



Flavours *of the* Aegean

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A EUROPEAN REGION OF GASTRONOMY FOR 2026, CRETE'S CUISINE IS DEFINED BY SIMPLICITY. HEAD TO CHANIA AND ITS WILD BACKCOUNTRY TO SAMPLE DISHES ROOTED IN THE SOUL OF GREECE'S LARGEST ISLAND – FROM SNAIL STEW AND BOUGATSA PASTRIES TO MIZITHRA CHEESE AND HONEY



Sporting a well-worn blue apron, Stelios Trilirakis moves from pot to pot, lifting the lids to give the contents a quick stir. He leans in to add a dash of olive oil to each of the flame-blackened clay vessels, which simmer over the embers of the makeshift hearth set up in the garden.

Puffs of steam escape into the crisp morning, filling the air above Drakona village with the aromas of stewing vegetables and meat. I'd skipped breakfast, as is sensible when travelling on this food-focused island. But now my stomach is snarling shamelessly.

One theory in Crete — a place named as a European Region of Gastronomy for 2026 by the International Institute of Gastronomy, Culture, Arts and Tourism — says the further inland you go and the more remote the location, the more authentic the cuisine. And yet I didn't have to travel too far from the coast. Stelios's family restaurant Ntounias is just a 40-minute drive from the port city of Chania, capital of the homonymous region in western Crete. The small farm and rustic taverna lies in the foothills of Chania's soaring White Mountains. Here, the farm-to-fork philosophy is grounded in the same simple lifestyle that's played out on this fertile soil for centuries.

"Some say that the Mediterranean diet is based on Cretan cuisine," says Stelios, lighting up. "I don't know about that, but what I do know is that, for years, people here in Crete ate simply," he explains. "They would prepare lentils and the following day they would add rice to them. They found ways to preserve food without refrigeration. They might not have consumed meat daily but, when they did, it was excellent quality."

Stelios grows all the fruit and vegetables on his farm organically. Chickens wander freely. Goats, sheep and cattle have ample room to graze. He forages herbs from the leafy gorge at the property's edge: wild greens and indigenous *diktamo* — the mint-family herb with overtones of oregano and thyme used in tea infusions.

"Almost all ingredients we use come from the farm, therefore zero miles," Stelios says,

explaining that the remainder is sourced from local small-scale producers. "And the seasons determine the food we serve."

With a focus on traditional Cretan recipes that demand patience, everything is prepared over a wood-fired flame, both indoors and out. Stelios sprints to the kitchen, where his wife, Emmy, is tending to multiple dishes before the first of the day's patrons start to trickle in at around 1pm. Ntounias's *raison d'être* may be slow food, but given that Stelios is its farmer, butcher, cook and head waiter, he needs to be quick on his feet to ensure everything is done in time. On the stove, a pot of broccoli and cauliflower with *hondros* (cracked wheat) is bubbling away, to which sheep milk will be added to create extra creaminess. Flames leap from the oven, where late-season lamb is being prepared *kleftiko*-style, in parchment paper.

Emmy adds snails, gathered from dewy hillsides nearby, to a pot prepped with chopped red peppers, onions and potatoes. In Crete, the ubiquitous gastropod are either eaten fried or as *yiachni* — in a hearty stew. Rich in vitamin B12 and omega-3 fatty acids, snails have been consumed on the island since the Minoan era, from around 3000 BCE. In times of adversity, they served as an accessible source of protein.

Handiwork with a fork is needed to coax succulent, soft snail meat, sweetened by peppers, out of the shells. They're accompanied by a traditional Cretan *dakos* salad served, as is customary, with chunks of *paximadi* (rusk), still warm from the oven. That way, the juice of crushed tomato and extra virgin olive oil seeps into the dense, tangy crumb. The main act, tender oven-baked lemony lamb with plenty of oregano, goes perfectly with some hand-cut slow-fried potatoes, so rich in flavour they need nothing more than salt.

Clockwise from top left: Stelios Trilirakis grows all the produce on his farm at Ntounias organically; one of its Cretan *gidomouskara* cows; olives bagged and ready for the press; fried potatoes at Ntounias. Previous pages from left: Mezze dishes at Chrisostomos in Chania; a view of Chania

