://visitgreece.gr)