

Hot potato

The humble spud has captured the imagination of one passionate cultural cook

ALTHOUGH Peru is the birthplace of the potato, the Greeks have embraced the spud like no other vegetable.

"A slow-cooked Greek baked lamb would not be complete without potatoes, and of course it is essential in our traditional dish, moussaka," says Greekalicious founder Maria Benardis.

The potato was introduced to Europe in the 1500s and soon became an important food staple and crop.

The word potato comes from Spanish patata.

"The same word is used in Greece," says Maria.

"According to the Spanish Royal Academy, the Spanish word is a compound of the Taino batata (sweet potato) and the Quechua papa (potato)."

Maria says there are many popular varieties of potatoes, including desiree,

king edward, kipfler, nicola, sebago and Dutch cream.

"The kipfler variety is great for steaming, boiling or roasting," she says.

"Nicola is great for boiling and baking, while sebago is good for all purposes and wonderful as french fries.

"Desiree is excellent for boiling and as a mashing potato suitable for salads and also roasting.

"King edward is particularly suitable for roasting and baking, although it is also suitable as french fries, for steaming and sauteing.

"Dutch cream is perfect simply boiled or mashed.

"It is also ideal for roasting or baking, for puree or soup."

In Greek cookery, Maria says potatoes are essential in baked dishes and moussaka.

"They present themselves as handmade chips with sea salt and dry wild oregano, or drizzled with some melted Greek cheese such as feta," she says.

"We include them in our soups, stews, salads, pies, toss them into omelets, and we mash them into poure (potato mash), or as skordalia (garlic dip).

"We boil them and steam them for salads, or they are simply cut into pieces and roasted with lots of salt, lemon juice, wild oregano and extra virgin olive oil.

"There is no end to what you can do with the versatile spud."

Maria says every time she cooks

with potatoes she's transported back to the Greek islands.

"I enjoy them with lots of sea salt and dry wild oregano as a side to my freshly caught deep-fried calamari," she says.

"Of course this is accompanied with a shot or two of ouzo."

For those with a budding passion for potatoes, Maria has the following tips:

- For best results choose potatoes according to how you'll be using them.
- To spice up your potatoes when baking them add lots of herbs, grated cheese, chopped chillies or other vegetables.
- After frying, drain them on paper towels and keep warm in a low oven while frying the remainder.
- For crispier fries, fry them twice.
- To make skordalia, boil some potatoes, add several peeled and minced garlic cloves, extra virgin olive oil and seasoning, then mash as usual.
- For a lighter mashed potato, stir in more milk and use extra virgin olive oil in place of the butter

